





# INSPIRING STUDENTS TO BE AGENTS OF CHANGE: A SOUTH AFRICAN PERSPECTIVE

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**ABSTRACT**

By reflecting on my experience as a Masters degree graduate, a university lecturer and a design mentor on a youth training programme in South Africa, I will provide evidence of how different pedagogical methods can either nurture or hinder a student's personal growth, therefore directly impacting their approach and ability as designers. I will discuss the importance of creating awareness among students about how their values, opinions and goals can affect their design decisions and influence what impact they make on the world around them. Moreover, this paper calls for a global teaching philosophy that recognises empathy and respect as devices for sustainable world making.

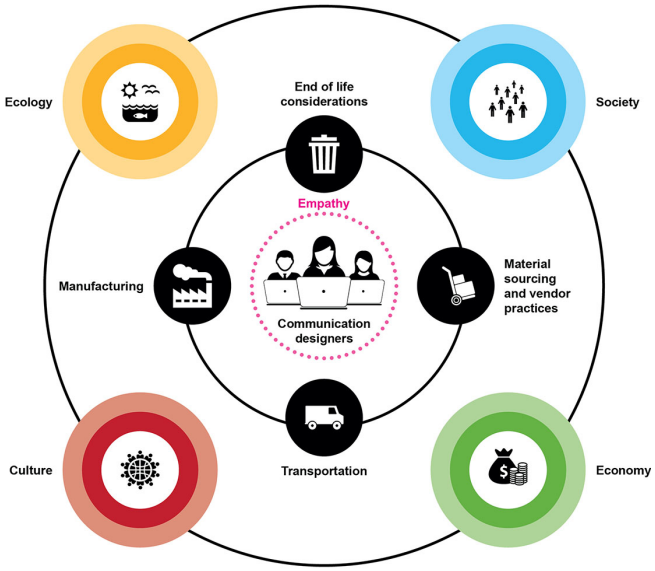
Key Words: Communication Design, Design for Sustainability, Education, Empathy

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Across the globe the increasing promulgation of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) lends impetus to the need to address sustainability in a more urgent and holistic manner. As the needs of the world change, so too do the roles and responsibilities of design professionals. Communication designers, for example, can play a transformational role in the drive for change by conscientising the general public about the severe consequences of not addressing issues of sustainability with agency and urgency. If we consider that today's students will become future industry leaders the onus is placed on educators to prepare the next generation of designers with the requisite knowledge, skills and tools to make a meaningful impact not only on their profession, but also on the world at large. By reflecting on my journey, over the past decade, as a communication design practitioner, educator and mentor, this paper will explore my intervention into inspiring and empowering young designers to be the change agents needed to drive sustainability forward.

## 2. ADVOCATING DESIGN FOR SUSTAINABILITY THROUGH EDUCATION

Early on in my career I realised that through the messages we communicate, designers have the power to inform public opinions and can therefore influence positive change in attitudes and behaviours. With this power comes responsibility, but as a young designer in South Africa (SA) I did not feel equipped with the knowledge required to consciously and confidently embrace this role. After four years of practice I grew increasingly concerned by my industry's lack of awareness of the part it could play in environmental stewardship, social responsibility, cultural preservation, and boosting economic viability. As a result, in 2008, I enrolled in the Urban Sustainable Design Studio (USDS), a summer school hosted by the Foresight Design Initiative in Chicago, USA. There I was exposed to innovative ways in which to tackle the complexities of designing sustainably. The focus was not only on materials and production processes, but also on how to apply Design Thinking's collaborative and human-centered approach to solving design problems. To practically engage with our learnings we worked on live briefs. The project I worked on investigated possible solutions to lessen the barriers to employment for people with disabilities. By working closely with this community I learnt the importance of practising empathy, where empathy "is the capacity to step into other people's shoes, to understand their lives, and start to solve problems from their perspectives" (IDEO.ORG, 2016:7). The course highlighted that, right at the start of the design process, designers must think holistically about the entire life cycle impact of their proposed solutions. As the Sustainable Systems Thinking in Communication Design infographic below illustrates, designers are central to the decisions made within a larger system. The first circle surrounding the designers represents the empathic lens through which they must approach each design problem. Practicing empathy ensures that solutions do not only consider the end users' practical needs, but also their cultural and emotional needs (IDEO, 2015). The second circle represents four processes which are integral to the entire system: material sourcing, vendor practices, transportation, manufacturing and end of life considerations (Yvette Perullo [sa]). The outer circle shows how every design solution exists within a larger interconnecting system relating to the four pillars of sustainability.




*[Figure 1] Sustainable Systems Thinking in Communication Design Infographic (Adapted from Yvette Perullo, n.d.)*

At the time of participating in the USDS, *Design for Sustainability* (DfS) was growing in popularity in the West, but in SA there was no clear understanding of what practising sustainably really meant, specifically within the context of communication design. There were no courses dealing with DfS locally, thus when I returned from Chicago I developed and taught an introductory course for communication design students at the Cape Peninsula University of Technology and the Ruth Prowes School of Art. This marked the start of my academic journey. My

goal was to share what I had learnt in a way that was applicable and accessible to South African designers because, as Giard and Walker (2013:1) attest, in order to be meaningful and effective, DfS has to be "attuned to place and context". Over four years I curated an interactive and multi-dimensional learning experience that included theory lectures, guest speakers and field trips. With each cohort I integrated a live brief into the course to give students the opportunity to experience how their design decisions could impact the world around them. One such brief was to design a shark information signage system for Cape Town's (CT) beaches. This was in response to a fatal shark attack that – upon investigation into safety measures on beaches – revealed information about shark behaviour was poorly communicated to beach goers. I therefore approached the City's Department of Environmental Resource Management with a proposal for my students to design a solution that would create awareness about shark activity and promote beach safety. The students were enthusiastic to be working on such an important real world brief. The project was so successful that the City implemented several of the students' ideas, in new awareness signage, across the CT coastline. Through such projects I was able to convey to students that they had a critical role to play in championing sustainability, not only through the materials and production processes they chose, but through the persuasive messages they communicated.

At the two institutions where I lectured there appeared to be little or no engagement with DfS outside of my course. A review of the other fourteen higher education institutions that offered communication design programmes in CT revealed that only four included concepts relating to sustainability in their course descriptions. This highlighted a major gap in curricula and I identified that this gap was echoed by the local industries poor uptake of DfS. Based on these observations I enrolled in a Masters degree programme. I wanted to unpack why a gap existed in curricula, and most importantly try to figure out how to overcome this gap. My research investigated the level of awareness, interest and engagement with DfS within the CT communication design fraternity. The title of my dissertation was: *Integrating principles of sustainability into communication design pedagogy at selected HEIs in Cape Town: towards an industry-responsive curriculum*. The table below explains the methodological approach that my research followed.

*[Table 1] Masters Thesis Methodological Approach*

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|---|---|
| RESEARCH DESIGN | Qualitative; Purposive sampling of the Cape Town communication design fraternity; Three HEIs that varied in size and course focus; Five communication design companies. |
| INFORMANTS KEY | Eight communication design educators: theory and practical; Eighteen communication design students: third year; Six communication design professionals. |
| EMPIRICAL DATA | Semi-structured interviews; Focus groups; Online survey. |
| THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK | Since there were multiple actors involved with this study, Activity Theory provided an analytical lens through which to view the interrelationship between the three different categories of actors who were involved in multiple, interrelated activity systems of teaching, learning and practicing DfS in communication design (Engeström, 1999:65). |

## 3. MAIN RESEARCH FINDINGS

Through the analysis of the data I identified five key tensions that prevented the uptake of DfS into the communication design curricula: Tension one, DfS was misunderstood as an exclusively environmental issue; Tension 2, there was a lack of alignment between the theoretical and practical teaching of DfS; Tension 3, students were not taught how to practically implement DfS in the local context; Tension 4, educators were waiting for industry to champion DfS, rather than being the conduit to help drive change in industry; and Tension 5, to practice DfS the communication design fraternity wanted to be incentivised. These tensions resulted in students failing to get to grips with the interconnected environmental, sociocultural and economic impact of their design solutions. To address this I developed four main strategies – with input from design educators – for integrating DfS into curriculum and these strategies were shaped by ten guidelines.

*[Table 2] Strategies and Guidelines for Integrating DfS into Communication Design Curricula*

| STRATEGIES | GUIDELINES |
|---|---|
| 1. Introduce DfS as a core principle from the outset | DfS should be a formal inclusion in the communication design curriculum; DfS should be introduced as a subject from first year; DfS should be integrated as a critical lens into all theory and practical subjects throughout the curriculum; DfS should be assessed as a stand-alone marking criterion on every brief. |
| 2. Expose students to pertinent information about DfS | DfS should be made relevant to the lives of students so that they can develop a personal connection with the subject; To stay abreast of advancements in DfS, HEIs should invest in the continuous professional development of educators by sending them on regular training; DfS industry specialists should be brought in as guest speakers and/or guest lecturers. |
| 3. Allow students to engage practically | Students should work on live briefs, for real clients, which address sustainability issues in the local context. |

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| 4. Facilitate collaboration between diverse design actors | Students should collaborate in multi- and inter-disciplinary groups on DfS briefs; Educators from various HEIs should collaborate with local design networks to promote dialogue about DfS, and to develop communication design-specific resources to aid best practice in DfS. |

My research discovered that any inclusion of sustainability into pedagogy was linked to the educators' and students' personal interest in the subject. This related to the guideline that I believed to be most critical – making DfS relevant to the lives of students so that they could develop a personal connection with it. According to Sherin (2013:6) communication designers who choose to practice sustainably are "driven by values-based decision making". This idea was supported by Benson and Napier (2012:213) who believed that the best solution to promote the uptake of DfS in communication design education was in "connecting issues of sustainability to the values of design students". Sustainability itself can be understood as a value system that guides people towards more conscious behaviour within society. However, we cannot assume that all students' values will necessarily align with sustainability principles. Through educational experiments, Benson and Napier (2012) realised that most students were in fact unaware of how their personal values, opinions and goals impacted their design decisions. It is therefore important for educators to encourage students to determine their personal values and then to interrogate how these values connect to the larger environmental, social, cultural and economic context in which their design decisions are made (Wals, 2014). While this does not suggest that students have to ascribe to the same values; it is important for them to be able to articulate what it is they believe in, and what they want to work towards as designers. Furthermore, if it is considered that a teacher's personal values and views about sustainability can influence the way in which the subject is taught, it becomes even more important for students to be able to critically evaluate information and engage with it on a personal level (Cotton & Djordjevic, 2011). Educators therefore need to guide this process by engaging students in reflective discussions about their understanding and interpretation of what they have been taught and its relevance to their own lives and design practice.

The study viewed DfS as a key input for preparing students for more ethical practice once they graduate. It argued that only once young designers were able to critically evaluate the impact of their design decisions, as well as confidently define their role as designers in the world, would they personally take on the required responsibility of their profession.

## 4. THE REALITY OF PUTTING RESEARCH INTO PRACTICE

In order to promote the uptake of DfS amongst students, my study called for the early incorporation of principles of sustainability into curricula, so when - a few months after completing my Masters degree - I was tasked with developing and implementing a first year module on the fundamental elements and principles of design at the University of Johannesburg (UJ) I saw it as the perfect opportunity to practically apply my research findings. I was excited to take on the role of disseminating information about sustainability. Over the course of the first semester, however, I realised that due to many complex issues the vast majority of students were not ready or able to engage in topics relevant to DfS. As my research discovered, students' backgrounds and schooling influenced how they connected with concepts such as DfS. The UJ students came from diverse backgrounds with some facing socio-economic challenges that impacted on their ability to meet the basic requirements of the course – attending lectures and submitting work. Other issues that drew attention to the students' realities included their differing secondary education experiences and standards; varying levels of exposure to and awareness of the design world; varying literacy levels; and language barriers.

At the time of my involvement with UJ the South African education fraternity was being challenged to question what a democratic and decolonised education system should look like. This was in the wake of *Fees Must Fall*, a student-led protest movement that opposed increases in universities fees and called for the decolonisation of higher education institutions (Langa, 2017). The Design Education Forum of South Africa took on this challenge by hosting a conference themed *Decolonising Design Education*. Concerned with my students' plight, I presented a paper titled *Reimagining Design Education Through Empathy*. In it I discussed three empathetic approaches to teaching that I believed could help overcome some of the inherited inequalities and disadvantages that design students and educators faced: tapping into and respecting the students' situated knowledge; connecting with the students' personal values; encouraging empathy; and shifting the relationship between lecturer and student to be one based more on mentorship. I was inspired by the writing of bell hooks, who advocated for a foundational and ethical restructuring of the way in which students are taught.

"To educate as the practice of freedom is a way of teaching that anyone can learn. That learning process comes easiest to those of us who teach who also believe that there is an aspect of our vocation that is sacred; who believe that our work is not merely to share information but to share in the intellectual and spiritual growth of our students. To teach in a manner that respects and cares for the souls of our students is essential if we are to provide the necessary conditions where learning can most deeply and intimately begin" (hooks 1994:13).

This quote speaks to pedagogy needing to be student-orientated and human-centered, and the key to this is empathy in hooks' (1994) sense. If educators have a better understanding of their students' realities, they can adapt how they teach so that design education becomes a more accessible and democratic learning experience. This idea was supported by IDEO who wrote in the *Design Thinking for Educators Toolkit*, that educators should use Design Thinking's empathetic approach to reimagine the learning experience through the lens of the students' needs and desires (IDEO, 2012:2). This links back to the importance of integrating DfS into curricula, because what is DfS if

it is not about reimagining what is possible.

At UJ I attempted to adopt this empathetic approach by reshaping the form and delivery of the course content in such a way that it became a more nurturing learning experience. Adapting the briefs to meet the needs and aspirations of the students also yielded much more interesting results. However, what my experience uncovered was that due to certain structural limitations – large class sizes, limited one-on-one contact with students and limited time for dialogue – I could not easily put into practice the concept of empathy within the formal academic environment.

## 5. LEARNINGS FROM A YOUTH TRAINING PROGRAMME

In my professional capacity I worked as a design mentor at Livity Africa, a non-profit youth development organisation. The purpose of the organisation was to "work with and for young people; to harness and accelerate their ability to create their own sustainable livelihoods" (Livity Africa, sa). An example of how this was achieved was through Live SA, a nationwide youth-run media channel. Live SA provided a platform for eighteen to twenty-five year olds to receive on-the-job training from professional mentors representing various disciples including design, photography, videography and journalism. Every three months there was an intake of up to twenty-five young people who were responsible for generating relevant content in an authentic and creative way so as to inspire and engage the youth. The content covered a range of topics from music, art, fashion, relationships, career advice, politics, and news. My role as design mentor was not only to up-skill the trainees, but to better equip them for the changing working world by guiding them on a journey of self-discovery and self-actualisation. Rather than dictating what content they created, or how it should be visually communicated, my responsibility was to assist them in finding their own voice and personal means of expression. The key to achieving this was by encouraging the trainees to foreground their lived experiences, as well as challenge them to question how the content they created could enrich the lives of other young South Africans.

Right from the start, the trainees' learning experience was shaped by a sense of equality that was realised through active participation and co-creation. This required that everyone who participated in the training programme needed to be empathetic towards one another's lived experience. As mentors we made the time to accommodate the trainees' situated knowledge into our knowledge and perceptions, allowing us to reflect on the context of where they were coming from, where they wanted to go and what was important for them to be able to succeed in life. We were inspired by each persons' individual story and tried to tap into their passions as much as possible, in that way making them feel valued and respected.

Because the trainees were defining all of the content themselves, they were not only enacting their creativity, they were identifying with their own value system. Adding to this, the trainees' involvement in producing content for a community that they empathised with allowed them to better understand what role they could play and what impact they could make in society. A good example of this was the content and collateral created for the #FreeToBleed campaign. The aim of the campaign was to put pressure on government to make sanitary products freely available to learners from under-resourced communities (livemag.co.za, 2017). The campaign was petitioned in Parliament and subsequently free sanitary pads have been distributed in schools across certain provinces. Tito Mboweni, SA's finance minister, recently declared sanitary products tax free and announced a significant increase in investment towards the roll out of free sanitary pads (health24.com, 2018). By creating awareness around urgent health and economic issues, the campaign encouraged the trainees to see their potential role as active participants in the governance of their country.

Live SA epitomised the learning environment that hooks (2003:xv) envisaged the classroom to be: "A place that is life-sustaining and mind-expanding, a place of liberating mutuality where teacher and student together work in partnership." There was a marked difference between the connection I developed with the design trainees and the first year university students. My experience indicates

that the empathetic approaches discussed throughout this paper play a key role in breaking down barriers and building meaningful relationships between educators and students. A summary of the approaches that educators can implement include: understanding and acknowledging the students' cultural and academic backgrounds; being increasingly mindful of the various barriers that students face; enabling students to discover their voices and personal means of expression; encouraging open and respectful dialogue between students so that they become aware of each other's realities; introducing design concepts in such a way that they are contextually relevant to the students' own lives; setting design briefs that provide the opportunity for students to explore how design can positively impact their communities; and building confidence amongst students by identifying and promoting their interests and skills.

## 6. GROWING A COMMUNITY OF CONSCIOUS GLOBAL CITIZENS

At the beginning of this I year relocated from SA to India. These countries face many of the complex challenges that the SDGs attempt to address – poverty, unemployment, inequality, lack of formal housing, limited access to quality healthcare, and dependence on coal power. The associated negative impacts of climate change are also being felt with rising temperatures, as well as severe water shortages. As expressed throughout this paper, communication designers can use their skills to inform people about sustainability issues and inspire them to contribute towards a better future. For example, designers can lessen the negative impact of the above-mentioned challenges through:

raising awareness about important humanitarian issues; changing behaviour by encouraging people to use resources sparingly; motivating action to support local industries; or by uniting diverse cultures and directing people towards a common goal (Dougherty 2008:12; Perullos 2013:30). To adapt to the needs and daunting challenges of a rapidly changing world the communication design industry urgently requires change agents to lead the way. To ignite change, communication designers should recognise their potential role as design activists. The students of today will be industry's future leaders, and if properly prepared, they can fulfil this role effectively.

To drive action-for-change in the learning environment, educators must frame critical global issues within the context of the challenges faced by the students and communities in which they live. This is not an easy task, but inspirational resources can help to inform and motivate both educators and students. Global Citizen is a powerful example of this. It is a non-profit organisation championing an online activism campaign that aims to mobilise millennials to take action towards realising the first SDG – ending extreme world poverty by 2030 (globalcitizen.org, n.d.). The campaign creates awareness amongst young people; exposes them to the causes of extreme poverty; and encourages them to use their collective voice to take action against it. Actions are simple – sending an email, posting a tweet, or signing a petition. Actions are categorised into seven core issues: Girls and Women; Health and Education; Finance and Innovation; Food and Hunger; Water and Sanitation; Environment; and Citizenship. To reward people for taking action, a massive music festival is hosted in a different country every year and the line-up includes the biggest names in global music, as well as artists, activist and world leaders. Tickets to the Global Citizen Festival (GCF) are free, but are only rewarded to active citizens who have enough points to enter into the ticket draw.

Last year the GCF took place on the African continent for the first time, in Johannesburg. I was commissioned to curate a team of top young Southern African communication designers to create the visual identity for the GCF marketing campaign. The campaign had to communicate an authentic, inspiring and culturally relevant message to the local target audience so that they would be motivated to amplify their collective voices by taking actions to address issues of poverty. The campaigns impact was significant, it generated over 5.65 million actions which led to 60 commitments – from world decision makers – to the value of $7.2 billion; and is set to affect the lives of 121 million people (ibid).

While Global Citizen believes that to create change we "need active global citizens who are engaged in the world, knowledgeable about its diversity and passionate about change", they have also realised that to drive massive change young people want to be incentivised (ibid). Similarly, my Masters findings discovered that in order to implement DfS practice into their work students wanted to be incentivised, rather than adopting principles of sustainability to address real world challenges out of sincerity. Educators should therefore take inspiration from, and expose students too such campaigns as a way to assist them in defining their role in the world while being made aware of the relationship between their values and actions as designers.

In conclusion – to implement a sustainable and inclusive approach to design education, whether in SA or India – educators must adopt a philosophy of teaching that is founded on deep empathy and respect for students' needs, aspirations and motivations.

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