The ethics of Ubuntu and community participation in design

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Abstract

In order to produce skilled design graduates schools regularly restructure their curricula to develop knowledge characterized by continuous advancements applicable to the ever-changing design industry. New schools are in demand and a concern arises that these offer little more than specialized software training and do not sufficiently prepare students to become empathetic, thoughtful individuals that may serve the needs of society. Former president of the International Council of Graphic Design Associations (ICOGRADA), designer and educator Jorge Frascara (2008, sp) confirms this:

> "[T]here is a need to change the purpose of design education: from technical to problem oriented; and the frame of reference: from teaching how to work in the consumer society to learning how to contribute to improve society."

This view is further supported by several design academics such as Roos (2011) and Friedman (2012) who regard design as a tool for transforming user behaviour thereby increasing the probability of the success of artefacts and improving society. Design educators should therefore consider outcomes such as reflection-on-practice, empathy and mindfulness to be equally valid to those outcomes traditionally taught within Higher Education curricula. Through its focus on all of these aspects human-centred design manifests through a responsiveness to all the stakeholders in the design process as well as a consciousness of the community - a principle it holds in common with the traditional African ethics of Ubuntu.

Designers and educators working in a South African context should consider deontological norms and values as well as those traditionally found in African ethics. African ethics are founded on the communal rather than the individual and focus on responsibilities to the family and the clan. The ethics of Ubuntu meaning "a person is a person through others" ("I belong, therefore, I am") are entirely contradictory to the well-known Cartesian view "Cogito ergo sum" (I think, therefore, I am") or modern-day avarice expressed in sentiments such as "I have possessions, therefore I am".

The importance on Ubuntu ethics within a South African design environment is increasingly significant due to its bearing on the principles and ideals of involvement and empathy within the context of communal and social interactions. This paper argues for the consideration of the ethics of Ubuntu in the formulation of new design curricula as a means of integrating social responsibility in graphic design education.

Keywords: design ethics; human and participatory design; Ubuntu

Introduction

It is the role of the designer to be professional and impartial in his or her practice and yet designers always express a certain set of values each time they make a design decision. Design, as practice is by no means a neutral process and is also informed and influenced by its surroundings (Kinross 1989). Designers, regardless of the professional context within which they work must additionally consider

their own authorship as well as a number of stakeholders each with their own agenda and value system and how those stakeholders may have an impact on the final outcome of the design.

The American Institute of Graphic Arts (AIGA) will publish the fourth edition of its AIGA Design Business and Ethics series in 2015. The guide lays out standards of professional practice and includes chapters on the use of photographs and illustrations as well as copyright. This, rather constricted view of what constitutes ethical behaviour in design is what design graduates are most familiar with by the time they graduate. Although ethics as a subject has been introduced in most design programmes few courses have dealt with the subject in much depth. For graduates to have skills applicable to the ever-changing industry design schools must continually update and restructure their curricula. New schools compete with established Universities and a concern arises that, at times these offer little more than specialized software training and do not sufficiently prepare students to become empathetic, thoughtful individuals that may serve the needs of society.   Moreover, as Nini (2004, sp) points out, designers' responsibility towards audience members and users has not been sufficiently addressed through education efforts and publications such as those made available by the AIGA. Former president of the International Council of Graphic Design Associations (ICOGRADA) Jorge Frascara (2008, sp) confirms this:

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This view is further supported by other design academics such as Roos (2011) and Friedman (2012) who regard design as a tool for transforming user behaviour thereby increasing the probability of the success of artefacts and improving society. Design educators should therefore consider outcomes such as reflection-on-practice, empathy and mindfulness to be equally valid to those outcomes traditionally taught within Higher Education (HE) curricula. Through its focus on all of these aspects human-centred design manifests through a responsiveness to all the stakeholders in the design process as well as a consciousness of the community - a principle it holds in common with the traditional African ethics of *Ubuntu.*

African ethics and design

A number of different definitions for the concept of *Ubuntu* exist and various scholars (Khoza, Chikanda, Teffo, Makhundu, Maphisa and Shutte) have attempted to define it by highlighting different aspects of the concept. A definition that lends itself well to a human-centred worldview comes from Khoza (2005:269 in Mabovula 2011, p.40) who defines *Ubuntu* as "an African value system that means humanness or being human, a worldview characterised by such values as caring, sharing, compassion, communalism, communocracy and related predispositions."

Although the above definition stresses *Ubuntu* as an African value system the philosophy may have universal applications. Mbigi (in Roux and Coetzee 1994) developed an *Ubuntu* based model for life founded on four principals fundamental to the basic tenets of the philosophy:

- "Morality which involves trust and credibility;
- Interdependence which concerns the sharing and caring aspect that is co-operation and participation;
- Spirit of man which refers to human dignity and mutual respect that insists that human activity should be person driven and humanness should be central, and lastly
- Totality, which pertains to continuous improvement of everything by every member" (Mbigi in Mabovula 2011, p.40).

Elsewhere *Ubuntu* has been described as "an African philosophy of life that guides the thinking and actions of Africans and must therefore be found in their lived historical experiences and not from

philosophical abstractions that have very little meaning in actual life" (Nabudere n.d, p.3). This sense of lived experience is also where *Ubuntu* philosophy contrasts with western analytical and continental philosophies and is supported by Cheikh Anta Diop's (1990, p.163) "two-cradle" theory of humankind; "an aggressive northern, Euro-patriarchal cradle emerged as a latter-day antithesis of the more humane southern cradle, which is African and matriarchal in its cultural ethos." Humanity is seen as a traditional tenet of *Ubuntu* and according to Letseka (2000, sp) a significant degree of human happiness or "humanness" thriving in traditional African life is the inter-dependence often found in close-knit communities.

According to Mabovula (2011, p.38) the philosophy of *Ubuntu* has its roots in African communalism and forms of social order. This form of African communalism has been described as a "kinship-oriented social order, which is informed by an ethic of reciprocity" as well as "a sense of solidarity with large groups of people" (Gyekye 1987, sp). Allister Sparks describes this sense of solidarity in his book "The Mind of South Africa" in which he examines the philosophies and cultures of the people of southern Africa. Sparks has further described how Africa may have trailed behind Europe scientifically and economically but it was far advanced in terms of its "social and political philosophies and systems" (Sparks in Nabudere n.d, sp). The systems he defines, which revolved around communal relationships, "had developed a deep respect for human values and the recognition of the human worth based on a philosophy of humanism that was far more advanced than that found in the European philosophic systems at that time" (Nabudere n.d.).

This African philosophy manifests itself through the understanding that one comes to see one's welfare as being linked inherently with the welfare of the community (Gyekye 1987 in Mabovula 2011, p.38). According to Australian academic and designer Tony Fry (2002) designers have an obligation to consider community welfare and therefore to be human-centred and should accept this condition if they wish for their practice to be ethical. A notion of community is a unique characteristic of African life and, according to Gyekye's definition, an understanding of communalism implies that the stakeholder is a fundamentally communal being entrenched in an environment of social relationships and interdependence, and not an insulated individual. According to Mabovula (2011:38) in African communities, "people view themselves and what they do as equally good to others as to themselves".

In the context of design an important tenet of human-centred practice is participation, co-operation and a certain interdependence of stakeholders – all principles found in *Ubuntu* philosophy. In order for designers to produce communications outcomes that emphasize and consider user's needs and respect stakeholder contribution in the process as evident in participation and human-centred design practices a wider consideration of these methods may be recommended.

Participatory and Human-centred design

Participation design (PD) roots are found in the determination of Scandinavian labour unions for workers to have increased autonomous and independent control within the place of work (Ehn 1989). In the 1970s when PD first emerged, the introduction of computers within the workplace was viewed as fundamental to a mounting discussion in Germany and Scandinavia regarding the position of industrial democracy in the place of work. PD advocates design "as a collaborative effort where the design process is shared among diverse participating stakeholders and competencies" (Bjögvinsson, Ehn & Hillgren 2012, p.101). The purpose of PD is to include all the stakeholders in the design process from the inception of the project, with equal contributions from all stakeholders influencing the course of that design process (Futurman 2014, p.44).

The first practitioners of PD considered the amount of control employees had over the technology that they used and how this effected wide-ranging administrative decision making, which included the pace and procedures of workflow. Increasingly, however PD projects have diversified in terms of the reasons and manner that users and stakeholders have participated. Recently, it has been

suggested that PD has evolved to include a wider range of stakeholders such as "direct users, users' managers, co-workers, customers, suppliers and others" who would be affected by the final outcome of the design (Carroll & Rosson in Albinsson sa, p.10) and overtures have been made at addressing users who have had difficulty in participating in the past, such as children (Pardo, Vetere & Howard in Albinsson sa, p.10). On one hand, stakeholder involvement is restricted to the provision of access for designers to the expertise and capabilities of users. Within this approach however, the participants have limited or zero control in terms of the design process or its outcome. The designers determine the scope of the project or these are initiated by another stakeholder such as a client (in the case of an actual company, a company manager etc.), and end-user participation is limited to the elements of the project where user contribution is perceived as having value, but ignored in technology based decision-making (Greenbaum in Kensing & Blomberg 1998, p.173). Kyng (2010, p.54) observes the pressures in current PD projects: "[T]oday most PD projects … focus on user participation and the results of design. At the same time a crucial part of their rationale is that they have positive effects for the participating and affected users and companies". What Kyng and others such as Bannon and Ehn (2013) and Akama (2014) are questioning about contemporary participatory design projects is whether the involvement of the designers extends beyond the design phase and into supporting the users in utilising the outcomes in their everyday practice.

In well applied PD and human-centred projects stakeholders should participate not only because their expertise and knowledge are appreciated but ultimately all stakeholders must feel that their values and welfare is supported and that their interests are acknowledged in the ultimate design outcome. Designers such as Tony Fry acknowledge the importance of participation and stakeholder involvement but bemoan the fact "cultures of design lack the conceptual tools to think ethically" (2009, p.2) and views design as an ethical issue whereby ethics remain a "stranded debate and almost totally without the transformative agency it needs to have if design is to ethically progress" (Fry 2004, p.3).

Ethics and designer responsibility

Although great strides have been made in accepting design as an area of research, design is largely still perceived by many as "service" profession, instead of an academic field of knowledge production. This manifests in how design ethics is perceived within the design community. Designers therefore may understand ethics as "the rules and standards governing the conduct of members of a profession." One definition defines ethics as "a set of principles of right conduct", while the Oxford dictionary defines ethics as "the study of the general nature of moral choices to be made by a person" (Oxford Advanced Learners' Dictionary 2010, p.411).

A designers' basic responsibility is to meet user and audience needs. At the core of this paradigm lies the nature of design professionals who want to be credited with the creation of *good* design. Design academic Audrey Bennett (2012, p.76) defines good design as design that "improves humanity or the environment; resonates with the culture/s of users; includes the user and other stakeholders in the design process; stimulates and facilitates ease of use in a public context and establishes credibility with its user." Although definitions of what human-centred design encompasses vary, as its intentionality lies with creating a positive impact for the greatest number of people it can be labelled as "good design".[1] With specific reference to graphic design Frascara (1988, p.21) states that social impact and human-centeredness in design can only be achieved through: "the impact that all visual

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[1] As human-centred design has its roots in ergonomics and human-computer interaction one definition describes it as "an approach to systems design and development that aims to make interactive systems more usable by focusing on the system and applying human factors/ergonomics and usability knowledge and techniques" (Giacomin 2012:[sp]) however definitions centred in a social sphere describe human-centred design as "a process …to create new solutions to design challenges. The process helps people hear the needs of the people and communities they're designing for, create innovative approaches to meet those needs, and deliver solutions that work in specific cultural and economic contexts" (HCD connect:online).

communication has in the community and the way in which it influences people; the impact that all visual communication has in the visual environment; the need to ensure that communications related to the safety of the community are properly implemented." In order for design to be truly sustainable designers must use their skills as an instrument of social change as well as contribute to new and novel research in the field.

Nini (2004, sp) borrows from the code of ethics developed by the ICSID (International Council of Societies of Industrial Design) as well as IABC (International Association of Business Communicators) when developing the following ethical designer accountabilities to audience members and users:

1. "Designers must recognize the need to include audience members and users whenever possible in the process of developing effective communications and to act as an advocate for their concerns to the client.
2. The Designer's main concern must be to create communications that are helpful to audiences and users and that meet their needs with dignity and respect. Any communication created by a designer that intentionally misleads or confuses must be viewed as a negative reflection on the profession as a whole.
3. Designers must not knowingly use information obtained from audience members or users in an unethical manner so as to produce communications that are unduly manipulative or harmful in their effect.
4. Designers must advocate and thoughtfully consider the needs of all potential audiences and users, particularly those with limited abilities such as the elderly and physically challenged.
5. Designers must recognize that their work contributes to the wellbeing of the general public, particularly in regard to health and safety and must not consciously act in a manner contradictory to this wellbeing.
6. Designers uphold the credibility and dignity of their profession by practicing honest, candid and timely communication and by fostering the free flow of essential information in accord with the public interest".

Nini (2004:sp) further recognises that ethical issues such as aspects dealing with corporate policy or the nature of fieldwork have touched upon the interest of designers who are increasingly working within social contexts. Designers are beginning to feel a sense of responsibility that goes beyond traditional concerns of propriety information and design plagiarism that includes concerns about environmental impact and product safety. Furthermore Nini (2004, sp) argues that within the design field ethical concerns include standards of professional practice and the final social and cultural impact of the design. Akama (2012, p.2) conversely points out the question of ethical practice by designers is compounded by the fact that "[A] large part of the argument that surrounds a designer's ethical responsibility places importance on adopting values and ideological perspectives that many designers find difficult in applying or translating to their daily, commercial practices." Akama (2012, p.4) suggests reflective practice as one way for designers to become self-aware and consider how their choices impact on the well-being of others.

Community interventions at a UoT

In order to address these developing issues within the curriculum at a University of Technology in South Africa a number of projects (or "Interventions") have been developed as part of the graphic design programme. The projects briefly discussed below include the incorporation of both human-centred, participatory methods as well as the introduction to *Ubuntu*-framed ethics module. The projects are established as a sequence of scaffolded learning activities with third and fourth year students that reinforce the understanding of HCD fundamentals, processes and consequently develop broader concepts of empathy, cooperation and design-in-context. Importantly placing the

project within the students' own communities has enabled them to utilise the philosophies acquired within the ethics of *Ubuntu* seminars in an appropriate setting whilst in service to others.

Undergraduate students at third and fourth year level and selected members of the community participate in four scaffolded Interventions, each comprising four stages, in order to systematically escalate engagement with human-centred and participatory design. Each Intervention engages these senior students of graphic design in a consultative, immersive process with various stakeholders to investigate and explore the designer's role in enabling and facilitating stakeholder input in the design process. These Interventions take place within diverse micro-environments of commercial practice, educational practice and special needs community environments in order to broaden the social dimensions of the design process. The lecturers explore the processes and interactions of the practice of teaching human-centred design within the graphic design programme as well as the processes and interactions that graphic design students have with various stakeholders acting in the role of clients and users. The teaching of human-centred design is framed within the constructs of participation, simplicity (ease-of-use), consistency, applicability and accessibility. Assessment takes place following each intervention and students are given an opportunity to reflect on the process in class seminars as well as in individual web blogs. This reflection that takes place following each intervention forms an integral part of the teaching process.

The first Intervention with the third year graphic design group utilises a lecturer administered questionnaire to establish the baseline of knowledge and disposition to human-centred design (HCD) processes. At this level students are familiar with basic human-centred design concepts and have some familiarity with popular human-centred design toolkits such as the one developed by IDEO (2014) and d-school at Stanford University (Stanford Design Bootcamp:available online). The student cohort is usually limited to groups smaller than 40 students so intense focus group discussions following the administration of the questionnaire are possible in order to obtain richer data.

The second Intervention builds on the students' existing knowledge of HCD and participatory processes and introduces students to some novel concepts through a lecturer introduced brief. Through Intervention Two third year graphic design students identify a potential client within their community and work collaboratively with the client using human-centred systems of co-creation and co-design in developing a commercial outcome which suits the client's individual needs.

Interventions Three and Four engage students in learning activities that have a more direct impact on and engage a wider range of stakeholders in that they require the production of real-world solutions for existing (the University Library) as well as special needs clients at a community centre within a local community. Here the students will assist the manager and caregivers of the centre in developing new design solutions for the centre from an empathic, collaborative HCD context. The Interventions are structured in such a way as to enable the students to identify and thereafter develop visual communications solutions to the design problems at hand together with the clients in a human-centred, collaborative and importantly empathetic manner. As the Interventions involve the use of real-life situations and real-life clients it is important that ethical considerations are adhered to – to this end ethical permission has been sought before the students engaged in Interventions Two, Three and Four.

Conclusion

This paper contextualizes a series of Interventions involving participatory and human-centred approaches to design that take place within the framework of a graphic design programme at a University of Technology. Within these design processes the designer must consider the other stakeholders in the design – the user as well as the audience. Here, empathy as well as human dignity and respect, tenets of *Ubuntu* philosophy play a crucial role. In design practice it is important is for

the designer-user-audience interaction to be of equal value to all participants or other significant ethical issues may come into play. As social responsibility is becoming increasingly important in design outcomes the philosophy of *Ubuntu* should play a considerable role in helping to shape future curricula for ethics in design courses within design programmes at South African Higher Education institutions.

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