

Color and territory. Empathy as a tool to enable international collaborative design projects.

Color y territorio. La empatía como herramienta para posibilitar proyectos de diseño colaborativo a nivel internacional.

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Empathy, Aesthetic, Collaboration, Participatory design.

Even before COVID-19, collaboration in the academic context has been taking new forms, but now more than ever, technology and online connectiveness offer new approaches for the learning experience. Universities and design institutions recognize that some soft skills are better developed in a multicultural, multi-perspective environment. This new take on global collaboration has resulted in a wide variety of programs between academic institutions and are oriented to develop both knowledge and collaboration.

This paper aims to share the methodology and outcomes of a program between the Fine Arts program at SUNY Genesee Community College located near Buffalo, New York and the Industrial Design program in the Facultad del Hábitat belonging to the UASLP in San Luis Potosí. It started in 2017, but took a surprising improvement during the COVID-19 Pandemic fall semester of 2020, where students participated in an internationally collaborative exercise based on color, territory, localism and aesthetic perception between design students from México and USA. The main outcome was that students were given the opportunity to discover the cultural richness of their counter parts working in cross-cultural teams. While working in these teams, the students creatively shaped their interactions with each other in order to establish emotional bonds using social media. The experience shows a hint of an approaching future, where social relationships will need to adapt to changing norms and the value of a global empathic community is recognized.

Introduction

In a global environment, design education has been mainly focused on forming design-based hard skills within the profession. These include skills such as: sketching, drawing, software knowledge, model making and design principles. Frequently Universities, either locally or globally, dwell on these hard skills as a form of assessment for the program and define a standard set of skills that every designer should have in order to develop on the job market and successfully integrate themselves into the creative field. There are even lists or requirements with these numbered hard skills promoted as attributes that every designer or professional within the field should master. These attributes in some instances are declared as key factors in the formation of design and art students and become an axis of work for some curricula all over the world (Gutierrez, 2012).

Creative disciplines such as design, architecture and art move rather organically within the realm of what a student needs to know in order to become a professional, and these movements are also a reflection of cultural, economic and even environmental changes in the context, so hard skills in their strict meaning of specific knowledge obtained, must become more malleable to these changes. Simultaneously, in the same global environment, the value of soft skills such as communication, resilience, leadership, and empathy are often ignored in relation to student success and are rarely addressed in creative programs like design or art. These skills are omnipresent in the profile of new professionals but aren't strategically placed on the syllabus or programs goals. They are often secondarily developed by the nature of the artistic disciplines and get polished in the experience of working in the creative fields.

In the midst of the 2019 global pandemic, this dichotomy was exacerbated. In this situation, the hard skills were often challenging to teach, since students were in angst of their futures and their profession. Meanwhile soft skills were cherished, because of the value added to this disconcerting situation. Way before Covid19, collaboration in the academic context has been taking new forms, but now more than ever technology and online connectiveness offer new approaches for the learning experience. Universities and design institutions recognize that some soft skills are better developed in a multicultural, multi-perspective environment. This new take on global collaboration has resulted in a wide variety of programs between academic institutions and are oriented to develop both knowledge and collaboration.

In some Universities, the syllabus of some programs is oriented to specific development of soft skills along with classes of methodology and theory (Alba, 2020). This aims to furnish students with capabilities that allow them to connect the knowledge to a soft skill-oriented problem-solving experience. An effort to create such learning opportunities has been framed in a specific program developed by the State University of New York. The COIL program, which stands for Collaborative Online International Learning, is a program established on 2004 designed to engage with a global digital environment and educational trends regarding online, multicultural learning experiences.

"We envision a world free from implicit bias, where people engage across differences to fully connect with others. We believe that an educational environment that fosters shared values, mutual understanding, and critical digital literacy, and which promotes interaction across boundaries to develop leadership, collaborative problem solving and contextualized decision making, will make this vision a reality." (COIL, 2004)

The COIL Center of SUNY has been working regularly with Mexican Universities, but only until 2016 started working with Universidad Autónoma de San Luis Potosí. The program was established with two colleges within the university: the school of engineering and the Design and Architecture department. In order to include teachers into the COIL program, academic personnel had to take a

workshop to understand the core values of the program and the possibilities and possible results of the collaboration.

The open call was answered by the industrial design program of the Facultad del Hábitat, a design and architecture school of the UASLP who characterizes in some degree because the students and teachers generally are interested in exchange program experiences, international mobility and also some teachers and a high percentage of the students are bilingual or to some degree can articulate their ideas in the English language.

To collaborate you must first collaborate

The COIL program, as it was established, is a program focused on collaborative online learning and stands among many initiatives matching educational trends on how we learn remotely and how can we improve these learning experiences (Alba, 2020). Taking this starting point into account, all Coil certified teachers have to find a partner to establish an ongoing online collaboration. This selection process is a very interesting experience, because it situates the teachers in the same position as their soon to be COIL students. In the sense that they have to establish effective communication, check on time availability and in some degree match a vision with a person who they haven't seen or known in real life.

The matching occurs organically, no teacher is constrained to any area of knowledge or discipline and precisely there lies the richness, this guaranteed diverse background works as the main trigger to incite collaboration and shows the willingness of all parts to collaborate. Professors then overlap the objectives of regular subjects or classes with other goals and objectives fostered by the Coil program, involving networking and connectivity in a virtual space.

The collaboration was established between the Fine Arts program at SUNY Genesee Community College located near Batavia, New York and the Industrial Design program in the Facultad del Hábitat belonging to the UASLP in San Luis Potosí. Professor MFA Heather Jones from GCC established contact with MDP José Luis González Cabrero, head of the program of industrial design and started COIL collaborating. Both shared similar background in design and common interests. The team developed an online learning experience that allowed student from México and the United States to collaborate.



Fig 1. Maps and Location of Genesee Community College SUNY and Facultad del Hábitat UASLP

Participatory design, the first scenario

The first scenario for the COIL learning process established among the Fine Arts program of the Genesee Community College SUNY and the Industrial design program of the Facultad del Hábitat in San Luis Potosí was framed on a participatory design methodology. The scenario consisted on a project developed in real time with 2nd year fine arts students and 9th semester industrial design students. The collaboration was set on a random methodology sorting out keywords to trigger creativity and collaboration in a product invention project. The duration of the collaborative project was 4 weeks, students worked in international teams and used the time of some of their classes to develop the jointed project.

The back bone was to provoke collaboration, so with the key words that they got assigned randomly, they had to create a new artifact, explaining its use and presenting the outcome as a finished product. That allowed students freedom and creativity, but at the end of the collaboration the results and the process were not as expected. The critique and feedback among the students and their projects were shallow and to some degree politely superficial and didn't reflect a deepened understanding either from the task nor the reasons for why and how to collaborate.

Immediately the scenario reflected some of the strengths of the collaboration, but the team also acknowledged improvement points. Each Coil professor was commissioned to analyze the diagnostic and come up with new ideas. After half a year of work, the approach changed due to the following analysis. The main objective was to improve the learning experience and to cherish the collaboration as the quality to develop in the students.

Instead of focusing on the goal, meaning the project as an end result, the team focused on the process and reset a new objective to collaborate, enhancing the contact to develop a cooperative climate and also to get rid of some of the factors that didn't allow effective communication. Some of the blocks were factors such as shyness (for half of the student's communication was in a second language). Also, technology barriers and unavailability from some members were tackled by opening the communication on any social media platform, allowing students to know each other

virtually and establish contact in their chosen online channel, email, facebook, twitter, Instagram, whatever they felt more comfortable using and was suitable for their needs and timetables.

Lastly, the time scheduling was a factor in establishing contact and really spurring in-depth communication. It was more than just basic communication about the project. We needed to create the safe environment and flexible timing needed to create a real connection between persons who didn't know anything about each other. The new scenario was on a time-free platform, a fan page on a social media like Facebook who had a good setup that allowed us to track and measure interaction, comments and reactions among students.

This open-ended approach will allow students to focus on the process and is radically different to what they are used to do. As designers or artists, they often are pushed toward the “final product”, even in the near future, after becoming professionals, the result is almost always the measurable finished outcome, but things rarely work that way in reality. The open-ended process is the basis of design for social innovation, (Manzini, 2015) because it articulates design and management stages for the project, allowing students to look at their interactions as beta versions of the experience itself, improving and adjusting along the way.



Fig 2. Troubleshooting of the first participatory design scenario and empathy diagram

A cultural color study, empathy as a tool

Humans get the most information through visual stimulation, near 80 percent of the perception experience of the world around us comes through sight (Von Rebeur, 2013), even more, designers rely on sight as their main sense to experience the environments. Keeping this in mind and integrating this with the proliferation of digital devices, the availability of smartphones and cameras, the team decided to incorporate taking pictures as a new platform to discuss projects.

The action of capturing the world around the students was the first building block for this study, but it was enhanced with a specific element that could be interpreted in different ways according to the environments of the two contexts. The final element in the new exercise was a cultural study of color. Colors and the use of color are deeply knitted in our point of view to contemplate the world,

(St Clair, 2017) it's profoundly linked to culture and because of that is a great starting point to understand other realities and views. On a global world assessment, the symbolic meaning of color remains interwoven to the territory and territory then becomes a beacon to build empathy, bridging an understand of the world through brand-new eyes. The aesthetics of color and how it is defined in different cultural settings, tells an interesting narrative about the people, culture and geography.

With this in mind, the cultural color study exercise focused on building cross-cultural teams from USA and México, students from both countries were sorted with a color and the challenge was to find that color on their geographical territory and take pictures emphasizing that specific color. Every student expressed their points of views about color hierarchy and aesthetics individually and then added their work to the larger group compositions, resulting in an attractive collage that was a mix of cultural narratives pulled together by the unifying color. At first, the photos had different contexts, without any kind of idea of the pictures or the places they came from. Eventually as the project progressed, the images are homogenized into this larger group collage, but also in some sense they became democratized as the ever-growing amalgam of their singular visions of color was then presented as a cohesive result.

Color is a powerful vehicle to articulate each other's vision, culture becomes a reference point that through color, could explain a common human reference point. Students were able to share in the situation outlined by the same focus and explore the development of a completely new reference of color. Even artist or designers familiar to both countries and contexts such as world renown graphic designer Lance Wyman have expressed that color could turn up into a cultural bridge to connect territory and people (King, 2014).

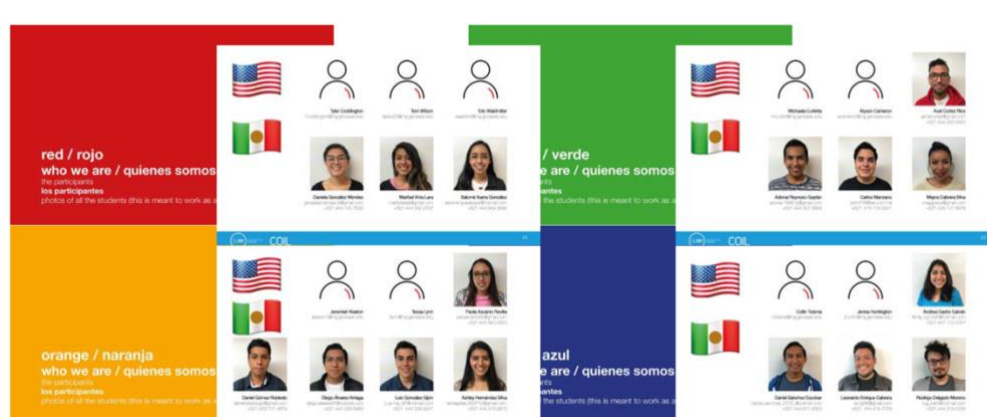


Fig 3. Examples of four cross-cultural teams and their sorted color

The final step of the process was to share it in social media, a special page in Facebook <https://www.facebook.com/GCCcolorconnection> was set up and students of other teams were encouraged to comment and give feedback. In that way students accomplished the three objectives

established for the Cultural Color Study project: 1, Students were able to develop a sense of empathy and global view of different disciplines collaborating with each other using the COIL platform to enhance their academic experience. 2, Students used design creative thinking methodologies and the elements and principles of design in color study photographs and gained a depth understanding of color theory, the use of color in narrative and the cultural / emotional connotations of specific colors and 3, Students developed a sense of group critique analysis and express constructive feedback with their peers, gaining professionalism and overview on international or global collaborative projects.

Empathy also became the value that motivated communication. Despite the challenges of not talking fluently the same language and despite the various interpretations of the colors, they willingly connected on the topic. Essentially serving as a creative exercise of “putting yourself in other people shoes” allowed them to respect each other and be more available for further communication and genuinely remain interested in the other party. Empathy then stepped outside of a mere step in a design thinking methodology and became the backbone of the project.

Fig 4. Green and Orange moodboards circa 2019

The Cultural Color Study project started on November 2020 in the midst of a global pandemic and with 21 participant students, around twelve industrial designers from México and nine fine arts students at the Genesee Community College. The general response was overwhelmingly good, some of the students manifest that their contact with their international peers had been a nice new experience amongst the dreadful enclosure of quarantine. Another reaction was that with specific knowledge of closed borders and in-home time, students manifested they got rid of the anxious feeling of establishing communication with their mates. This was a refreshing view contrasting the trend of anxiety and oppression some young people have shown when contacted by message or a call (Prokov, 2018). Meaningful communication between them, that often happened when they selected and commented on other pictures or colors, became a beam of responsiveness in the time lapse of the exercise.

Empathy was shown early, as the exercise always presented the color team mates on a specific geographical location and profiling the program and university they belonged to, explaining to them the two institutions as counterparts. But due to the Covid outbreak, students were more aware of geography, and eagerly followed the pandemic geo-location. So when the other part of the world was presented they didn't look at it as "just" another place, but as a real one: an imagined geography (Thackara, 2006) belonging to each group was shared and cherished and became a positive reference point of contact.

Locality and territory became ever more important factors in order to spike empathy, for both were new references to escape the new confined sense of normality, but also because both offered some worm hole views from another part of the world that were personal and not based on the larger news media. The dialogue and discourse to articulate their own reality through one's selected color was an easy task for them, but in another enrichment consequence students didn't limit themselves to take only pictures of their surroundings.

As a result of the lockdown, students got more creative and they came up with colorful self-portraits, setting up glimpses of their lives, their possessions, their hobbies, activities and environments, further more reinforcing the bonds with their colleagues in an honest attempt to establish meaningful connections. The results and the changing emphasis can be appreciated in the images of all teams. The subsequent feedback and amount of participation between all participants, including teachers and students shown an increase of engagement from the previous color connection exercises.



Fig 5. Yellow moodboard , cultural color study during Covid. Pandemic, December 2020

Conclusions

The results of the exercise during the pandemic were characterized by a sense openness and respect for varying perspectives between all participating students. While working on the joint project, students understood the value of collaboration and crowdsourcing, they also gained a respect for their human similarities and appreciated cultural differences. In a global society, developing this sense of empathy will become a key skill to succeed in the design field.

Students were also main actors in articulating this online learning experience, they showed that autonomous driving force to step outside of their comfort zone and the willingness to collaborate with each other. They often joked that the pictures were not the end result, but the hope to, in the near future, meet personally with their pairs and establish contact in real life.

The legacy they left for the Coil program and for both educational institutions is very rich and well documented in the social media pages, facebook groups: @GCCcolorconnection and the reports of the COIL collaboration, but the real outcome remains that they use their locality and connectivity to have a window to the outer world but also use empathy as a tool to really connect and understand the complex world surrounding them, providing them with a very valuable competence for any designer, artist or even human being in this era.

A final conclusion would be that young people are agents of change and even though uncontrollably situations are continuously changing their immediate future and perception of the world, they keep asking themselves more frequently and incisively what it is that they can do in the face of these challenges. (Liers, 2018). New generations are seeking to be that agent of change and empathy can become the tool to find themselves and find in others what they want to become.

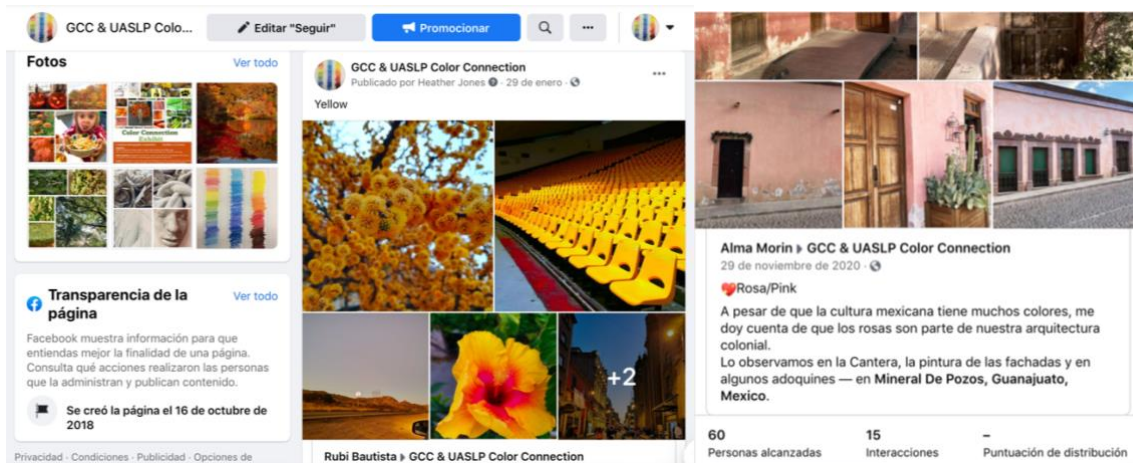


Fig 6. Screen shots of the CCS facebook page and group called Color Connection @GCCcolorconnection

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