

TITLE UX design workshop between Cuba and US. Experiences and results.

SUMMARY In this paper we present the experiences and results of the workshop among students of graphic design and one sculpture student from SUNY New Paltz and of both industrial and graphic design students at ISDi. Participation-observation is used as a method, complemented by interview techniques and student self-reports. The result is the description of the process and projects arrived at during the workshop.

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INTRODUCTION

Our institutions have been moving toward a collaboration for the past 118 years. In 1901 SUNY New Paltz hosted sixty women from Cuba who came to take a two-year teacher training course. They lived in our small village of New Paltz with female chaperones and studied in Spanish and English. The next year the United States Congress declined trade reciprocity to Cuba and the program ended.

In 2000 a delegation of from SUNY New Paltz including the college President and his wife, the Dean of the Center for International Programs, and faculty in Latin American Studies visited Cuba to meet with officials at the University of Habana about the possibility of student and faculty exchange.

Three years later an exhibition Utopia/Post-Utopia: Conceptual Photography and Video from Cuba opened at our Samuel Dorsky Museum of Art at SUNY New Paltz. When Anne designed the exhibition catalog she had no idea that 16 years later she would be taking a group of students to ISDi to work together with students there.

SUNY New Paltz joined the Institute of International Education delegation to Cuba in 2015, and the following year hosted a delegation of Cuban education officials including the Vice Minister of Higher Education, the Rector of the Universidad Tecnológica de la Habana, and the first secretary of the Permanent Mission of Cuba to the United Nations.

In 2017 the SUNY New Paltz College Provost and International Programs Dean joined a delegation from the New York State University system travelling to Cuba to sign a memorandum of understanding in support of collaborations between the State University New York system and the schools overseen by the Cuban Ministry of Higher Education. This was the first such agreement that the nation of Cuba has entered into with an university or system in the United States. At SUNY New Paltz we are honored to be part of this.

Finally, the New York students arrived in Habana on 5 January 2019 and spent the weekend on tours to learn about Cuban history and culture, and also got to know each other better.

On Monday 7 January, 118 years after the first students came from Habana to New Paltz, 22 students and 5 faculty met at ISDi for our collaborative workshop.

THE PROMPT

Having brought together students from both universities and the specialties of Graphic Design and Sculpture of New York and of Graphic and Industrial of Cuba, this encounter supposed two main challenges, make connect people with different cultures and languages, and achieve that specialties with different professional problems are they will focus on a common project.

The first task was for everyone to get acquainted. We divided the students into 4 mixed teams composed by industrial and graphic design students, from both SUNY New Paltz and ISDi. We provided open-ended questions for them to explore, derived from the work of SUNY Stony Brook professor Dr. Arthur Aron.¹ Well afterwards the students told us that they all agreed that the questions were pretty “cheesy” but it did get everyone talking.

In order not to limit the projects to a particular professional problem, the students are not required to carry out a product typology, but they are offered guidelines so that they identify a problem, and that together they will reflect on it and look for it. through design an approach to your solution. Therefore we introduced the design brief: “As you consider life in Habana and in the US, and working in your group, design an experience that proposes

- a solution to, or
- a new perspective on, or
- a way of exploring a “problem” of interest to you.

A person should be able to [1] physically enter/interact with the space you’re creating, and [2] have the experience.

The deliverables at the end of the workshop are your prototype, documentation and presentation of your design exploration and outcomes.”

Since we were not able to plan very far ahead and neither of us knew the abilities of the whole group an open-ended prompt based in the students’ lived experiences with design solutions relevant to both Cuba and the US seemed the most promising project structure.

New Paltz students were additionally asked to undertake a daily journal and photographic documentation of ephemeral, permanent and improvised design.

WORKING GROUPS

Each group chose their own team name.

El Grupo: "Commigraphs!" project

Olivia Carlen	SUNY New Paltz
Riley Loughlin	SUNY New Paltz
Karla de la Caridad Puerto Martí	ISDi
Arián Moreno Pons	ISDi

El Grupo were concerned with how individuals who spoke different languages could communicate with each other.

Together they developed a card game, ¡Communigraphs!, in which players move toward and

away from each other as they attempt to successfully match images with their meanings.

The game is lighthearted and disarming which, as the designers found, helps people navigate communication challenges in a fun, easy-going way.

Since players are not sitting at a table, but are actually standing at opposite ends of a space on a paper game board, communication successes are rewarded with increased physical proximity and a sense of shared excitement.

The project is a variation of the game of charades, that plays with the identification and establishment of common communication codes, with goals that imply the physical contact of the players, susceptible to be developed and evaluated with more specific and particular objectives; and be used as a didactic or technical means to guarantee contact or approach between children.

Back in New Paltz, and in her final report Olivia wrote: "I think the four of us were able to represent all of our strengths through our project. Arian created the 3D container and specifications for our game. Riley and I used our combined illustrative skills to create the logo and visuals. Riley drew the participants, the concept for our logo, and wrote out the instructions. I drew the illustrations for the game, finalized the specs for our logo, and created a typeface in my handwriting or the instructions. Karla finalized all of the visuals for our game on Illustrator."

Riley speculated about next steps: "If we were to further develop our game, I think that we should make more cards with different pictographs and more sturdy packaging. We should have more people play our game and observe the results ... though the game is fun, I think we should make another version of Communigraphs more practical for everyday life (i.e. to help people carry out daily activities), still using pictures.

In ISDi, Arián with regard to the meeting wrote: "The impressions from the beginning of the workshop with New Paltz were very good because, in my case, it was the first time that I made an exchange with people from another country within the field of design. I knew that I had to show my abilities, but rather I had a lot of desire to learn from them because, even being contemporary, belonging to a culture different from ours, made their way of seeing and solving problems from a different perspective, something that we should take full advantage of."

"The initial contact was quite difficult because I had not been in the situation before that my language was practically useless since they could not understand me and then I had to exploit my basic knowledge of English. It was really difficult, but the whole experience I took as something that would make me better, since I had to take me to the limit of my possibilities to communicate and that they enjoyed their stay in the country and in the ISDi with us. Everything was improving because we were always helping each other to get to understand each other and get to know each other better. "

Referring to the work process: "The evolution of the work at the beginning was exhausted, because we could not fall into a specific problem to solve together. We tried to get out of the ISDi in search of inspiration, we sat on the boardwalk in Havana after taking a P6 (bus) together, we walked back to the ISDi, we sat in the yard, but NOTHING. We had several ideas, but the fundamental problem was to communicate it among ourselves. It was then that we came to the conclusion that communication would be our main problem to solve. At that time we felt more united and more confident, we even knew how to help us express what we

functionality issues when we realized that the game did not successfully work through user testing. After taking a step back to figure out the problem, my group and I were able to rethink the game structure and how the development would impact family relationships. With our process having both high points and low points at times, I think that next time I would want our group to refrain from settling too quickly on one game structure. Instead it would be more beneficial to test out a few different game variations and discuss the advantages and disadvantages with each. I would also want to hold back from thinking about the branding until the game concept was completely finished.

Sanford writes: “We had a pretty well balanced group. Some of us were very headstrong, while others were more calm, which made for a good contrast, and helped keep everyone in check. There would be times where our ideas would clash, and the more stubborn of us wouldn’t initially budge (myself included), but the others were so understanding and level headed that after talking more we would always come to a solution and agreement. There was definitely a specific moment of fear that I remember, though. It was after Jaca and I realized that the game we made didn’t work at all, and then made an entirely new game. We were really worried about telling the others, particularly Camilla because she was very determined to make the initial idea work. But after explaining everything, they all understood and we all just plundered [sic] ahead without bickering about it. We all knew we had a fast approaching deadline and that complaining wouldn’t help anything. The language barrier wasn’t much of a problem because Camilla was an amazing translator, but if I were to do this again I would try so very hard to learn as much Spanish as possible. I would also want to give us more time! I feel like more time would allow us to develop something even more interesting.”

In terms of future steps, Sanford says: “I definitely think we have a great idea with this game, but I think I would like to partner with a psychologist before going any further. I’d like to re-develop the game with them to make sure it makes perfect sense and would actually work well in most, if not any, family situation. It’s a really exciting concept, but it does seem difficult in execution.”

Los Tranquilos: "Bota + Crece/Throw + Grow" project

Tanasia LaBrew, SUNY New Paltz

Anabel Martin Mora, ISDi

Tania Velin, SUNY New Paltz

Fabián Cobelo, ISDi

Los Tranquilos were concerned with the problem of urban and rural town trash, particularly organic matter that could be removed from the waste stream and put to good use.

Their solution, a small-scale composter, is meant for school and home gardens.

Using the device can be a positive experience for children and creates rich compost for growing plants.

Considering the sustainable side of the solution, its further evolution could lead into more economic and humanistic approaches by proposing a variant developed mainly by recycled materials as an open sourced design for unprivileged communities.

Tania describes her experience: “Within our group, we held certain strengths and weaknesses. An advantage to my group was the fact that I am bilingual and had the ability to communicate

effectively with both groups ... Our group possessed a number of skills that we found essential towards getting to our final project idea. Anabel was the only industrial designer in our group and knew about a number of programs that the rest of us have never worked with. Whenever Tanasia and I had an idea on what the final would look or function like, she would then discuss the realities if we were to take that approach-which in some ways would have not been effective for our composting can. She understood form, material costs, and movable parts more than anyone else in the group, which really helped us determine the extent of our proposed product and in building the prototype as well.

“Fabian somehow got himself specialized as the typographer of the group as he approved the type that would go along with our final logo, designed our in-progress presentation, and obsessed over designers like Paula Scher. Tanasia played a key investigator and organizer of content in the group as she took notes on every detail from our initial ideas to the function of our final prototype. Using a number of notes and sketches throughout our time at ISDi really allowed us to continually expand on our original idea which was super important for our working process. I found myself in the position of not only being a bridge between both cultures and languages, but also the one who somewhat facilitated the day to day workings of the work day by also consulting with my group members on what should be focused on for the day.”

“ ... language was also a common disadvantage that many groups, including mine had also dealt with ... having the same idea communicated twice was something that did take more time to reiterate instead of if everyone was able to speak the same language and understand each other fully. Even though I have been learning Spanish since I was a child, I am still not fluent in the language ... So even though I was able to communicate with the ISDi students, I still found myself not catching every word they said and having to ask them to repeat what they said or ask for the English equivalent.”

“ ... I would also try to have let everyone contribute more equally to the brainstorming and building process since I believe we could have made more cohesive decisions like creating a set of instructions along with additional marketing materials. It might have also been nice to include some kind of video of the prototype being used or some images of the prototype in an apartment or casa to give our product some kind of platform.”

Halcones: "Perro Azul/Blue Dog" project

Jorge Carlos Menéndez Rodríguez	ISDi
Emma Seager	SUNY New Paltz
Heidi Rochela Treto	ISDi
Caleigh Carr	SUNY New Paltz

Halcones sought to improve the situation of stray dogs.

The modular, lightweight shelter they designed filters ambient moisture to provide both shade and clean water for street animals and a place for animal lovers who wish to keep them company.

Design considerations included preventing collected water from hosting disease-carrying mosquitos.

The design proposal holds a deep sensibility for the issue it tries to solve and as it

constitutes modules to collect water it also function as an urban installation for creating shadows. Beyond its original purpose, Halcones' design and concept could easily be scaled up to provide shelter and water for people.

Emma commented: "The group was fantastic at creative problem-solving and being both independently and group driven with each task we faced. We all worked extremely well together. The language barrier was difficult in the beginning, but as time went on, we began to better understand and got into a routine of work."

Caleigh says: "I absolutely loved working with my group. Even though the language barrier made it more difficult to communicate, we make it work as we got more comfortable with each other. I learned so much from each member of the group, including their working progress, reactions to error, and effort put into every detail."

Broma: "Yo ♥ Havana Limpia/I Love a Clean Havana" project

Lisandra Pérez Chacón	ISDi
John Humphrey	SUNY New Paltz
Aglaia Kilb	SUNY New Paltz
Yania Pérez Reyes	ISDi
Wendy Cremé Rodríguez	ISDi

Broma sought to change the behavior of people who throw their trash on the street.

One challenge is accomplishing this without also wasting resources and creating more stuff destined for the trash bin.

Their solution: a die-cut "Yo [heart] Havana Limpia" sign oriented in relation to a light source so that the words would be illuminated on sidewalks and buildings. The die-cut may be changed to create a modular sign system.

John wrote: "I would say our strengths consisted of impactful thoughts and reflections of our ideas. When we set a milestone we could set out and achieve it. Unfortunately at times it was difficult to know if we were on similar pages, or if a new idea or perspective was understood equally by everyone. This caused some issues in making headway, as we would need to dedicate time for explanations. Nonetheless I believe that both groups of students, New Paltz and ISDi, were able to sufficiently clarify intentions and ideas with each other so no one was left behind. For next time, I think equipping oneself with thorough methods of communication and conveyance would help, as well as out of class bonding, as I believe it is important in building interactions and familiarity... and studying more Spanish."

"When considering continuing the project at home, I think that this idea could resonate in New Paltz. New Paltz doesn't have the same problems as Havana, but I believe the concept of sending an eco-friendly message, along with not creating more waste in the process, could be received well by the community. In terms of continuing our efforts here (in New Paltz), I would begin with utilizing our tools and resources that we are provided with. The use of laser-cutting drastically improves production, as well as allowing greater room for experimentation. Additionally, I think I would make an effort to obtain a stronger light

source for further experiments, and recruit help in working out the physics and incorporate these factors moving forward."

REFLECTIONS

Mixing different cultures and design specialties in a project, although it is always a challenge, enriches the participants: each one learns more about the field of action of the other and its design perspective. After our experience in collaboration we can recognize in our project some of the findings in the literature about cross cultural collaborations. Dr. Thomas Eissenberg ² has found that respect, beneficence and justice the three important ingredients that build collaborations with long term successful outcomes. He defines respect as mutual recognition and protection of each other's cultures, "...societal goals, knowledge and values." The structure of our project, which was to identify and work on common issues of concern, respects the cultures, knowledge and experiences of all our students.

Beneficence means working toward the most benefit with the least negative impact. The US students and faculty were met with genuine hospitality by their ISDi counterparts. Arrangements were made so that the ISDi students could balance their ongoing work with the collaboration. Justice is likewise about balance, in this case sharing the responsibility of all aspects of the project and the work that continues beyond the two weeks. It requires the kind of open communication that the faculty and staff created when we met and began to work together and the friendships that formed between us all.

Our experiences also reflect a current focus on the necessity for people who work with others across diverse cultures to develop "cultural metacognition," self-awareness in terms of beliefs, real-time thoughts and behaviors, and what's learned through the time spent together. ³ Before coming to Cuba, the New Paltz students met with College faculty who had recently travelled to Habana to do a workshop at ISDi, read about the ArtCenter experience, and learned about the country's history. Tours of cultural and historic sites also informed the New Paltz students. We worked to create self-awareness to not make cultural assumptions of other people, to be open to adjusting one's assumptions while working together, and to reflect upon the process (the New Paltz students were required to keep a daily journal).

The benefits of collaboration clearly go beyond educational purposes.

The difficulty that verbal interaction entails forces each participant to find new ways of communicating, original and particular for each situation. Along with the desire to discover a little more about the other, and the requirements to work together productively, new and deep degrees of connection are established. Establishing trust is an essential part of the process. Students who felt a sense of trust toward their colleagues always assumed the best and were able to meet challenges in a productive way. The very few who did not were not able to make their contributions.

Sometimes the work groups brought together people who not only did not share a language, but might not necessarily be compatible. Each student is at a unique stage in their emotional development and maturity. But it appears that for the sake of harmony and successful completion of the project, everybody did their best.

While workshops are an ideal environment for knowledge and growth, they also open up space for creative solutions. Our workshop asked students to focus on the daily lives of people

and communities in Cuba and the United States, resulting in high-impact solutions that emerged from the exploration of different approaches to their needs.

The final projects of this experience, taken to different levels of conceptualization, can be developed a posteriori as viable open-source products, which can be made available to individuals and communities with similar needs, without cost.

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BIOGRAPHY

ALFREDO G. RODRÍGUEZ DIAGO: Graduated as an Industrial Designer, at the Higher Institute of Design (ISDi) of the 2014-2015 academic year with a Gold Degree, he was recognized as outstanding in teaching and, for all these results, the most integral student of his year. He has been a professor of the Industrial Design faculty of the ISDi since his graduation, where he has taught the subjects Structure and Strength of Materials; and he is the main professor of Spaces Design and Project Communication. Wide profile designer, he has developed his work mainly in the design of spaces (interior and exterior), scenography; and it has also been developed in communication design (editorial and illustrations).

ANNE GALPERIN: Educator, designer, administrator. I am now back in the full-time faculty saddle after chairing the Art Department at the State University of New York at New Paltz from Fall 2011 through May 2016.

As an Associate Professor of Graphic Design I teach courses including design foundations, typography, theory and criticism, history, and research methods.

Earlier in my career I focused on print design. More recently I've begun to design wearables, artifacts worn on the body that are electronically or digitally activated. My client list includes the American Composers Forum, Chronicle Books, Cranbrook Academy of Art, D.A.P. (Distributed Art Publishers), Four Walls Eight Windows, New York University Press, O/R Books, Princeton Architectural Press, Princeton University Press, SPIN Magazine/Three Rivers Press, Time-Life Books/Williams Sonoma, and the Walker Art Center. I am the recipient of two merit awards from Bookbuilders West and a Print Magazine Regional Design Award.

Semi-recent writing includes an essay in *Image–Music–Text: Discovering Album Aesthetics*, Museum Tusulanum Press, Norway, 2011. I am currently developing a proposal for a book about wearable technologies and working on an oral history project with women designers who began their careers in the mid-20th century.

I earned a BSc. in Human Development and Social Policy with Honors from Northwestern University in Chicago, Illinois and an MFA in 2D design from Cranbrook Academy of Art in Bloomfield Hills, Michigan.