

Community Engagement Methodology for the Academic Design Curriculum

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ABSTRACT

Design profession has become quite resignified over time, being increasingly associated with an approach to involve people working collaboratively to co-create new opportunities for the welfare, solve complex problems or even favor innovation processes, whether they are applied in business environments or in the social sphere. By acting in this scope, Design is articulating social innovation processes, as it is developing strategies, whether through products or services, so that the actors related to the existing context can be active agents of transformation. In synergy with this approach, there is another participatory aspect, originating from other areas of knowledge: *Community Engagement Methodology*. This encompasses a process for providing information, empowering the community to identify solutions to their needs, as well as influencing priorities and strategic decisions. In this context, despite having enough theoretical and practical research implemented to favor community engagement, it appears that the academic curricula of Design courses do not work so specifically with community engagement/ implementation of social innovation processes. Thus, this paper reveals a methodology developed during PhD research in Design that aimed to favor the social reintegration of offenders and ex-offenders. This methodology, made up of different methods, was created in codesign with a Portuguese social cooperative, which was one of the promoters of a project co-founded by the European Union, between 2017 and 2020. The methodology was applied to professionals of the Criminal Justice System who work within the scope of reintegration in four countries (Portugal, Italy, Romania, and Germany), who evaluated it very positively. Therefore, the purpose of this article is to reveal the community involvement methodology created and propose ways that it can be implemented in Design curricula, to encourage and favor the development of solutions and improvements in different social contexts.

Keywords: Community engagement, Design for social innovation, Academic design curriculum

INTRODUCTION

Design suffers and continues to undergo many changes over time. Initially the area was closely linked to art and architecture, related to the creation of products, brands, packaging and editorial materials. Due to its intensely investigative, analytical, and creative potential, which it explores to solve problems or create new products/services, Design has come to be valued as

a process, to be used by other areas of knowledge to innovate and solve the problems that affect them. Thus, Design came to be identified as a “provider of methodologies and methods” to solve complex problems, such as those that may be related to social innovation processes.

Social innovation is recognized as a process in which social actors organize themselves, reusing existing elements, whether material or immaterial, to improve certain situations, solve problems or even generate better well-being. As a result, there is an improvement in the ways of life of society. When the designer is a participating actor, he collaborates by providing tools to supply different stages of the process, such as developing empathy for the reality of the participants, stimulating creativity, facilitating communication and collaboration between the members of these communities, in order to make the process even more participatory (Jégou and Manzini; 2006; Meroni, 2008; Meroni and Sangiorgi, 2011; Chick, 2012; Manzini and Staszowski, 2013; Freire, 2011; de Oliveira et al. 2021).

On the other hand, in addition to the approach of social innovation through Design, there is another area that also proposes greater interaction of members of a community, with a bias towards “community policing”, with the objective of obtaining greater commitment and active participation of citizens on political decisions: the community engagement (Myhill, 2012). This one, despite working with a very civic participation, does not explore as many empathic and creative methods as the first one.

This paper reveals how a methodology was created and implemented, guided by both approaches, so that the Criminal Justice System (CJS) creates strategies to engage Civil Society Organizations (CSO) in the problem of social reintegration of (ex) offenders, from increased participation and commitment, to prevent and control the risk of criminal recidivism. This social innovation process was developed between 2017 and 2021, it was part of the “MOBI” project, co-founded by the Erasmus+ program of the European Union, carried out by transnational organizations from four countries: Portugal, Italy, Romania, and Germany. Among the authors of the methodology is a Portuguese social solidarity cooperative, *Aproximar*, and a Design researcher, who developed his doctoral thesis on this theme of social reintegration. It is worth noting that the researcher, his supervisor, and the managers of the cooperative are the authors of this paper.

Based on the successful implementation of the methodology developed, the objective of this article is to propose guidelines for the implementation of the methodology in academic design curricula, to facilitate the articulation of students and teachers with civil society, and, in this sense, to encourage the development of social innovation processes in universities.

DESIGN FOR SOCIAL INNOVATION AND COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

Before approaching what Design for social innovation is about, it's necessary to define what social innovation is. This refers to new forms of organization of society, in order to solve social problems, generate opportunities for the common good, or create more sustainable ways of life. When it is a

process of social innovation guided by Design, the aim is to provide tools to enable members of these communities to participate in a collaborative and active way in the pursuit of such purposes. The results obtained should be improvements for society, as well as the development of capacities to act and collaborate (Jégou and Manzini; 2006; Meroni, 2008; Meroni and Sangiorgi, 2011; Chick, 2012; Manzini and Staszowski, 2013; Freire, 2011; de Oliveira et al. 2021).

The role of designers in this context can take place either as a catalyst for the process, or by participating in different activities involved, such as: creation of strategies to enable its members to participate in a collaborative and active way, research opportunities for the community, interpreting social needs, designing tools to support the understanding of interaction, among others (Meroni, 2008; de Oliveira et al. 2021; Oliveira, 2021).

On the other hand, the community engagement approach, which is not linked to the area of Design, but which is believed to corroborate with it, and therefore was also explored. This relates to the scope of police services (linked to the CJS) and its partner organizations in community matters, which is also known as: “community policing”, with the perspective of obtaining commitment, engagement, and active participation from citizens with measures and political decisions (Myhill, 2012). In this approach, it is proposed that social actors are no longer just citizens with the right to vote, choose their representatives, contribute with their taxes, to be active agents that participate collaboratively in the planning of improvement strategies. Community involvement encompasses several activities, such as: providing information, empowering the community to identify problems and even solutions to their needs, defining priorities to be implemented, strategic decisions, among others (Myhill, 2012; UNODC, 2006).

For successful community engagement, so that the relationship between the police and the community works well and is efficient, some attributes that the team should be aware of are highlighted: organizational commitment and that there will be a change in culture; integrated work, so that work belongs to all individuals, not just teams; power must be shared, so that the community actually has an active role and a sense of belonging in the process; adaptation and flexibility to adapt different approaches that corroborate to meet the needs of the community; existence of metrics for performance management related to performance and effective community involvement; implementation of training/training to develop participants’ competences, both for the police and for the communities; trust between actors; development of a two-way communication; collaborative work in a multidisciplinary way; and supply and search of resources to favor the articulations (Myhill, 2012; UNODC, 2006; MOBI, 2019).

THE METHODOLOGY DEVELOPED

Based on theoretical research on both approaches, Design for social innovation and community engagement, the *Aproximar* cooperative team developed an adaptable and customizable methodology and methods to be explored in the different methodological phases. The team involved in the creation

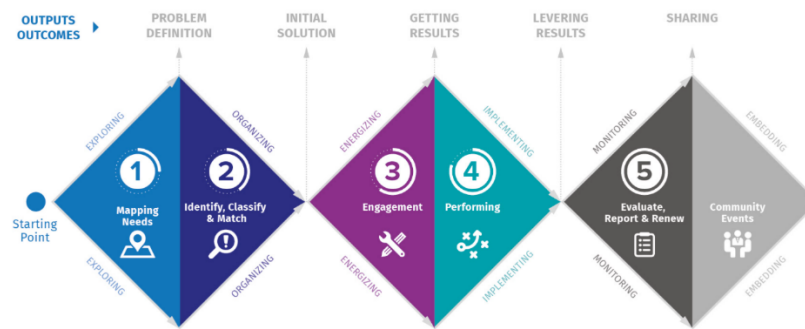


Figure 1: Community engagement methodology (MOBI, 2019).

comprised professionals from different areas: a psychologist, a designer, a criminologist, two social workers and a sociologist. The methodology conceived, as part of the MOBI project, co-founded by the European Union, focused on engaging CSO in solving the needs of the CJS, regarding the social reintegration of offenders or ex-offenders.

Although the social reintegration of these people is a responsibility of the CJS, the other social actors, such as families, the circle of friends and civil society organizations, also play a fundamental role in supporting the reconstruction of their lives. The proposal was to develop a more society-centered model, to share responsibility and power with the community, especially civil society organizations. These play a key role in helping with this problem, as they can provide the system with important resources to reduce recidivism, by providing decent work positions and supporting the development of skills for (ex) offenders (MOBI, 2019; Oliveira, 2021).

In this context, a methodology composed of five phases was created, as shown in Figure 1, and described below.

The first phase, *Mapping of needs*, has an “opening” phase for understanding the needs, as well as identifying which of them are the most relevant to be worked on during the following phases. This phase will serve to answer questions such as: what are the causes of the problem or what are the impacts of this problem. At the end of this intensely exploratory phase, there is the “problem definition”.

In the second phase, *Identify, classify and match*, there is a period of synthesis, of organizing what was defined in the previous phase and mainly identifying key actors to act on the strategy to be planned, gaps in information that can be better explored, what kind of interest or responsibility the mapped actors will have in the process.

In the third phase, *Engagement*, again exploratory, serves mainly to devise strategies on how the community engagement actions will be carried out. The procedures will be defined, the resources that can be allocated to meet the needs, ways of making contacts with the actors, the levels of participation expected to be reached, what are the stages of the involvement process, deadlines for developing each activity, possible limitations, which engagement techniques will be used, among many other issues.

The fourth phase, *Performing*, proposes to monitor the implementation of the ideas created, the objectives set and recognize if what was planned in the previous phase is being carried out in a timely and orderly manner and if the resources are being used efficiently and effectively.

Finally, in phase 5, *Evaluate, Report and Renew*, there is the conclusion of the community engagement process and possible renewal for a new process to address another problem. At this stage, the efficiency of the implemented process will be initially evaluated, and valuable feedback will be provided, on issues such as, the best techniques to be used, the most appropriate locations, what does not work so well and could be better done.

After designing the methodology, 24 tools (methods) were designed, which can be explored in each of the phases. For each of the tools, a code was created that suggests in which phases they are most recommended. Among the tools designed, there were some that were already widely used in Design processes, such as: *Word cloud*, *SWOT analysis*, *Stakeholders map*, *Storyboard*, *Empathy map*, *Problem Tree* and other more unusual ones, created by the *Aproximar* team, such as: *It's match? Priorities Definition*, *Engagement Evaluation*.

Implementation of the Methodology

After creating the methodology and drawing up methods, a meeting of the MOBI project partnership was used (held in Rome, Italy, between June 25th and 27th, 2019, to test them with professionals who represent each of the organizations and work with social reintegration of (ex) offenders. There were 22 professionals from four countries: Portugal, Italy, Romania, and Germany.

On the first day of the meeting, the first phase of the methodology was explored; on the second day, phases 2 and 3; and the third day was intended to present the ideas conceived and an overall assessment of the methodology and methods. Phases 4 and 5 were not tested as it would require implementing the ideas, and this would not be possible in such a short time.

In general, the evaluations were very positive, and suggestions were made for improvements in methodology and methods. After the meeting, the *Aproximar* team worked on improvements and sent corrections to the partners who were responsible for (really) implementing the methodology with the SJC in their respective countries.

The implementation was monitored only in Portugal, which was very well evaluated by the participants, professionals who work with the social reintegration of (ex) offenders. The participants, in co-design with professionals from *Aproximar*, managed to develop a community awareness plan and a blended-learning training course for the employability of young people aged between 16 and 30, serving time in the community. The project was implemented in July of the following year, during the COVID 19 pandemic, so it was carried out online.

The training implemented was training for trainers, that is, the training of professionals to give the course to young people was carried out. Figure 2 is a composition of images containing the strategy creation phase carried out throughout 2019 and the implementation of the course, in 2020.

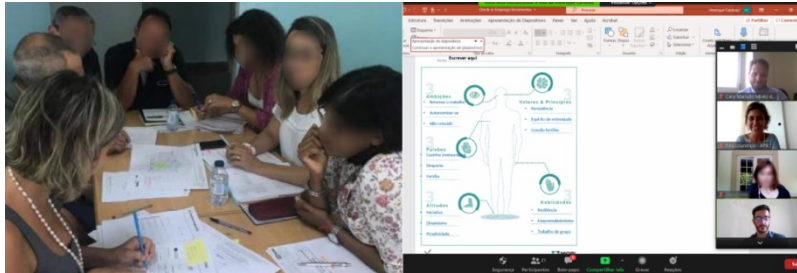


Figure 2: Implementation of the methodology and course created (Oliveira, 2021).

Proposal for Implementing the Methodology in Academic Design Curricula

Based on the research carried out and the good evaluation that was made by the people who used the methodology and methods, it is proposed here that these are explored in a university context, in academic design curricula, so that students are active agents to involve society and participate in social innovation processes. In addition, the proposal also aims to provide an innovative and validated methodological basis, which was built by exploring two distinct approaches: Design and Community Engagement.

Thus, it's proposed that the methodology be explored minimally within a discipline, which focuses on social innovation. Considering this scenario, in which there is a subject of about 40 hours/class, divided into 10 classes, the following sessions are proposed

- **Sessions 1 and 2:** theoretical background on both Design for Social Innovation and Community Engagement approaches. In addition to revealing the theories, it is suggested to show cases that explored these approaches.
- **Session 3:** Divide the classes into groups of 3 to 4 people and ask them to research possible existing problems in the context in which they live, in their cities and choose one to apply the methodology. It is suggested here that the search for organizations that work in areas of social inclusion is also encouraged, as was the case of the investigation, in which the doctoral researcher found the *Aproximar* cooperative and started to contribute, initially as a volunteer, in projects for social innovation. It is quite common to have organizations that need designers to support them and do not have contacts or means to hire them, or they can hire them, but they do not know that Design students can work in this social environment.
- **Session 4:** define which techniques can be explored throughout the design phases, especially the first phase, to mapping needs. It is suggested to encourage that, in addition to the community chosen to work, students seek more partners to involve in the project, such as students from other courses that are related to the problem, professionals, institutions, etc.
- **Session 5:** Provide feedback on how phase 1 went and plan for phase 2.
- **Session 6:** Provide feedback on how phase 2 went and plan for phase 3.

- **Sessions 7-8:** provide feedback on how phase 3 went and plan for phase 4.
- **Session 9:** provide feedback on how phase 4 went and plan for phase 5.
- **Session 10:** provide feedback on how phase 5 went and hold a closing moment and share impressions about the processes developed.

It is relevant to mention that as social innovation processes are not linear and can take longer than expected, as it depends on many factors, with the involvement of external participants, among other issues that cannot always be controlled, it is suggested that the final phases, 4 and 5, are more flexible and do not necessarily need to be carried out within the discipline.

CONCLUSION

From the research carried out, it was possible to recognize the qualities of the Design and Community Engagement approaches, as well as to explore both in synergy to build a methodology to explore in social innovation processes.

The article also served to reveal how a process of social innovation can be implemented and to pay attention to the causes that can be worked on and lack of strategies and people to collaborate, such as the problem worked on in the MOBI project, of community engagement to contribute to reintegration of (ex) offenders. It was also possible to propose the configuration of a curricular structure that can be implemented in Design courses, providing a strong bibliographic review, methodology and creative methods to favor working with communities.

For future research, it is suggested to implement the methodology as proposed in this article is to verify how the methodology replication process takes place, answering questions such as: how did the students appropriate the methodology? Were you able to implement it with the communities? What were the impressions of the participants involved? What other actors were involved in the process besides the chosen community? Did community members feel engaged? What was the level of engagement? What were the results achieved in the processes developed?

It is believed that such research into the implementation of the methodology in the curricula can have very positive effects in the academic sphere of Design, as well as for society. The present article serves mainly to provide an initial basis for the proposal revealed here.

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