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Full Length Research Paper

Indigenous artists and design students team up to create innovative handcraft products, Rwanda

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Abstract

This paper is a descriptive documentation of the outcomes from a collaborative endeavor between design students and indigenous craft artists in Rwanda. The education curriculum plan for Rwanda highlights the need to include traditional/indigenous knowledge in subject syllabi in schools, colleges and universities. The intention of this strategy is to enhance the promotion and preservation of the country's cultural heritage. The main goal of this paper is to report the results of the collaborative activity introduced through a design course offered as a second year module in the Creative Design Department (CRD), at the University of Rwanda (UR). Specifically, the study investigated the concept of initiating information exchange between design students and indigenous artists through designing and developing innovative handcraft product ideas produced from raw materials found within the country. The methods used to achieve objectives were interviews, observations and creative workshops. The findings showed that reaching out to traditional people of a society is an advantageous technique in facilitating indigenous knowledge and skills to the youth. Furthermore, the ideas developed could be used to improve creativity and the quality of authentic handcrafted products, making them responsive to modern contemporary markets.

Keywords: Indigenous Knowledge and Skills (IKS), craft, art, design.

INTRODUCTION

At the second year level, the Creative Design Department offers the Course Module Applied Decoration and Design. Within this module, students are required to produce different product ideas and prototypes using materials found in and around their country. This second semester course follows the Method Improvisation Module offered in the first semester of study. Taking into account that during the first semester each student is required to produce a product individually, the results showed potential for innovative handcraft product ideas.

However, particular limitations were observed. Many of the ideas lacked craftsmanship quality in as much as they were likely to be great prototype examples, suitable for either mass production or as souvenirs, which could be used to promote the country's cultural heritage and the Tourism Industry.

Furthermore, based on quality assurance interviews with students, it appears that the drawbacks on the quality of prototypes by students are due to financial constraints with regard to the purchasing and handling of

materials. Subsequently, the National Craft Industry Promotion Policy, drafted by the Ministry of Trade and Industry (MINNICOM), shows that whilst there is an abundance of raw materials, there is a lack of innovative design ideas in handicraft products made by its indigenous artists (2006, 2009). This has led to low quality and demand of the country's handicraft products in modern contemporary markets, locally, nationally and internationally (MINNICOM, 2006, 2009).

In view of the creative potential of design students alongside the need for new handicraft product ideas, as highlighted by the MINNICOM policy report, this paper serves to explore the credibility of initiating collaboration between design students and indigenous artists to create innovative handicraft design ideas, which could be produced by the indigenous artists who specialize in that particular material.

Of note here is that, as modern trends in academia attempt to promote the recognition of prior knowledge and skills in any field, this opens up the opportunity to include the knowledge of skills and resources of indigenous people. The assumption is that in a rapidly developing country, such as Rwanda, which is rich in raw materials suitable for handmade products, it could be beneficial to encourage cooperation between indigenous talent expertise and/with contemporary design trends. This hypothesis does not claim that this method would be the solution entirely, but it could elevate the country's craft industry and in part increase income generation.

Furthermore, the education curriculum of Rwanda fosters the inclusion of indigenous knowledge and skills into syllabi, in schools, colleges and universities. It is based on this platform that the course module of applied decoration and design experimented with the idea of collaboration. The students were allowed to divide themselves into groups where they were tasked to brainstorm a minimum of ten ideas for a particular material, which at least one student in that group had researched and sampled in the method improvisation module. As a group the students were required to find and work with an artist who specializes in that material. This method was considerate of time and financial limitations, which arguably accommodated the students more than the artists. To justify the single sided approach, it is important to note that it could have been problematic to experiment the potential of the collaboration from both sides at the same time because the course runs over a period of twelve weeks only. As a result, from reading this paper, various thoughts and views may arise to augment further discussion about this collaborative technique.

Background to the study

Brief views of statistics of Rwanda show that, in 2006, there were approximately four hundred and twenty

art/craft associations. The population count in that year estimates that out of more than 8.2 million people, only about 100 000 had full-time jobs against 850 000 who had low salary part-time employment. The size of the population living below the poverty line was projected at 57 percent (Ministry of Trade and Industry, 2006, 2009).

In 2009, the United States President's Emergency Plan For AIDS Relief (PEPFAR, 2010) approximated an HIV prevalence of 2.9 percent in adults between the ages 15 to 49. In that same year, nearly 170 000 adults and children between the ages 0 – 49 years were living with HIV, in which 88 000 of these people needed Anti-Retro Viral Therapy (ARVT). An estimated 65 percent of the people living with HIV and requiring anti-retroviral treatment were pregnant women receiving anti-retroviral treatment for prevention of Mother-To-Child Transmission (MTCT) (PEPFAR, 2010).

Dr. Donald Kaberuka, the Minister of Finance and Economic Development (1999) declared that the biggest challenge in combating the spread of new HIV/AIDS infections is the widespread ignorance and stigma existing across the population of Rwanda. He explains that the 1994 genocide may have contributed to the spread of HIV infections, due to systematic rapes, violence and living conditions related to refugee camps during that war phase. Kaberuka (1999) notes that the poverty resulting from the genocide appears to have increased sex trade as an economic necessity for mainly Rwandan females.

With regards to education, Kaberuka (1999) states that a decline in enrolment in school was observed following 1994 since many parents could not afford to send their children to school. He informs us that high rates of illiteracy in addition to a large number of youth who do not receive education beyond primary school level, hampers effective design of development mechanisms that could promote behavioral change that would help decrease the growing number of new HIV infections (Kaberuka, 1999).

However, recent statistics show that adult literacy has increased over the last couple of years, currently it is estimated to be 59 percent (Koster, 2008). Until the age of twenty-four, the level of literacy among women and men is about equal, after this age the level of illiteracy increases among women. For women aged fifty and above, at least one in five are literate (Koster, 2008).

Notably, behind the health, social and economic status of the country, many of the people of Rwanda have vast indigenous knowledge and skills that can help create employment, increase income generation and in-turn reduce the poverty rate, which appears to be driving individuals into dangerous and risky behaviors. The decreasing enrolment from primary, secondary and tertiary school levels threatens to prompt a monopoly of generational poverty within the society.

Therefore, it may be suggested that education curriculum plays a significant role in the development of

an individual and the country. The following discussion of educational and cultural policies of Zimbabwe, Ghana and Kenya gives an example of how indigenous knowledge and skills can be included into education curricula.

Literature Review

Education and cultural policies in other countries

In the Cultural Policy of Zimbabwe (2007) culture is defined as the totality of human behavioral habits determined by traditional value systems dominant within a society. These value systems become the foundational knowledge that supplements the social empowerment and economic development of that society.

Implementation strategies in the Zimbabwe policy include creation of an environment that encourages promotion and preservation of cultural values, norms and myths via educational curricula, in schools, colleges and universities. The policy states that indigenous knowledge and skills should continue to be handed down from generation to generation, through socialization within the home and community, to ensure the holistic development of the whole individual from an early age (Cultural Policy of Zimbabwe, 2007).

Furthermore, the policy asserts that arts, culture and craft are some of the subjects that should be included in the education syllabi. These subjects can facilitate the preservation of indigenous knowledge and skills, at the same time as it promotes the integration of aesthetic traditional values into modern and contemporary design developments (2007). Collaborative projects between indigenous art/craft producers and professional designers are recommended as a method to augment the inclusion of traditional skills and knowledge, as part of contemporary development in science and technology (Cultural Policy of Zimbabwe, 2007).

In Ghana, Aid-To-Artisan-Ghana (ATAG), a non-profit organization, developed a five-year strategic plan (1998). It is suggested in this plan that indigenous artists who have the capacity to use their knowledge, skills and creativity in the field of applied arts have the opportunity to improve their economic positions by offering innovative product design ideas to the arts and craft sector of the country. In addition, the ATAG plan encourages indigenous artists and community leaders to establish platforms for information exchange with school, college and university departments, as a method to develop art/craft subject matter that can be infused into educational curricula at all levels (1998).

In the Cultural Policy of Kenya, author Kivuti Ndeti (1975) remarks that the lack of education and illiteracy increases ignorance and hampers the growth and development ability of individuals within a society. Ndeti (1975) explains that a large percentage of the population

in African countries, such as Kenya still relies on oral tradition to transmit cultural knowledge from one generation to the next. He says that oral tradition is in essence knowledge based on actual experiences and human relations, which promote self-awareness and the development of human values of individuals. Similarly, Ndeti (1975) concludes by recommending that art/craft education should be integrated into teaching curricula in school, college and in university departments, to educate the youth about cultural values and traditional knowledge.

Collaborative relations between artists and designers

Author Kevin Murray in his article titled, *'Outsourcing the Hand: An Analysis of Craft Design Collaborations Across the Global Divide'*, states that "the relation between designer and artisan is closer to business relationship between Western company and Chinese factory, though in many cases the ultimate goal is the benefit of the producer rather than the profit of the company" (2010: 63).

Murray questions collaborative relations between designer and artist, and the standards used to evaluate craft design collaborations that produce world craft. He argues that from the artist's perspective, it may be assumed that the work is the free and spontaneous adaptation of traditional crafts to the opportunities provided by the global market, in which the process of engaging with the global market could be seen as an exciting creative challenge for the artists. However, an alternative view is that these craft design collaborations tend to be driven by external market forces, similar to the sweatshop arrangement in other export industries (Murray, 2010).

Murray goes on to say that the development of craft products involves cultural issues and traditional value systems, which provide a deeper understanding of the social dynamics of that particular society (2010). He explains that the wide gap in education levels between designer and artist creates a barrier in the collaborative relations. The artists tend to lack the ability to engage in Western Academic discourse, and confidence to share experiences and knowledge against the better-informed views of outside designers. Murray (2010) concludes that as collaborative partnerships in art/craft handmade products increases methods to verify these collaborations are needed.

DISCUSSION AND OUTCOMES

Rwanda education and cultural policy

The Rwanda Draft Curriculum by the Ministry of Education, Science, Technology and Scientific Research (MINDEC) for primary and secondary school curriculum

development states that to enhance the establishment of an educated, knowledge based and technologically led society, quality educational curricula has to be implemented in schools. This curriculum must also take into account traditional cultural customs that are beneficial to the society and the country (MINDEC, 2003).

In the article titled '*A Review of Mathematics and Science Education in Rwanda*', authors Alphonse Uworwabayebo, Jolly Rubagiza and Daniel Jyamurenye (2007) argue that in the colonial times, formal education was largely managed by missionaries from foreign countries who have been criticized for not adapting their educational curriculum to the needs of the local society.

According to Uworwabayebo *et al.* (2007), many Rwandans believed that the colonial education system by foreign missionaries did not consider traditional values, knowledge and literature of the society. In addition, these authors claim that the colonial education system appears to have partly fuelled the 1994 genocide because the transition from the lower to a higher level in school was based on ethnic and regional criteria rather than on individual performance. They conclude that the colonial education curriculum tends to have had ignored human values of the people and society of Rwanda (Uworwabayebo *et al.* 2007).

The National Curriculum Development Centre (NCDC, 2011) developed the General Paper Curriculum for Secondary Schools Advanced Level. Subsequent to the 2009 Rwanda education reform, art, culture and craft subject matter has been introduced in schools, at senior level. The objective in including these subjects is to enhance student's ability to make cross-curricula links that will develop their intellectual ability appropriate to students at advanced level. Another objective is to achieve an understanding and usage of the English language, which will enable them to articulate their ideas and opinions in a reflective and academic manner (NCDC, 2011).

As theme two in senior six, cultural studies have been added with the intention to allow students to explore the notion of cultural diversity, heritage and languages (NCDC, 2011). This theme teaches students to identify and understand the impact and influence of diverse cultures on lifestyles and social habits. In addition, this theme reflects upon the significance of preserving national cultural heritage and promoting of tourism based on the cultural knowledge of the country (NCDC, 2011).

As theme three in senior six, art education has been introduced. The subject content includes art forms, traditional arts and the role national heritage preservation. The objective is to encourage students to explore various art forms, such as architecture, painting, fashion, photography, sculpture and music. The facilitation methods for both these subjects include research, field trips, guest speakers and practice of traditional arts and crafts (NCDC, 2011). Evidently, art

and cultural studies have been included in school curricula. However, there is a gap in linking this knowledge to course modules at university level.

Recent reports from the Ministry of Trade and Industry in Rwanda (MINNICOM) declare that the development of the country's handicraft sector is constrained on production and supply of handcrafted products because they tend to lack specialization, innovative design ideas and the quality does not measure to international standards (2006, 2009). These reports affirm that this creativity limitation makes it difficult to sell Rwandan handicrafts in modern contemporary markets (MINNICOM, 2006, 2009).

Furthermore, the Ministry of Trade and Industry notes that "low product development and limited knowledge about market access and low market development efforts are still inhibiting export growth in the sector. Artists are constrained by their limited non-market determined technical and artistic product design, product standardization, development and marketing" (MINNICOM, 2006: p.21-29).

Francois Kanimba, the Minister of Trade and Commerce, told the New Times Newspaper that, "African products are too similar to thrive in intra-regional markets. History has shown that African products are mostly designed to suit developed markets. African traders are reluctant to produce valuable goods that can be traded amongst ourselves and this has greatly tampered trade" (The New Times Newspaper, 2014: p.7).

In another article in The New Times Newspaper titled, '*Roots of Rwandan Music should Remain Firm*', Dr. Peter Stefan, the director of Goethe Institute, declared that "Rwanda has no strong institutions to guard it's heritage like music, saying that what's required is a custodian to ensure that not only it's cultural legacy survives but also progresses. The Ministry of Culture should take a leading role in ensuring the country's rich cultural heritage survives by preserving it" (The New Times Newspaper, 2014: p.24).

Outcomes from collaboration of design students and indigenous artists

The collaborative project between design students and indigenous artists resulted in the development of five innovative product ideas. Prototypes of these design ideas were produced using raw materials found in Rwanda. The products include beaded lampshades, banana-fiber tablemats, pine wood footstools, palm leaves jewelry pieces and sisal grass mobile phone/tablet carrying bags pouches. The students named their products by combining two or more Kinyarwanda words, which describe the functional value of the product. The names of the products are Urusaro lampshades, Ryoherwa tablemats, Amaguru footstools, and

Shamanga Jewelry and Tonesha mobile device pouches.

At the end of the semester, the design students were required to document the process and their experience with regard to the collaboration with indigenous artists. Many of the students reported that they gained a lot of knowledge from the artisans. They learnt of the challenges faced by the artists. Most importantly, the students were impressed with the process of taking a natural raw material and creating a real functional product.

Evident to insights in the discussion of cultural policies from various countries, field interviews carried out during the semester revealed that most of the indigenous artists have limited formal education. Many of the artists learnt the craft skills from older generations. The current education policy of Rwanda highlights the need for promotion and preservation of cultural heritage via inclusion of art, culture and craft knowledge in educational curricula, in schools, colleges and universities. The concept of the collaborative project between design students and indigenous artists was based on these ideas. At the end of fourteen weeks, this collaborative project proven that integrating the knowledge and skills of indigenous people can be beneficial to design students, as well as the indigenous artists.

CONCLUSION

As espoused by Murray, some challenges observed from the collaborative project are the determination of the intellectual property rights of the design ideas and products. Should the Creative Design Department of the University of Rwanda own the IP or it should be shared between the artists and the department. In the event that the later is adapted there needs to be method to evaluate the terms of the partnership and how or who will manage the partnership. Moreover, as advised by Murray indigenous artists have low education levels, which tend to make them reluctant in participating leadership/managerial positions (Murray, 2010).

Another challenge is the need to find a market or ways to promote the new products. One option could be establishing linkages with government and institutions involved with culture and craft. These institutions could assume the management roles for production, marketing

and exportation of the products if the quality improves to match international standards. Bearing in mind that these institutions may already have a database of existing art/craft cooperatives in Rwanda, it would be easier for them to also manage the possible need for increased human capacity for production. In as much as there are challenges, there are various positive factors that could contribute to the production constraints presented in the National Craft Industry Promotion Policy of Rwanda, and towards the Vision 2020 of Rwanda, which places emphasis on the promotion and preservation of Rwanda Cultural Heritage, through the integration of indigenous knowledge and skills into educational curricula, in school, college and university level.

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