

Collaborative curricula

Danah Abdulla

London College of Communication, London, United Kingdom
d.abdulla@lcc.arts.ac.uk

ABSTRACT

The diverse population makeup of Jordan and the reputation of its capital, Amman, as a refuge city is a reflection of the Arab region's turbulent history, making it an interesting setting in which to study design. More specifically, Amman's contested identities provide a unique site for exploring a more participatory approach to design pedagogy. However, current design curricula are out dated and centred on extremely specialised, technical skills training to produce 'industry-ready' graduates, leaving students with little room to develop critical skills, engage in critical practice or venture beyond their specialisation. Furthermore, it is disconnected from its context and milieu (places, people, environments and institutions that individuals encounter that shape daily life and inform their worldview). How can design education engage students with social, political and economic issues relevant to their daily challenges and encourage them to become active citizens in such an environment? In this paper, I describe the methodology and preliminary findings of on going PhD research investigating how design education in Amman can be more locally centred. This research considers three questions: 1. What philosophies, theories, practices, models of curriculum and pedagogy are appropriate references for design education curricula in Jordan to be more locally centred? 2. What shifts in design perception does this require and create? 3. Could the development of a more locally centred design education curriculum help advance the status of design as a discipline in Jordan, engage the public and help Jordanian designers contribute to the larger international discourse?

Keywords

Jordan, design education, design

INTRODUCTION

Reports and studies on education from various organisations and Jordanian scholars paint a bleak picture of the higher education system both in Jordan and regionally, presenting an extensive list of issues and challenges. Furthermore, since the 1990s, higher education in the Arab region has become extensively privatised. The market-driven privatisation of higher education – very pronounced in Jordan – has replaced principles such as ethics, community responsibility and citizenship building with "individual interest and economic rationality," raising questions about the role of the institution "in the production of an educated citizenry capable – developmentally, technically, and ethically – of serving local, regional, and global needs" (Herrera, 2006, p.418).

While globally design and design education are undergoing transformations due in part to the blurring boundaries of the design disciplines and the introduction of new and more critical social practices, design in the Arab world continues to focus on the traditional disciplines rather than integrating emerging design disciplines (Sanders and Stappers, 2008). What's more, the privatisation of education has led to an increase in design programmes being offered at the undergraduate level. Design however is considered a profit-making discipline for universities: low on the prestige hierarchy and able to absorb financially-able students with poor GPAs due to its un-competitive entry requirements, resulting in many students entering design with little to no understanding of what it is. This paper presents the methods utilised in conducting my PhD research and preliminary findings.

The Local

The local in this definition is not the development of a national identity or as an emphasis on difference such as East/West or modern/non-modern, it is an understanding of place, context, and milieu rather than being exclusive in a geographic sense. It is the relevance that design has on the lives of the audience.

Banking Model and Curricula

The findings on pedagogy in Jordan from reports and studies can best be described by Paulo Freire's (2000[1970]) banking model where the educator deposits information and narration into the student. The content of this narration is "detached from reality, disconnected from the totality that engendered them and could give them significance" (ibid p.71). The student is instructed

to record, memorise and repeat without understanding the true significance of what they are asked to learn. It becomes mechanical, turning students into what Freire calls “containers,’ ... ‘receptacles’ to be ‘filled by the teachers,” and limiting their scope of action to “receiving, filing, and storing the deposits” (ibid p.72).

Furthermore, curricula fall under the product/transmission model which revolves around setting objectives and targets, developing a plan, applying that plan, measuring the outcomes (products), and the transmission of subjects where students are told what they must learn and how they are going to learn it (Kelly, 2004). This model is usually an elaborate outline with documents for the teacher and the student and what Grundy (1987, p.31) calls a “teacher-proof curriculum document” which provides the teacher with step-by- step directions on teaching and testing.

An audit of course lists and study plans of Jordanian design programmes that I conducted illustrated a large number of skill-based courses where the student is rewarded for his/her technical expertise and aesthetic competencies – and the success of the professor’s work is evaluated by how the result “conforms to the specifications of the syllabus” (ibid p.62).

This model is inadequate as it promotes a curriculum that renders education as transmission and instrumental as opposed to developmental by focusing on changing and moulding behaviours to meet specific ends.

Furthermore, recent reforms are concentrated onto a planning by targets approach which places the emphasise quantity rather than quality. It narrows education to a behavioural, instrumental, and linear activity that leads to a loss of freedom for both the students and the educators.

Participative Worldview

The nature of education in Jordan, and ideas that inform my practice, are the reasons why this research is grounded in ideas of participation and collaboration. It draws on co-operative inquiry and participatory action research in particular.

Co-operative inquiry is rooted in the idea that persons are self-determining, and they are the authors of their own actions. It is about involving people to contribute in the entire process as co-subjects and co-researchers (ibid). Full reciprocity is the ideal in this method, but not all those involved will contribute in the same way. Co-operative inquiry groups will “struggle with the problems of inclusion, influence and intimacy,” leading to people taking on different roles where the quality and quantity of their contributions will also be different (ibid p.264). The manner in which the group is able to manage the differences that may arise will determine the quality of the work.

PAR is influenced by Paulo Freire’s (2000[1970]) ideas of critical pedagogy. PAR is concerned with power and powerlessness, and its main task is to empower people to use their knowledge and experience to confront this power (Fals-Borda and Rahman, 1991). PAR has two aims: “...to produce knowledge and action directly useful to a group of people...” (Reason, 1998, p.269), through empowering the people to raise consciousness – “a process of self awareness through collective self-inquiry and reflection”

(Fals-Borda and Rahman, 1991, p.16). It seeks to create an alternative system of knowledge production based entirely on the role of the people in the entire research process and building collaboration and dialogue that seek to empower, and develop a sense of solidarity amongst the community (Tandon, 1989; Reason, 1998).

Methodology and Samples

Five Phases of Organising Processes of Joint Inquiry (see figure 1)

The methodology draws on John Dewey’s (1938) concept of inquiry – summarised generally by Steen (2013, p.20) “as a process that starts from a problematic situation, and that moves– by productively combining doing and thinking – to a resolution.” Dewey’s concept of inquiry is pertinent to PAR and co-operative inquiry with themes such as knowledge as instrumental, empowerment through reflection on practice and experience, communication and cooperation, a desire to improve one’s situation, and exploring alternative futures, all being aspects found in the participative worldview. For Dewey (1938), organising processes of inquiry are produced jointly where “the aim is not to develop universal knowledge that represents some external reality, but to bring people together so that they can jointly explore, try out, learn, and bring about change in a desired direction” (Steen, 2013, p.20).



Figure 1. Five Phases of Organising Processes of Joint Inquiry

Data Collection

Data was collected in Amman, Jordan using interviews, focus groups, and design charrettes. The participants chosen were defined as key players throughout the project, who are essential to it, and who will have an effect on and/or be affected by the project. The choice of participants, falling under democratic co-design processes, meant equal representation amongst positive and negative voices.

Interviews

A total of 25 interviews were conducted with design educators and designers in Jordan. The interviews played two roles: to finalise the list of participants for the charrette, and to gain an understanding of design and design education from these participants to develop the questions for the charrette.

The semi-structured and open-ended interviews elicited views and opinions from participants on education, design, and design education. While many participants shared similar views, there were others that provided differing viewpoints leading to interesting discussions. It is important to acknowledge my own bias in exploring a locally-centric curricula and to keep in mind that some participants may be against disrupting the status quo.

Focus Groups

Focus groups were conducted with students only, which entailed a different recruitment strategy. The most successful method of recruitment was to be invited as part of a jury or to give a talk by educators I interviewed. In total, I conducted three focus groups with 15 participants from three universities.

Charrettes

To develop questions for the charrette, I developed a code book which served as a guide for the transcription. The main issues and statements discussed in over 200 codes were developed into 19 questions served as the starting point for the charrette.

Activities were developed based on ideas from the KJ Technique to develop the charrette activities. Charrette participants were provided with a brief for the workshop one week prior. With the questions pinned to the wall, participants were split up into two groups and were given allocated time to complete five activities in six hours.

Results, Findings and Conclusion

As the data from all three methods has yet to be fully analysed, I will conclude by briefly discussing the results and findings from the interviews and focus groups. The analysis revealed multiple issues, challenges and concerns related to design and design education in Jordan (what is) while also presenting suggestions on moving forward.

Discussions were passionate and participants were eager to share their ideas and interest in thinking of the future of design and design education.

Whereas the focus groups and interviews brought forward ideas on possible steps to transform design education, they were more individual and based on one person's opinion, through the charrettes, the process aimed to be entirely collaborative and would likely produce different results on possible solutions and next steps (what could be).

Several issues were identified by all samples of participants and others were also mentioned in the literature on education in general. The problems identified were long-term in nature: some were within design and design education in general, while others were related to education in Jordan and the culture overall. It is difficult to tell what types of results will arise from a collaborative form such as the charrettes, but it is clear from the initial results that all participants acknowledge there is a lot of work to be done. Through doing and thinking in the charrettes, the design community in Jordan will have the opportunity to develop the future-vision of design and design education together.

References

- Dewey, J. (1938) *Logic: The Theory of Inquiry*. New York: Henry Holt and Company.
- Fals-Borda, O. & Rahman, M. A. (1991) *Action and Knowledge: Breaking the monopoly with participatory action research*. Intermediate Technology/Apex.
- Freire, P. (2000) *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. New York: Continuum.
- Grundy, S. (1987) *Curriculum: Product or Praxis*. Barcombe: The Falmer Press.
- Herrera, L. (2006) 'Higher education in the Arab World', in James J F Forest & Philip G Altbach (eds.) *International Handbook for Higher Education*. Netherlands: Springer. pp. 409–421.
- Kelly, A. V. (2004) *The Curriculum Theory and Practice*. Fifth edition. London: Sage Publications.
- Reason, P. (1998) 'Three Approaches to Participative Inquiry', in Norman K Denzin & Yvonna S Lincoln (eds.) *Strategies of Qualitative Inquiry*. Thousand Oaks, California: Sage Publications. pp. 261–291.
- Sanders, E. B. N. & Stappers, P. J. (2008) Co-creation and the new landscapes of design. *CoDesign*. 1–16.
- Steen, M. (2013) Co-Design as a Process of Joint Inquiry and Imagination. *Design Issues*. [Online] 29 (2), 16–28.
- Tandon, R. (1989) Participatory research and social transformation. *Convergence*. 21 (2/3), 5–15.