DESIGN FOR YOUNGSTERS' EMPOWERMENT IN THEIR SUSTAINABLE ACTIVE CITIZENSHIP

OLGA GLUMAC

PHD IN DESIGN, UNIVERSITY OF PORTO

RESEARCH INSTITUTE FOR DESIGN, MEDIA
AND CULTURE (ID+)

OLGA.GLUMAC@GMAIL.COM

ABSTRACT

This paper describes and critically reflects upon case study within an ongoing action research located in Porto (Portugal) that investigates how the empowerment of Portuguese youth can be established through co-design. This long-term study is designed and implemented in Porto's public school through weekly sessions where students-participants give their contributions to the topics and ideas of activities to be conducted. The number of participants varies and is based on voluntary involvement of students from 12 to 16 years that are interested in improving the environment for their daily conviviality and learning within school area. Youngsters are in charge for co-design of local initiatives and responsible for their collective learning on how to reach highest levels of participation. Therefore, design is being perceived as a mean for creating new methods that could be applied in inclusive learning. Creating situations where young people can come and share designing and co-ownership experience allows stimulation of their initiatives and "learning by doing" (Kolb 1984).

1. INTRODUCTION

The PhD design research project is in its second year of development that investigates how to empower youth in their active citizenship through co-design.

The meaning of *Youth empowerment* has always been connected to the long-term process in which adults (competent to work with youth) start to share ownership, responsibility and decision-making power with, for and by youngsters (Huebner 1998). The desired outcome is to empower youth so they can be competent and determent in taking and leading the initiatives based on their interests and needs that are often unrevealed and marginalized by their complexity (Goldin 2014). In addition, young people are faced with many challenges that influence their wellbeing (self-esteem, self-development).

Stressing further daily youngsters' participation and its levels, it is important to introduce *Ladder of children's participation* by Hart (1992). The author has adjusted Arnstein's *Ladder of Citizen Participation* from 1969. In this demonstrated hierarchy, there are two highest degrees of youth involvement which are accomplished either when youth has the ownership but the decision-making process is shared with adults or when the project is youth-led and initiated. Within specific conditions and with inquiry of the parameters, the point is to foresee if through an empowerment of the involved youngsters any of the two degrees of participation can be achieved.

Moreover, the dialogue can happen between all members of society where youngsters can 'have their say' (Goździk-Ormel 2008) in the strategies and structures of support for their self-development and their wellbeing in which education plays a critical role and has an impact on employment, health and civic participation (Goldin 2014).

After all, students are conditioned to learn strategically and to gradually increase their competences (knowledge, attitudes and skills) during and after

graduation (Könings et al. 2005). Contemporary education has an objective to prepare students for their lifelong learning (Van Hout-Wolters et al. 2000). Thus, each student might develop into an expert learner (Ralabate 2011), the one who can recognize what his learning needs are and to be able to strategically develop his learning plan.

The PhD research being set in a local school context and a framework of formal education, youngsters are recognized as active citizens in case they are fulfilling their duties and responsibilities of being active learners who practice their meaningful engagement through sustainable participation. If conditions and opportunities are based on the contemporary youngsters' needs, young people are usually more interested to join and practice their role and undertake the process of empowerment. According to the *Global Youth Wellbeing Index* (Goldin 2014), in transition from childhood to adulthood youngsters are about to establish their identities as individuals and to develop voices independent from their families and communities. Youth is a significant period in the life of an individual for neurological, cognitive, physical, social and emotional development.

Therefore, it is important to create a safe and open environment for individual and collective learning such as for example *community of practice* (Lave & Wenger 1998) that can lead to exploring different ways of co-creation in collaborative development, in this case co-design of learning processes with and for youngsters and understanding of their perspectives. On the same subject, by establishing fruitful outcomes, a higher level of motivation will result in a greater involvement in the design process (Druin 2014). This type of experimental practice can help both participants and designers to understand and reflect upon their work in concrete situations, by being reflective practitioners (Schon 1979). Akama (2012) further argues that the pertinence of being a reflective practitioner is to take the first step when trying to be fully aware of one self and establishing relationships and connections with others that one should always have in his mind when in the process of designing with and for others.

Expected outcomes of this project are:

- Framework of methods (Andersen et al. 1990) and its development through design processes that can be viewed as set of good practices and be applied in inclusive education in citizenship or/and design;

- *Lab of Collaborative Youth* - design and implementation of network led by youth through means of co-design and with support and co-facilitation of adults, uniting all stakeholders of Porto community;

- Knowledge wise - reflective contribution and set of recommendations to ongoing discourse about the role of design and designer's competences as facilitator.

2. METHODOLOGY

This PhD project is founded on action research (Reason & Bradbury 2002) and case study that uses a participatory design approach of having iterative design interventions that address participants' needs and also applies co-design methods where co-realization is made between designer-facilitator and with and for participants-active learners. Participants are considered to be "experts of their own experience" (Sanders & Stappers 2008). When designing services and/or processes in collaboration with community stakeholders, all actors involved, including designer researcher, should undertake the process of empowerment by 'learning from and about each other's expertise' (Robertson et al. 2014).

The following text will be a brief presentation of the chosen methodology and implementation of the steps within the action research: exploration and planning, action, evaluation and validation, always through reflection.

2.1. EXPLORATION AND PLANNING
2.1.1. CONTEXT AND PARTICIPANTS
The context of Miragaia, one of the historical neighborhoods of Porto, was chosen as an area of inquiry in a serendipitous way but also because it has responded to couple of criteria: there are young people who are willing to participate and be supported, and for which the competences of the researcher are suited for; the community is situated in an area accessible to the researcher (to enable daily co-existence and stronger impressions).

The main focus group is composed of elementary school's students, coming from families which are socio-economically disadvantaged and that live in Miragaia and its surrounding. Having in mind that Porto's *Municipal Plan of Youth* targets young people between ages of 12 to 35, the age of participants varies from 12 to 16 years. This school is dealing with various challenges but the most present are bullying, school dropout, teenage pregnancy, but also lack of motivation towards responsible learning.

Some of the students have expressed motivation and will to participate in this research and challenge themselves in finding ways to improve the environment for their daily conviviality and learning within the school area. The students were introduced to the project through *cultural probes* (Gaver et al. 1999) and presentations in their classes where they were invited to challenge themselves and join the project.

2.1.2. EXPLORATORY SESSIONS
The case study has been organized through exploratory weekly sessions, outside of curricula, that are designed

in auto oriented, non-hierarchical, participatory and flexible ways, where students-participants give their contributions to the topics and ideas of activities to be conducted. The number of participants varied and is based on the voluntary involvement of students between age 12 and 15. It initiated in April and lasted until June 2014, it had an aim to assess and observe participatory performances, the local needs of students, their motivations to learn in creative ways, existing good practices in youth participation and their competences in active citizenship (e.g. solidarity, argumentation skills, cognitive level of understanding the concepts used in youth policies, among others). These insights served to construct a strategy plan for future action.

2.2. ACTION

2.2.1. OWNERSHIP OF THE SESSIONS

In the second stage, weekly sessions were continued in October 2014 and had lasted until the end of June 2015, this time focusing more on longevity of the processes and in sustaining meaningful participation. This was triggered by creating new challenges for participants to act and express themselves, and by trying to pass the ownership and power to youngsters. So far, they have raised several initiatives: activist messages to explain their dissatisfaction of not having an access to gym for a period of several months due to occurred accident (see figure 1), by expressing wish to have Christmas party that they didn't have last year, so they organised it by themselves with support of adults (see figure 2 and 3), tournament in football with another class.

Figure 1: Banner made by the pupils expressing: "We want gym".

Figure 2: Christmas party organised by participants of the project: dancing activity.

Figure 3: Christmas party organised by participants of the project: enjoying conviviality and intercultural food specialties.

2.2.2. CO-DESIGN AND COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE

One of the things that were crucial finding in exploration phase for further action development was raised awareness upon the 'language' being used when working with young people of this age. Some of the terms and their concepts were considered to be too 'vague' if not explained in more simplistic – practical way so that students could relate to them through their life experiences. Being in doubt whether to explain terminology and its concepts in the way it exist hoping that participants will achieve understanding, or maybe to 'translate' them into more general explanations that could be easily conceptualized by this young people. Both ideas seemed to be excluding the acceptance of different levels of understanding the same terminology.

Therefore, participants and students of graphic design from neighbor professional school were invited to deconstruct together each chosen term and learn about it through existing definitions but also in defining their own (see figure 5). This was to recognize the pluralism and search for new ways of understanding.

The first 23 words were the researcher's choice (who took in consideration not only the priority and value of words to start with, but also the possibilities of their visualization) so 23 participants from design school would get one term by random choice while Miragaia's participants had worked on more than one since the group was three times smaller.
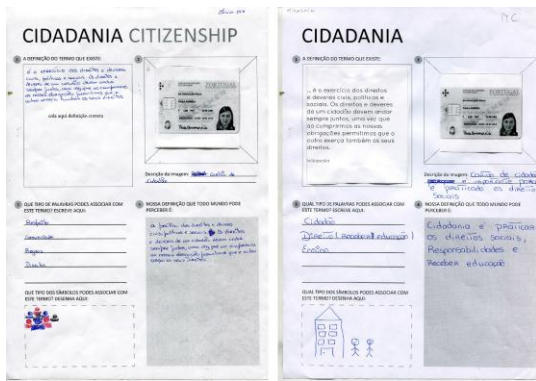
Figure 5: Designed handouts to facilitate development of new definitions. Presented photo shows outcomes of two students from two different schools deconstructing the same term.

The outcomes were new definitions and illustrations being collected and presented through a round table, a visual dictionary (see figure 6) and an exhibition held in April 2015.
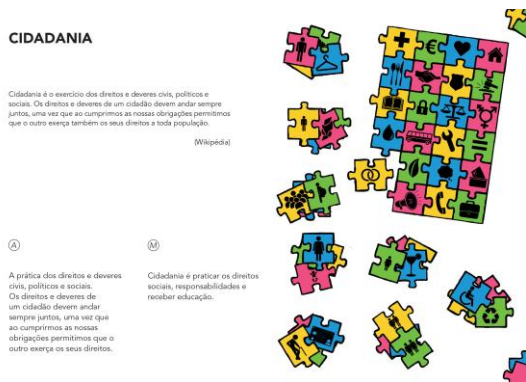

Figure 6: One of the pages of visual dictionary "Illustracionary, my way" presenting written and visual representation of word *Citizenship*.

Like this, schools of same local were challenged to work together on the same goal and collaborate and young professionals were challenged to create empathy and learn about shared values, interests and needs of others - participants with and for whom they design for, practicing collaboration and design for local impact.

3. FINDINGS AND CHALLENGES

Sessions were made weekly so participants would reach a kind of 'routine' in memorizing when and how they are going to happen. When sessions skipped weekly 'routine', participants would usually lose track that there is the next time if nobody would remind them. Their focus was enthusiastic but short. The same reflected to sessions: they wanted to see some action and to do game exercises for very short period of time and they always asked for something new.

As a live organism, this study fluctuates with the number of participants in each session which is considered to be normal when having in mind that sessions are carried on voluntary basis each week in the afternoon hours when youngsters would might prefer either to meet and hang out outside from the school area

or simply be obliged to stay and study with the support of a school assistant. It is important that there is a built notion of having a choice and that all participants are not obliged to be present. Moreover, it is highly valuable to understand how decision-making process is made when there are options to choose from and how the decision of one, eliminates the other, depending of what you want and when.

The main challenge was to encounter ways in which participants learn to enjoy learning. Moreover, talk about it. That was another challenge: the time we spent in reflection. Moments of pure discussion were not participants' cup of tea, comparing to practical and material work, it seemed it makes them feel to be in a classroom again, being kind of obliged to ask and answer questions.

Never the less, along the process and through the recognition of their efforts by the school and other community members, the sense of ownership was reached but not complete power sharing. They still left almost all the responsibility of management to the facilitator or any other superior member (teacher, socio-cultural animator).

Feeling belonging and part of the group that is active on long-term basis made an impact on individuals by sustaining their motivation to be engaged in the project even when they left the school.

4. FUTURE WORK

So far, this project was about enabling participants to improve their environment by their own measures. There is still work to be made in assuring that the other stakeholders accept the youngsters' transformation and the transformation of the environment, a knowledge-sharing and sustainable ecosystem can be achieved that meets the needs and interests of all individuals regardless of their hierarchic position. And that is the place where a concept of Lab of Collaborative Youth is born. The sustainability of individual self-development stays to be duty of the individual itself. This project is only there to trigger this understanding and to show individuals that positive development is possible. Sustainability of the project itself will certainly depend on the enrollment of other agents, such as professors, technicians and social workers. Designer must invest efforts to develop "(…) local knowledge base that will help sustain PD practice after researcher depart." (Bodker 1996, Kensing et al. 1998)

REFERENCES

Akama, Y. 2012, 'A Way of Being in Design: Zen and the Art of Being a Human-Centred Practitioner', *Design Philosophy Papers*, *10*(1), 63-80.

Andersen, N. E., Kensing, F., Lundin, J., Mathiassen, L., Munk-Madsen, A., Rasbech, M., & Sørgaard, P. (1990). *Professional systems development: experience, ideas and action*. Prentice-Hall, Inc.. In Simonsen, J., & Robertson, T. (Eds.). (2012). *Routledge handbook of participatory design*. Routledge.

Bødker, S. (1996). Creating conditions for participation: Conflicts and resources in systems development. *Human-computer interaction*, *11*(3), 215-236. In Kensing, F., & Blomberg, J. (1998). Participatory design: Issues and concerns.*Computer Supported Cooperative Work (CSCW)*, *7*(3-4), 167-185.

Bradbury, H., & Reason, P. (Eds.). (2002). *Handbook of action research: Participative inquiry and practice*. Sage Publ.

Druin, A. 2014, 'Inclusive ownership of participatory learning', *Instructional Science*, 42(1), 123-126.

Gaver, B., Dunne, T., & Pacenti, E. (1999). Design: cultural probes.*interactions*, *6*(1), 21-29.

Goldin, N. 2014, 'The Global Youth Wellbeing Index', Rowman & Littlefield.

Goździk-Ormel Ž. 2008, 'Have Your Say!: Manual on the Revised European Charter on the Participation of Young People in Local and Regional Life', Council of Europe.

Hart, R. 1992, 'Ladder of participation, children's participation: From Tokenism to citizenship', *Innocenti Essays*, 4

Huebner, A. J. (1998). Examining "empowerment": A how-to guide for the youth development professional. *Journal of Extension*, *36*(6), 1-7.

Kensing, F., Simonsen, J., & Bødker, K. (1998). Participatory design at a radio station. *Computer Supported Cooperative Work (CSCW)*, *7*(3-4), 243-271. In Kensing, F., & Blomberg, J. (1998). Participatory design: Issues and concerns.*Computer Supported Cooperative Work (CSCW)*, *7*(3-4), 167-185.

Könings, K. D., Brand-Gruwel, S., & Merriënboer, J. J. 2005, 'Towards more powerful learning environments through combining the perspectives of designers, teachers, and students', *British Journal of Educational Psychology*,75(4), 645-660.

Lee, Y. 2007, 'What is designers' social responsibility? Investigating new roles of designers in design participation processes', *International Association of Societies of Design Research*.

Municipal Plan of Youth of Porto. January 2014. Retrived from https://cmpexternos.cm-orto.pt/pmj/

Lave, J., & Wenger, E. (1998). Communities of practice. *Retrieved June*, *9*, 2008.

Municipal Plan of Youth of Porto. January 2014. Retrived from https://cmpexternos.cm-orto.pt/pmj/

Ralabate, P. K. 2011, 'Universal Design for Learning: Meeting the Needs of All Students', The ASHA Leader.

Robertson, T., Leong, T. W., Durick, J., & Koreshoff, T. 2014, October, 'Mutual learning as a resource for research design', In *Proceedings of the 13th Participatory Design Conference: Short Papers, Industry Cases, Workshop Descriptions, Doctoral Consortium papers, and Keynote abstracts-Volume 2* (pp. 25-28). ACM

Sanders, E. B. N., & Stappers, P. J. (2008). Co-creation and the new landscapes of design. *Co-design*, *4*(1), 5-18.

Van Zyl, I. 2014, 'Youth empowerment: the role of service design and mobile technology in accessing reproductive health information', In *Proceedings of the 13th Participatory Design Conference: Short Papers, Industry Cases, Workshop Descriptions, Doctoral Consortium papers, and Keynote abstracts-Volume 2* (pp. 103-106). ACM.