

Teaching the importance of redefining the problem,  
humanistic visions and values in design for less fortunate women in Bangladesh

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#### Abstract

*This paper presents a course from the curriculum at the University College in Akershus, Norway, for BA design students second year. This specific course forces the students to enter the scene of different people's daily life and make the students try to understand the real human needs in the given situation. Whereas "Design for all" mostly focuses on the user-phase of a product or service, the chosen student projects address the needs of the people who are producing the new designs. The student task is formulated and rethought along the design process in parallel with the increase of knowledge and understanding that the students absorb and develop. Design and production of smaller products sold in a store in Oslo, Norway, is changing the living conditions for more than 300 women in Bangladesh and other developing countries in Asia and Africa. The Salvation Army stands behind this concept called "Sally Ann". Design products are specially developed in order to create social inclusion for both the women who handcraft the products, and their children. This concept interferes with local cultures and social structures that are unfamiliar to the designers. The ethical perspective to this work is of a complex character. It can, however be transferred to many other design contexts. The keywords for this design work is respect and humbleness toward the culture and the women who now will be presented to these new products and stand for the production of them.*

Keywords: Inclusive work, Rethinking the problem, Human basic needs, Design Brief, Care ethics, CPS-methodology, social inclusion

#### *Introduction (goal of the paper)*

Design for less fortunate or disabled people is not only a moral response to humanistic ethics; it can also be a pedagogical approach in teaching students how and why to redefine the problem definition in a design project. Victor Papanek (1971) mentioned designers as one of the most dangerous professionals in the world;

if they were not aware of the ethical questions in their work. However, the ethical position of the designer is not always of high influence in an industrial design situation. The possibilities though, to ask questions and redefine the request, are present in the process of receiving and accepting the design brief.

Designers need tools and basic theory not only to be able to pragmatically and consciously evaluate and redefine the problem definition of the design task, but also to imagine the new possible solutions of more satisfying products to the given situation. This includes the final result of the product, but may also involve the production processes and choices of materials, in other words the working conditions in the production phase of the product development. This paper focuses on the pedagogical advantages of presenting a design task to the students that addresses needs, which are unfamiliar to the individual students in the first place. Secondly the paper presents the design approach and the results of the project. The case study, “Sally Ann”, was introduced as a student task by ass.prof. Arne Eide at the Akershus University College. Ass.prof. Tore Gulden, dr. cand. Arild Berg and Paola Cabrera Viancha from University of art and design in Helsinki were facilitating the theoretical workshops for the students.

Finally, the paper discusses the ethical questions related to this type of design and the general knowledge of ethics this project has given to the students that can be transferred to other design tasks. In this section some theoretical references will be introduced and related to the discussion and reflection. This includes the need-matrix by Manfred A. Max-Neef et.al (1991) and the different type of satisfiers in the context of “Human Scale Development”. Further some basic terminologies of ethics are interwoven to explain the importance of worldview and value perspectives in development and decision making. Here Arthur J. Dyck (1978) is presented with his definitions in “An introduction to ethics , on human care”.

### *Background (and issues)*

Products have a long history for being symbols of identity, related to for example social class or sub-cultural belonging. Although this is not a new phenomena, the consumption and user-patterns might have become more subtle and complex. The speed of change in trends and technological development is also accelerating. The ability to follow and read the changes in trends is an expression as such for the innovative user-segments. The possibility to take part in special sub-cultures is not always a question of economy but rather an interest and sensibility to new development, and the urge for human individual expression connected both to belonging and differentiation. The professional market and working conditions are also influenced by this development. However, a social political goal in Norway is to create inclusive working

climates for all (ref ). Within organization development and special working hour arrangements, a diversity of people shall be included in all types of professional activity. Not only administration and organization must be adapted to new ways of thinking of inclusion, but also physical and technological conditions. Do we think of these qualities in terms of global economy as well? Is it possible to increase our ethical embracement and moral understanding to other individuals and people whom we do not know in the first place? And turned the other way around, maybe the experiences from the “Sally Ann” fair trade concept can be transferred to European locations and citizens. Designers might need to rethink the terms of innovation and trend, and discover the many other values in the process of product design and development than just the focus on sales in the final meeting with the market, however, this is also of high importance. Described nicely by Daniel Formosa (2005), “design as a profession is becoming less about the object and more about the person”. Formosa explains this by pointing to how today a product’s possibility to differentiate with similar products in the market, is by relating to people in a real and meaningful way. He underlines how designers must *really* understand people.

“Design for all” is a design philosophy derived from “Universal design”, which was renamed to “Inclusive design” and now has entered the more populist and social democratic term “Design for all”. On the first hand, the basic idea to this expression was a reaction to the typical products designed for elderly or disabled people that stigmatized the users as a group outside the mainstream market. On the other hand, other everyday products were designed too complex, and rather than addressing needs of real people, many products would express complicated thinking on behalf of the producers and the company. Initially “Universal design” introduced seven product qualities to address and develop the design process: 1. equitable use, 2. flexibility in use, 3. simple and intuitive, 4. perceptible information, 5. tolerance for error, 6. low physical error and 7. size and space for approach and use.

The guidelines for Universal/inclusive design are focusing on the product and its qualities in the user-phase and in the meeting with the end-user. To think inclusively and towards social inclusion in other terms than in the consumption and use-phase is the contribution of this paper. In the student projects that are presented and discussed here, the *production* of the products stands out as the main subject for integration and social inclusion for less fortunate people or disabled citizens in Bangladesh. The Salvation Army initiated in 2003 (?) the fair trade concept “Sally Ann”. Simple and characteristic everyday products are designed for the European market, and produced in Bangladesh so far. They will increase the numbers of cooperational countries in the future. The salvation Army are today within 108 countries. However, this is not

typical global business economy with low production costs and high tradeoffs to the investors. The income returns to the producers of the products and to their families, and for further development of the fair trade concept. The goal of this business is to increase the possibilities for new ways of living and improve the health conditions for prostitutes in Bangladesh and their children. The targeted women are unskilled in terms of handicraft in production of the products. The designs must therefore be developed based on low-tech production methods and use of local available materials. 13 out of 23 design concept made by the students at the Akershus University College are now further developed for real life production and trade. The experiences from these projects can in many aspects be generalized and transferred to other situations and people.

*(Context of the research/" research question") Design for all through design for specific needs*

In a course "Strategic design" in the second year of BA studies, the students at the Faculty of Product Design, Akershus University College, are "mentally" and practically trained to redefine the problem definition in the design brief that is given to them. The students are asked to design for disabled people<sup>1</sup> or as in this last autumn, for less fortunate women in Bangladesh. This task reveals clear contrasts to the students' own reference group and the human capabilities that are usually expected of a "general" user. This approach however, results in product solutions that are more sufficient and user-friendly to all. What design students experience is also experienced in professional design practice (e.g. OXO designs).

The student projects presented here have been designed with close relation to the workers but also with focus on the end-user of the products. Their functions are meaningful in interrelation with people. Finally they are also designed with thoughts of ecological impact and possibilities of recycling.

*(description of the work process/method) What needs?*

The individual student is initially challenged to understand what today's living conditions these specific targeted women and their families' experience in everyday life. The student would imagine herself in a similar situation, and finally picture possibilities for new solutions for working conditions in handicrafting products for sale in a foreign market. However, every design task relates to many stakeholders. Who's needs should be given first priority in the different qualities of the product and it's life cycle phases?

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<sup>1</sup> The abstract of this paper was initially based on knowledge from previous courses in design strategi executed by ass.prof. Ragnar Emmerhoff.

The practical tools consist of: observation of authentic users, communication with representatives from the target group and interviews with other key persons. However, since these students were placed in Norway and their target group was in Bangladesh, the students had to do their research through other sources of information. They were shown a video of the conditions in Bangladesh, and experienced to meet different people with first hand information about the actual people who would become or already were involved in this concept of “Sally Ann”. Designers with similar design experiences facilitated a workshop where the students read relevant literature and presented the new findings to their classmates (appendix I).

The ethics are implicitly revealed to the students through discussions, lectures about social needs and ecological responsibilities and how design can influence on these realities. This theory is addressed as important dimensions to the designers’ argumentation and awareness in creating solutions for better futures.

#### *The CPS-methodology*

The CPS-methodology (creative problem solving) by Osborn (1957) is taught to the students to generate and evaluate ideas. The design methodology in total should support the process filling the gap between the existing and the visioned reality. The course as such addresses the task of defining goals for product need and market demand and criteria. Further different methods are introduced and trained for research, analyses, preparation of data material, product analyses, product development as such, product evaluation and project steering/organization. Tools are presented for documentation, literally and oral preparation and finally 3-D material work. The course trains the students in systematic organization, design process and final presentation of the work.

The final results are of high quality in terms of detailing and innovative thinking promoted from the strict criterion concerning use of materials and low-tech and handicraft production methods. The materials presented from Bangladesh were bamboo, different types of fabric, clay/mud and straw, typical waste, paper and cocoa nut shells and different types of bio fibres. The students strived for meaningful products also in the aspect of the product use-phase. It is crucial that the products actually are accepted and sold in the European market to finally support further production and thereby income to the workers. The final designs are reflecting cultural diversity, product aesthetics, tactility, and functions that contribute to human interacting experiences. Following section describes five of the students’ results.

*Playing pillows for smaller children, the soft bie-cube*

This product invites smaller children to play within a rather defined area of soft elements. The pillows can be connected with high degree of flexibility, thus somewhat older children can build constellations and create their own playful spaces. The material is fabric of cotton and the filling is preferably non-toxic foam of plastics. The filling is under discussion and so is the specific type of cotton. The pillows are made by simple sewing principles, however, requires a sewing machine. The joints between the pillows are made of wooden rings and Velcro, or will be only Velcro (borrelås). The final expression of the soft bie-cube will vary in all products, depending on the colours and patterns available on fabrics. For the production process, the product is illustrated in drawings and illustrations of each product component, sizes and connecting edges. The “production manual” must be as simple as possible, designed for illiteracy and non-professional working contexts.



Illustration 1 The soft bie-cube, designer/student Trude Hagen

*Puppet show scene, "Eventyrlig" with puppets in paper and belonging packaging*

This project starts with a focus on children's toys and the lack of products in the Norwegian market that supports theatre play and room for role games, which is an important activity for children at three until at least 10 years of age. This type of playing activity is in danger to vanish because of other rather dominating stimulous on the market for children.

*"What meaning can my products have for others? I want to focus on two important groups; the people who are users of the product and the people who will produce it."* , Marit Midtthun Johansen, designer/student



Illustration 2 Puppet show, with and without packaging, Marit Midtun Johansen

*Lamp*

Bård Erik Dahl has designed a lamp made out of old bike hubs and "spilene". His idea is to reuse components and products that are wasted in the area. The challenge with this product is the electrical components, however, Bård suggests that this is a part of the product that the end-consumer provides

him/herself. The purchased piece is then the "skjerm". Every product look a little different, although based on the same concept of production, namely reuse (illustration 3).



Illustration 3 Bård Erik Dahl

*"Pick me", bag and blanket in one, for picnic and social meals in the free*

This concept is like most of the other projects also focusing on both the end-user specific and the worker. The student, Rannveig Ø. Tobiassen explains why: *"Much of the basic values in the trade concept of Sally Ann is about placing the individual human in focus and therefore it was important to me that this became visual in my product."*

Pick me is meant to activate the user, and inspire people to make a walk in the park and leave all daily work behind; relax in peaceful surroundings. The product integrates the functions of a bag; something to carry your food and equipment for a picnic in, and a blanket to sit on without getting wet or cold. Pick me is made out of old "presseninger" and cotton fabric made and sold in the local area. This creates natural varieties of among the products. One critical area of this product is the zipper on the sides of the bag. This might cause some extra challenges for production.





**Illustration 4 "Pick me", bag to be opened and used also as "blanket" for picnic,  
Rannveig Ø. Tobiassen**

*Flower pot in clay and straw*

*" There is an endless possibility to make varieties in structure and surface of this simple form. I think this will happen naturally in the production situation, because the idea is about recycling and reuse- the content will maybe change according to the season of the year, the place it is produced and the material that might be available at the moment. None of the products would nevertheless be totally alike, as they are base don different structures and handicraft." Silje A. Eriksen, desiger/student*



**Illustration 5 Flower pot in straw and paper, Silje A. Eriksen**

*(Description of the findings, analyses ) Inclusive working conditions*

This design- and teaching practice can be related to the theoretical perspectives of care ethics, a new practice and theory in medical health care. Normative ethics can be divided in two major directions, formalism and utilitarianism. Formalism presents ethical principle values concerning intrinsic value and “happiness” *for all living* creatures and the conditions for this. The utilitarianism is evaluating context related issues and discusses utility “for most people”, understanding utility here as happiness. Both directions mentioned in normative ethics discuss “good” and “bad” human actions. It differs between right and wrong. Normative ethics can be the core of different religions, but is also the core in philosophical traditions disconnected from specific religious directions. “Doing good” is a moral consequence of normative ethics defining good and bad. However, “doing good” can in one ethical set of values, ex. in the formalistic direction, become “doing wrong” in the utilitarianistic direction of normative ethics. In health care ethics the traditional explicit goals are to “do no harm” and to respond to need and vulnerability of the sick by restoring

health and proper function (Keller 1996). And further, the new directions of ethical philosophy, care ethics, integrates moral and therefore both pragmatic care for physiological and psychosocial needs and vulnerabilities. “Care ethics within the health sector, is recognized through the healthcare personell’s attitude, partiality and willingness to communicate with the patients through the performance of caring acts.” Jean Keller (1996). The care ethics is by Keller also discussed in terms of limitations or important elements to be aware of , namely the autonomy of the patient and danger of burnout by the health care personell and relatives of the patients.

The total concept of “Sally Ann” interferes in some degree with a culture and people who have not specific been asking for assistance, however we assume that the targeted women in Bangladesh will be interested in participating in this program in the first place. The students experienced through the information they collected that the targeted women where experiencing extreme living conditions and would like to participate in order to achieve an increased security for their children and themselves. However, there were no room or surplus for own artistic expression in the accomplished handicraft. For instance the “pick-me” concept was meant to open for individual patterns made by the worker, however, the student understood from her research that this was not of interest in this context. Some students felt frustration in not having a closer connection to the persons who would produce their specific design. This is usually not a concern the designers have in such an early stage of the design process. The design approach initiated by the teachers and guest lecturers was clearly affecting the students’ reflections. When the designer’s focus is moving from product to people and real needs, new mechanisms and personal abilities are introduced in the design process. Understanding, interest, sensitivity and conscious processing are important in this complex working context. The humbleness concerning own position and privileges, is here just as important for the designer in meeting with the unskilled workers, as for the health personell in meeting with the sick persons.

Manfred Max-Neef and his colleagues in Chile present a needs-matrix which includes nine basic needs in a non-hierarchic system and in four different existencial categories (1991) (Appendix II). These needs have been pinpointed through decades of experiences with new development of smaller villages all over Latin-America. The design work focusing on the production and working conditions address several of these basic needs. The nine basic needs are: Subsistence, protection, affection, understanding, participation, leisure, identity, creation and freedom. The four states of these needs are “being”, “having”, “doing” and “interacting with”. This matrix differs from the Maslow pyramid by not constructing a specific hierarchy of needs except

from the need of staying alive. Further this matrix can be used specifically for development of new solutions in both macro and micro scale in society. This includes material and non-material solutions. Max-Neef proposes three postulates in connection to the study of needs and satisfiers (solutions): 1) Development is about people and not about objects. This is the basic postulate of human scale development. Max-Neef calls for new indicators for qualitative growth of people. 2) Fundamental needs are finite, few and classifiable (they only change with the human evolution, that means a very slow pace). 3) Fundamental human needs are the same in all cultures and in all historical periods. What changes both over time and through cultures is the way needs are satisfied. Culture may be defined as the way needs are satisfied.

In this context, human poverties is described by Max-Neef as every fundamental need which is not satisfied. Poverty is therefore a phenomena that includes more than economic resources. Whereas economic resources here, is defined only as a means to provide some type of satisfiers, that may be activated to satisfy a need. However, some examples of lack of satisfaction is for *affection*, the exploitative relations with the natural environment, and for *identity*, lack of satisfaction due to imposition of alien values upon local culture. A satisfiers can influence the satisfaction of many needs, and also all human needs are interrelated and interactive (Max-Neef 1991). To have an employment which brings economic and social security to a person and his/her family, affects almost all the fundamental needs in the matrix.

*Reflections on the composition of the design brief and the designer's influence on the final results(Final conclusion and possible follow-ups)*

The design brief is formulating goals and criterion for the new product to be developed. Analyses and evaluations that are executed on forehand, set the premises for the design. The designer has to relate to the design brief as it is described, however he/she should be able to ask questions and add comments to the defined product values and plan of development. Today's design education is changing, however we still see only smaller attempts to realistic constellations between design students and students from economics, marketing, engineering etc. Such broader involvement in an educational context can contribute to a deeper understanding of real world product development. The coming designers will be able to experience the demand for reflections and articulation advocating the specific end-users and their needs in addition to other criterion for the different product life cycle phases.

(further reflections related to the difficulty that designers are facing in between business and responsibility for human and ecological values )

The understanding of efficiency today might be a barrier to diversity in the working force. There may also be a conflict between the goals and understanding on society level and the goals of the single organizations and businesses. The national Norwegian ambition to include all adults in paid work demands for a general change in the understanding of efficiency and the contribution that diversity in working force will provide to a business or organization/institute.

(Questioning the concept of “Sally Ann” and how it has a critical side concerning the producers freedom and autonomic state vs. dependency to the Salvation Army and their demands (if there are any) in order to join the programme, - what are the connections to corporate social responsibility? This will introduced for further work)

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