



Hope: A Co-creative design approach for improving well-being in women at a local shelter

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There is a growing number of aging homeless women who are looking for shelter and struggling to construct a sense of valued life and self (Gonyea and Melekis, 2016). This concept paper presents a design approach that continues to engage underprivileged women in a co-creative design experience. The goal of this collaborative involvement was to inspire and positively impact the self-confidence of these women through use of their creativity in developing fashion products. The creation of these products would add another dimension to part of their job-training program. According to Csikszentmihalyi (1997) enhancing creativity through exploration and discovery may consequently improve well-being. Specifically, Prescott et al. (2008) found a strong correlation between art making activities and life achievements of the homeless. The women in this co-creative design experience imagined design ideas through a series of accessible creative activities.

Upon IRB approval, three women participating in a social enterprise job-training program at a local shelter were invited to participate in this collaboration. The goal of this program is to instill self-confidence and hope for women in poverty aspiring to improve their economic condition. Therefore, inspiration for this design process came from exploring the word “Hope” as part of the main mission for the participants in this program. Over a period of two months, the group would meet each week and the design researcher would provide specialized lessons on design including color, shape and pattern. Collectively the group started by creating a word map to think creatively about the word “Hope”. The participants created unique color palettes with paint chips and hand drawn symbols based on their representations from the word map. Common themes were light colors, florals and hearts. The participants’ floral sketches were combined together to create an original print unique to this design experience. On a later date, the participants were provided with a half scale dress form and basic heart shapes to experiment with draping. The design researcher illustrated a series of ideas in a variety of colors based on the women’s collaborative draping and print design. Collectively the group examined the ideas and all agreed on a design to represent the word “Hope”. The chosen design was then created as a garment which utilized the floral motif from the women’s sketches. The heart pattern pieces were used to create a blouse and wrap with a skirt worn underneath.

This garment was the start of the visual conversation of hope between the design researcher and women. It has been shown at several exhibitions and is displayed at the shelter along with a poster to provide inspiration for the women. It continues to serve as a representation of hope for the women and has gained attention from visitors. Beyond this initial experience the conversations have continued to find ways to expand this design experience between the women and design researcher. The resulting print design was further developed in multiple colorways for the women to use in other products such as bags and for trims. The simple heart shaped pattern

pieces were given to the women to allow them to further explore and modify to create new items for their training program. The floral motif from their combined sketches was also used in experiments with laser cutting for unique wraps and scarves. The entire design process continues to be documented through a series of photos and notes. As the collaboration progresses, new approaches and technologies are being explored to maximize the learning for everyone involved.

This shared creativity between the women and design researcher has resulted in more than the creation of fashion products but has inspired hope. Following are a few positive comments from the co-creative design experience. One woman responded about the uniqueness of this process by saying, “I have never been a part of this kind of experience before!” Another woman said this about the “Hope” garment, “This lifted my spirit to a whole new level. I would tell all my friends about this experience.” During the discussions the third woman specifically commented about the design selection, “It was amazing that we all agreed on one pattern and color. We put in a lot of our own ideas.” Findings from this design process contribute to the growing research of positive co-creative experiences. Furthermore, this design process identifies opportunities to use creative design experiences to positively impact populations that have had to overcome significant struggles. While this collaboration was limited to three participants, each woman responded with optimism and felt valued in the process. This could have implications for shelters to add art-making activities that aim to raise the spirits of their occupants by valuing their creativity and cultivating their imagination in ways that bring meaning to their lives. Beyond this population of women, the proposed design approach might function to contribute to the well-being in other populations in transition. As an example, this design approach might be used to build agency in immigrant groups and other disenfranchised populations.

References

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