Out of the studio, into the field

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Biography

Maria Rogal, Associate Professor of Graphic Design at the University of Florida, explores concepts and methods designers can use to co-design and collaborate with people in marginalized communities on their development efforts. She works primarily in Mexico on this initiative—Design for Development (design4development.org)—supported by a Fulbright-García Robles Scholar grant (2006–2007), a Fulbright-Hays Faculty Research Abroad grant (2007) and the inaugural American Institute of Graphic Arts (AIGA) Design Research Grant (2008). She contributed to the *Icograda Design Education Manifesto Update* and her article "Identity and Representation: (Yucatec) Maya in the Visual Culture of Tourism" was recently published in the *Latin American and Caribbean Ethnic Studies Journal*.

Abstract

In the Design for Development (D4D) initiative design students and faculty work in context with marginalized people to help them communicate their own ideas and cultures as they make, market, and sell their own products. In this paper I share key concepts and methods we use to work in context, or "in the field." I will explain how students develop a more informed design practice and accumulate competencies that help them understand and work in complex global environments. The fieldwork students carry out in D4D is an example of how communication designers can collaborate on projects for social, economic, and environmental development, one that can be replicated by designers in other contexts. D4D's fieldwork includes ethnographic methods drawn from cultural anthropology: semistructured interviews, observation, shadowing, and other interactions. Through an intensive and immersive experience, designers learn about the contexts in which project partners and target consumers operate. They expand on and apply their prior knowledge, thereby learning more about design and design processes. They develop global competencies that bear on both design process and outcomes: learning to listen, observe, and interact with others; working with interdisciplinary teams; documenting and analyzing fieldwork findings to support the project; and empathizing with diverse cultures, peoples, and

environments. They gain an understanding of communication in multilingual environments, and they learn to work through communication problems. In short, they gain a more informed design practice, one in which they understand that their work has implications for producers (partners/clients), users, and cultures.

Introduction

Design for Development (D4D) is a design fieldwork initiative where my students, colleagues, and I collaborate with indigenous entrepreneurs in Mexico to help them communicate their ideas and cultures as they make, market, and sell their own products. For these entrepreneurs, graphic design can play an intrinsic role in communicating the quality and value of their products and services, and it can support their business development. Neither they nor we have illusions that a well-designed product on its own leads to economic development. However, in situations like these where barriers to the market exist, a product's visual design may offer a new entry point. Design that is respectful, engaging, and appropriate can tell stories that otherwise remain hidden or marginalized. Our experience has shown that communicating the producers' stories and ideas from their perspective yields many benefits. It empowers the producers, it engages and educates the consumers, and it provides tourists and residents with another insight into regional identity and lived realities. Since 2005 we have worked with beekeepers marketing their honey directly to consumers; cultural tourism providers creating unique opportunities for outsiders to learn Maya history, agriculture, and traditional medicine; organic farmers developing farming schools to improve local health and earn a fair wage; and a group of teachers and students seeking to broaden regional westerners' understanding of their heretofore oral cultural perspectives and belief systems. *(Figures 1 and 2)*

Our experience has also shown that by working together in the field we can better respond to the communication needs of our indigenous partners and their target audiences. In this paper, I provide an overview of three important keys to the D4D methodology: co-design, intercultural communication, and ethnographic methods. We used them to transform our design practice as we moved out of the studio and into the field. *(Figure 3)*

Working in Context

The rationale to conduct field research—i.e., to "work in context"—arose from three real-world needs: to directly involve and empower marginalized people in decisions about their communication strategies and products; to provide a framework for designers and design students to work directly with people living and working in environments very different from their own; and to explore ways to address diverse and complicated local problems and better understand wicked problems—"sets of complex, interacting issues evolving in a dynamic social context" (Ritchey, 2013: 2). In quoting Rittel and Webber, Ritchey also highlights the importance of context, "One cannot understand the problem without knowing about its context" (Ritchey, 2011: 2). The tangible outcomes of our collaborations are brand identities and visual systems applied to products. The back story of their development is complicated by the socio-economic and political context in which we work. It is a place with a history of subjugation, economic disparities, and multiple languages and cultures. It is a place where stereotypes of "the Maya" are abundant and misleading. To work responsibly in this context—to represent the voices of our partners—requires very different tools than those we typically use in the graphic design studio or learn in the classroom setting. This moves us into the area of social design. As Ezio Manzini, one of today's most influential thinkers in sustainable design, notes, "To move in the field of social innovation designers need to define a set of conceptual and practical tools. But, first of all, they have to recognize that design activity is not defined by the products to be designed, but by a specific body of knowledge that can be applicable to a multiplicity of objects and in diverse nodes of the design processes" (Brooks, 2011).

Using our work with Cooperativa Xyaat (Xyaat), as an example, I will discuss some ways the concepts of co-design, intercultural communication, and ethnography are articulated in the field and why they are useful.[1] Xyaat is a cooperative that conducts both cultural tours of Señor, a small town in the state of Quintana Roo, and an environmental educational and community action program for local youth. Xyaat's objective was to develop a consistent stream of tourists

to generate operating income for the community program. Such small-scale grassroots-oriented cultural tourism run by people in their own communities is rare in this region of Mexico despite its reliance on tourism. For many companies, such ventures are not lucrative due to their low volume and because connections to communities are difficult to establish. The people behind Xyaat believed they had a good product, but they could not communicate its details to tourists. They wanted to engage international tourists who wished to travel off the beaten path in order to learn from and interact, in intimate settings, with Maya artisans, healers, farmers, and historian storytellers. But how could Xyaat reach its target audience and communicate the unique range of experiences they offered? *(Figure 4)*

In order to work intelligently and responsibly, the design team needed to learn about the context and history of Xyaat in its environment, how its people see themselves, how they are seen or not seen by others, and how all of this might be significant. Members of Xyaat had worked with foreigners in various capacities, not only tourism, but for many of the participants, our first visit was the first time we spent any time in a rural Mexican town. Imagine then that US-based designers working with Xyaat—indigenous Maya based in rural communities but very much in touch with the regional complexity—immigration, and contemporary social, political, and economic issues.

In beginning our fieldwork, Xyaat reiterated several challenges to building tourist engagement and, although anecdotal, we used these as a points of departure to learn about the landscape, identify competition, messaging, and tourists' perceptions by integrating ethnographic methods. Ethnography aids in, as David Fetterman writes in *Ethnography: Step by step*, how we give "voice to people in their own context." (Fetterman, 1989: 1) It provides a guide to first-hand observation and interactions, and it offers a framework and methods to gather explicit data—through the words people say, their actions, and behaviors. When analyzed, this original data, and the related tacit knowledge acquired, directly informs our design practice.

Ethnographic Methods

Ethnography is performed through fieldwork. Our goal is to use ethnography to understand practices, behaviors, and perceptions. Our first-hand interactions include semi-structured and informal interviews, observations, taking a tour, and shadowing while being active participants. in *Key concepts in ethnography*, anthropologist Karen O'Reilly writes that interviewing is the most popular method of social science in the UK" but what makes an interview ethnographic is that it takes place in context and notes that "fieldwork is really one long conversation with people, and a 'field' you are fascinated with" (O'Reilly, 2009: 125). This, for the most part, involves engagement with people: producers, users, intermediaries—really almost anyone who can provide some kind of insight. In our fieldwork with Xyaat, we identified two international tourist destinations to explore beyond Señor: Playa del Carmen and Tulum. Señor, where Xyaat is located, is approximately 1.5–2 hours from the latter two destination cities, which have hotels, restaurants, beaches, and nearby archaeological sites. In Playa del Carmen, where we stayed for two nights, five teams of two designers sought out stores and stands selling tours, as well as other venues where tourists congregated. We noted the makeup of our small groups and how this altered both what we selected and how they were received. Our goal was to learn the details of what was sold and how messages were communicated. We asked ourselves to consider what interviews with tourists and salespeople might reveal. What conversations do we overhear while shopping or otherwise observing? What is our experience when asking about a tour? How are others reacting? Who is buying? Who is not? We collected data, in the form of video, photography, audio, and personal notes. Reviewing the range of experiences and data, we noticed patterns and issues that supported Xyaat's anecdotes about their work experiences. By collecting materials and participating in pitches, we learned specific details about tours being offered, interacted with salespeople, and observed language and approach. We experienced and observed first-hand what we had heard from our Xyaat partners and others, and we used this to form a more holistic understanding of the context, including the actors and types of interactions. All of this then informed our process. In order to think ethnographically, designers must learn to suspend

our tendency to analyze and evaluate, skills associated with the studio, where rapid opinions, assessments, and ideas are the norm. In the field, such gestures may easily be inaccurate, learning to a misinformed process. *(Figure 5)*

In another hallmark of ethnography, our day-to-day fieldwork plan often deviated. New opportunities emerged from what we learned, who we met in the field, or other things that had become worth seeing. We learned to be and remain flexible enough to deal with the unexpected, and we had to understand this flexibility as being valuable to the process. Some parts of fieldwork can feel like goofing off; going on a trip and having fun may not seem like serious work. But the research process encompasses the entirety of the experience. Even in the most casual of contexts, we needed to record our experience, including our interviews and interactions, for later analysis and review. Of course our work deviates from traditional ethnography in that we are embedded for much shorter periods of time—days or weeks rather than months or years. Nonetheless ethnography provides a way to engage people meaningfully in their environment, and it allows us to obtain data that we could not have obtained otherwise.

Returning to Señor, we participated in Xyaat's tour to experience, as tourists would, visits to homes and workshops. *(Figure 6)* There we met locals who were experts in natural medicine, Maya history, handicrafts and embroidery, indigenous beekeeping, and rope making. We learned how rope is made from henequen fiber and ate a gourmet Maya meal. We also saw language and translation challenges that delayed comprehension, slowed responses, and limited direct interactions. For example, Maya required translation to Spanish, which then, for some, required translation to English. We noted the transportation issues of getting from the major towns to Señor and the challenge walking around town, especially in the tropical heat. Not all roads were paved and weather affected their quality. Working in this context, we gained tacit knowledge as we discovered what people think, how they feel, their goals, aspirations, how they and their families envision their futures.

Interculturality

Jandt notes that "when you have no information about a new culture, you assume sameness and can be caught unaware about certain differences" (75). Because of this, "it's better to assume nothing" (Jandt, 2004: 75). For us as designers, as people used to forming opinions, it was important to understand how key problems of intercultural communication, such as ethnocentrism—the "negatively judging aspects of another culture by the standards of one's own"—can creep into our interactions and, in turn, influence our outcomes (Jandt, 2004: 76). We had to be aware that people's lived realities and experiences differ and that misconceptions are always possible. This "we" includes designers, Xyaat, family members, disciplinary experts— essentially everyone involved. By integrating principles of intercultural communication into our practice and framework, we aim to understand and appreciate various perspectives and world views. We ask what these other perspectives will bring to the way we are working, thinking, and making. Because we were in the Yucatán we focused on learning about indigenous (Yucatec and Masawal) Maya values and practices. One concern articulated by our Maya partners and well documented by others is the essentialization of Maya culture as "ancient"(Rogal, 2012). This is particularly evident when such a perspective is used to attract international and Mexican tourists to the region. Our pre-departure research on this topic confirmed, as we quickly saw, representations of "ancient" Maya culture everywhere—on billboards, store signs, naming conventions, advertisements, and tourism promotion—throughout the region. *(Figure 7)* In many ways all Maya, regardless of location or time period, are seen as the same, such that people with different histories, customs, practices, languages, etc. are jumbled together as if they are one. In fact we often saw ancient Maya and Aztec cultural references carelessly mixed.

Our intensive experience working closely with members and friends of Xyaat provided insight into their culture, history, and outlooks. We talked and learned about their perspectives on land, traditions, gastronomy, traditional medicine, and language. At the same time, we saw how contemporary practices, beliefs, and technologies are integrated into their daily lives and thus

create a hybrid culture. We learned how economic issues come to the forefront in their actions and motivations, especially in Señor and other rural towns, where sustainable employment opportunities are often absent. We learned that local economic potential and social structures are affected by widespread immigration to nearby tourist cities as well as to the US. We had known about this in the abstract, but we could not have understood it—much less empathized with our partners—without learning it directly. They told us their experiences, challenges, dreams, and motivations.

Co-design

By using principles from ethnography and intercultural communication as frameworks by which to guide our interactions, we were able to consciously address our perspectives and biases. The issues our partners are trying to address—small business development and entrepreneurship—are embedded in other problems which can be further articulated and understood as wicked. In this context, co-design, a simple shift—designing "with" instead of "for," is a necessary approach in that it assured everyone a hand in decision-making. Central to co-design is the idea that users deserve to be involved in what is designed for them. Results such as products or strategies are more likely to be sustainable when informed by people (users and producers) and ultimately more people have buy-in. Problems are more likely to be discovered early. Thus, co-design compliments intercultural communication and ethnography as a third element in D4D's approach.

Sharing and discussing our findings, with Xyaat, together we refined the problem definition and developed ideas to differentiate Xyaat from its competitors. We decided to focus on the experience and interaction with living Maya people (artisans, farmers, healers, and storytellers) in their small community. This unique experience would be artisanal, personal, and contemporary, allowing for first hand experiences and interactions. Specifically, we decided to share stories and biographies of people a visitor would meet. By putting names on faces, we hoped to engage visitors in the experience visually, prior to their arrival. *(Figure 8)*

Conclusion

By combining concepts and methods from intercultural communication, ethnography, and co-design, we generated fieldwork data to help us develop culturally appropriate and empowering materials for a re-launch of Xyaat's brand, with relevant and engaging promotional materials. Our initial process took place over five months, with one primary field visit, interactions via the Internet (email and Skype), and subsequent field visits to refine the visual design and extend the strategy.

Two years later, on a follow up visit, I was shown new materials created by a local government agency to promote Xyaat's cultural tours. This work was created without Xyaat's input. As a consequence, it was unsatisfactory at every level, even down to the print quality. In our conversations that day, the importance of collaboration and partnership was reiterated, some of which we recorded in our video interview with Xyaat's president, Marcos Canté Canul.

> "And so you coming here and working with us has given us yet again wings to fly. You've given us this push that reinforces the project and the process of growth still continues. We have more plans as I've told you. I really appreciate that you've participated in this process and I think you'll continue participating and we'll continue sending news so that you work with us in this growth process. When we grow, we start seeing new things and learning new things and so this growth process will continue" (Design for Development, 2008).

Through our fieldwork we have found that, in the right circumstances, all people can contribute creatively and design. This is particularly evident when we ask partners and their families to help us pose solutions to problems. Integrating others into the creative process does not void our skills or expertise. Rather, it amplifies them because we can now integrate many different perspectives and knowledge to explore the problem at hand. As we bring design thinking into processes, we also transfer knowledge and ways of thinking, including design thinking.

"Working in context"—as I have described it here—allows designers to learn first hand about contextual factors important to the design problem. While a certain amount of information can be transferred in the classroom or studio, the fieldwork experience enables tacit learning. Tacit knowledge is critical for designers and difficult to teach, in the classroom because it can only be transmitted via training or gained through personal experience.

By working in context, students apply their prior knowledge and can expand on it, learning more about design and design processes. They develop global competencies that bear on both design process and outcomes: learning to listen, observe, and interact with others; working with interdisciplinary teams; documenting and analyzing fieldwork findings to support the project; and empathizing with diverse cultures, peoples, and environments. They gain an understanding of communication in multilingual environments, and they learn to work through communication problems. In short, we all gain a more informed design practice, one in which we understand that our work has implications for our partner producers, users, and cultures. Communicating the producers' stories and ideas, from their perspective, empowers the producers, engages and educates the consumers, and provides another insight into regional identity and lived realities.

Footnote

1. Cooperativa Xyaat, online at xyaat.org, is located in Señor, Quintana Roo, Mexico. Participants and collaborators included Marcos Canté Canul, Santos Pook Ék, Casilda Yam, Catalina Ek Pat, Abundio Yama Chiquil, Severo Pool, Lucio Poot, Crecencio Pat, Alex Racelis, Alison Brovold, Maria Rogal, Doug Barrett, Gaby Hernández, Molly Aubry, Luis Chacon, Abby Chryst, Ciara Cordasco, Emily Frye, Marcela Gurdian, Kelly Jeck, Anaïs LaTortue, R. Lee Newell, Ashley Schick, Kelly Skinner, and Jessica Vernick Staley.

Figure 1. Co-design for the Wixárika calendar in San Miguel Huaixtita (2005). Working with teachers, students, and members of the community to visually document the Wixárika concept of time in the community's voice.

Figure 2. A range of fieldwork activities provide opportunities to develop design proposals (2007–2010).
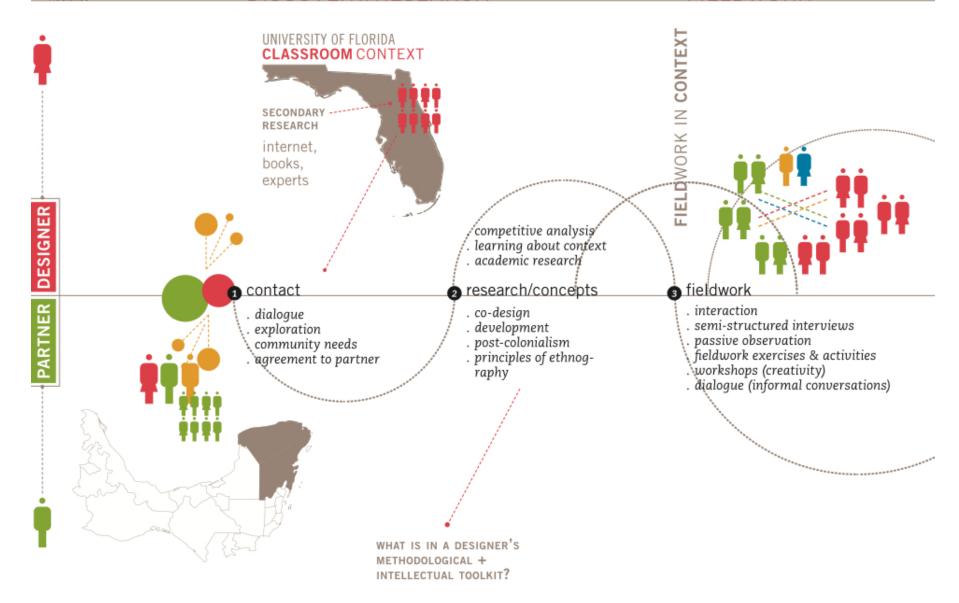
Figure 3. D4D Methodology Diagram (excerpt, Discovery and Fieldwork). The first two phases identify some of the preparation required prior to engagement and fieldwork—including understanding the key concepts outlined in this paper.
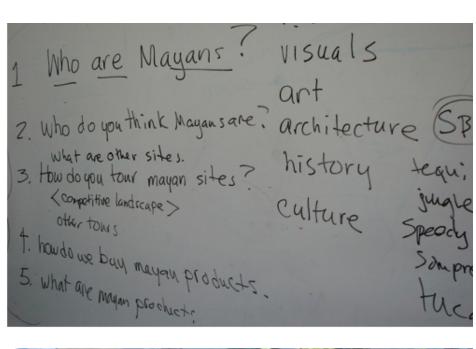

Figure 4. Stereotypes of Mexico and the Maya are ubiquitous. It was important for us to identify these and discuss them among our collaborators. Popular culture representations played a role in determining our approach and how the products, and their makers, could be presented in an alternative visual voice.

Figure 5. Ethnographic research in Playa del Carmen (2008). Learning how tours were presented, including how they were spoken about, their visual language, and key words used to highlight their supposed authenticity were important to revealing the layers that confronted our message-making in this marketplace of sensory overload and understanding how visual language and design creates perception. The world "Maya" is used ten times on the one posters depicted here but there are no Maya people represented. Most often images of people like ourselves are played back to us, inviting us to partake in the exciting experiences.

Figure 6. Touring Xyaat (2007). As we visited the home and farm of Don Lucio Poot we learned about various cures for everyday ailments, including reducing the inflammation of a recent bite.

Figure 7. The Maya Imaginary, tourist advertising and ephemera in the Yucatán. Images of the ancient Maya dot the visual landscape throughout the Yucatán peninsula. Products for sale in stores include books and games about the ancient Maya in multiple languages and ground coffee imported from another region using the famous Maya, or Mesoamerican, Ball Game on the cover and naming it after a nearby archaeological site. The game piques interest because of its difficulty and because it purportedly involved human sacrifice. A contemporary billboard advertising Coca-Cola uses ancient Maya glyphs and the archaeological site Chichén Itzá, emerging out of the bubbles, to pronounce in both Maya and Spanish, "The happiness of Coca-Cola for this land." This has multiple levels of meaning and representation because of the high consumption of Coca-Cola, thought by many locals to combat the intense heat and humidity.

Figure 8. Xyaat Postcards (2009). Xyaat's identity drew from their notion that they are able to transform and soar, hence the butterfly as the primary symbol. Developed in 2008, materials continued to be designed and these 2009 rack cards highlight the people who provide the learning opportunities and experiences unique to Xyaat.

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