

PLACE OF DESIGN THINKING IN INNOVATIVE AND MULTITASKING INTERCULTURAL ENVIRONMENT

In modern society a university graduate has to live and work in a multitasking environment while responding to the constant development dynamics. A modern person needs to possess creative, non-standard, critical and constructive thinking. At current stage innovation requires a human-centered approach that considers diverse cultural contexts.

Design thinking, a powerful methodology for fostering innovation, can be significantly enhanced by integrating principles of intercultural communication. This article explores the synergy between intercultural communication and design thinking, highlighting how understanding and navigating cultural differences can lead to more globally relevant, impactful, and ethically sound innovations. It examines the critical role of intercultural competence in each stage of the design thinking process, from empathizing with users to testing and refining solutions across diverse markets.

Design thinking is a human-centered problem-solving approach that has emerged as a valuable tool for fostering innovation across various sectors. However, design thinking cannot operate in a cultural vacuum. As businesses and organizations increasingly target world markets, the ability to understand and communicate effectively across cultural boundaries becomes paramount. Intercultural communication, the process of exchanging information and meaning between people from different cultural backgrounds, plays a basic role in enhancing the design thinking process and driving global innovation. Einstein once said: “We cannot solve our problems with the same level of thinking that created them”. This is why design thinking comes into play.

Design thinking is a process that involves understanding user needs, defining problems, ideating solutions, prototyping, and testing. Each stage of this process is profoundly affected by cultural nuances, making intercultural communication a critical enabler.

The “empathize” stage demands a deep understanding of users’ cultural backgrounds, values, and beliefs. Intercultural communication skills empower designers to ask culturally appropriate questions, interpret nonverbal cues accurately, and avoid imposing the grown cultural biases. As Brown argues in ‘Change by Design’, empathy is at the heart of design thinking, but it requires a conscious effort to understand perspectives that differ from our own [1]. Ethnographic research, a cornerstone of design thinking, depends heavily on effective intercultural communication to gather authentic and meaningful insights in to user needs and behaviors.

The way a problem is framed and defined is often influenced by cultural perspectives. What constitutes a “problem” in one culture might be viewed differently or not even recognized as a problem in another. Intercultural communication helps design teams identify and articulate problems in a way that is relevant and meaningful to diverse user groups, ensuring that the design addresses actual needs rather than imposing culturally specific assumptions.

Brainstorming and idea generation benefit significantly from diverse perspectives and creative approaches. Intercultural teams can leverage their different cultural backgrounds to generate a wider range of innovative solutions. However, fostering an inclusive environment where all team members feel comfortable sharing their ideas, regardless of their cultural background, is essential. Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner in ‘Riding the Waves of Culture’ highlight the importance of understanding cultural dimensions such as individualism vs. collectivism to facilitate effective brainstorming sessions in intercultural teams [2].

Prototyping allows design teams to test their ideas and gather feedback from users. Intercultural communication is essential for understanding how users from different cultures interact with prototypes and for interpreting their feedback accurately. For instance, a design feature that is intuitive for users from one culture might be confusing or offensive to users from another.

Testing in diverse cultural contexts provides valuable insights into the usability, desirability, and feasibility of a design. Intercultural communication skills help designers understand users’ reactions to a design, identify potential cultural barriers, and refine their designs to better meet the needs of

diverse users. This iterative process ensures that the final product is culturally appropriate and resonates with the target audience.

Despite the benefits, integrating intercultural communication into design thinking presents several challenges. Designers must be aware of their own cultural biases and avoid making assumptions based on stereotypes. “Unconscious bias” training can help teams mitigate these challenges.

Cultural differences can manifest as power dynamics within the design team or between the team and the users. Designers must be sensitive to these dynamics and strive to create a collaborative and equitable environment where all voices are heard and valued.

Designing for diverse cultural contexts raises ethical considerations such as cultural appropriation, and the potential for designs to reinforce harmful stereotypes. Designers must be mindful of these ethical considerations and strive to create designs that are culturally sensitive, respectful, and empowering. As D’Ignazio and Klein advocate in ‘Data Feminism’, designs should challenge, rather than perpetuate, existing power imbalances and inequalities [3].

To effectively integrate intercultural communication into design thinking, organizations and design teams should adopt the following practices: provide designers with training on intercultural communication, cultural sensitivity, and ethical design; assemble design teams with members from diverse cultural backgrounds; engage cultural advisors or experts to provide guidance and feedback throughout the design process; conduct thorough ethnographic research to understand the cultural context in which the design will be used; conduct user testing in diverse cultural contexts to gather feedback and identify potential cultural barriers; embrace an iterative design process that allows for continuous refinement and adaptation based on user feedback.

The integration of intercultural communication into design thinking is essential for fostering innovation. By embracing cultural diversity, promoting understanding, and practicing empathy, design teams can create more relevant, impactful, and ethically sound solutions. As the world becomes increasingly interconnected, the ability to navigate cultural differences and collaborate effectively across cultural boundaries will be a critical factor for individuals and organizations seeking to thrive in the innovation age. Organizations need to invest in training and create inclusive cultures that enable effective intercultural communication, resulting in more successful world ventures and products.

As someone deeply interested in the future of world innovation, I firmly believe that the ability to combine intercultural communication and design thinking is no longer a “nice to have”, but a “must have” skill. The opportunity to make meaningful changes in the world by developing truly inclusive solutions is incredibly inspiring. I am particularly interested in how these principles can be applied. For example, developing telemedicine solutions that take into account the cultural characteristics and unique needs of indigenous peoples, while respecting their traditions and communication styles, is a task that inspires me immensely. Similarly, developing educational resources, that are accessible and engaging for children from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds, rather than universal, can unlock enormous potential. I look forward to continuing to explore this field in my future career.

References

1. **Brown, T.** Change by Design: How Design Thinking Transforms Organizations and Inspires Innovation / T. Brown. – Harper Business, 2009.
2. **Trompenaars, F.** Riding the Waves of Culture: Understanding Diversity in Global Business / F. Trompenaars, Ch. Hampden-Turner. – McGraw-Hill, 1997.
3. **D’Ignazio, C.** Data Feminism / C. D’Ignazio, L. F. Klein. – MIT Press, 2020.