

We Weave We Design: Towards Artisan Empowerment Through a Participatory Model of Collaboration

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ABSTRACT

We Weave We Design is a year-long project that began with a participatory research workshop conducted in Guatemala to hear the voices of artisans. In partnership with a nonprofit organization that works with indigenous Guatemalan artisans, we explored cultural aspects of the artisan communities, like/as their textile tradition, creative processes, daily lives, short-term and long-term goals, etc. By comparing the organization's current approach to collaboration and artisan's voices, a problem was revealed: Artisans were not directly involved in the design stage of the production process. The organization's overall western model of globalized employment both exploits artisan ability to weave quality products while also erasing indigenous traditions of textile design and storytelling.

To address this issue, we co-designed with a member from the artisan community a 4-section workshop that aimed to create a space for artisans to design and weave textile products through cultural identification and storytelling. The workshop was intended to provide tools for the organization to make their design stage participatory and as a complementary to the organization's current artisan empowerment model. We tested

the workshop with the partner organization and artisan communities in early 2019.

Author Keywords

Participatory Research; Artisans; Globalization; Workshop; Women's Empowerment; Central America; Craft

CONTEXT

Having a rich cultural heritage and numerous talented weavers, Guatemala has attracted small and large organizations overseas to develop the business with its textile industry. Our partner organization is a New York-based nonprofit organization that works with artisan weavers in Guatemala to produce weaving products sold in the North American market. Its mission is poverty alleviation and the empowerment of indigenous artisan women to become entrepreneurs. It applies a holistic empowerment model that comprises 3 parts: community-based education, market access, and asset development [1].

Participatory research

In the initial exploratory research, we identified a series of issues after an investigation of our partner's collaboration and production model with a focus on the artisans' perspective on these two aspects. The research was mostly done over a week in Guatemala in 2018, where we conducted field research in the organization's worksite and the artisan community. In a participatory design research workshop, we used cultural



Figure 1. Artisans working on the cultural probe



Figure 2. Artisans' responses to the cultural probe

The major findings of our initial research were the following: first, artisans don't have space to practice their creativity in the current production process. The pieces they are weaving are all created by the organization's designers and based on the fashion trends in New York City. Second, the pieces sold don't show a complete picture of the culture from which they emerged. Historically, textiles of Guatemalan communities hold a lot of information - they record histories, meanings, and emotions. When they are not designed by the artisans, they do not reflect any of these. Besides problems in the collaboration model, we also found that indigenous artisan women in Guatemala don't know a lot about the history of textiles in Central America. Artisans generally perceive that their tribal clothing and textile weaving traditions were brought by colonizing Spaniards.

WORKSHOP

The 4-section workshop was designed with the manager of the organization who is also a member of the artisan community. Closely working with her allowed us to design tools that both worked well for artisan communities as well as the organization.

Day 1&2: Holistic Cultural Reflection

Activities were conducted to foster discussions about both the historical context and the present view of the indigenous culture. On the first day, a lecture about Guatemalan weaving culture was delivered by a Guatemalan woman anthropologist who works at Museo Ixchel in Guatemala City. The second day was dedicated to illuminating culture from everyday life. Artisans shared the stories of objects they have in their home that represent their culture to each other and to the students.

Day 3&4: Design, Prototyping and Celebration

The artisans individually designed their pieces on paper. They were inspired by the activities that took place beforehand. Artisans presented the stories behind their designs and selected final pieces to prototype. Artisans spent hours weaving their final pieces. The whole workshop series ended with a celebration party with lunch shared by all!



Figure 3. Artisans and students discussing

OUTCOMES

Seven bracelets and a belt were designed and woven by artisans during the workshop. They are accompanied by demonstrations of unique artisanal techniques and rich cultural stories.

Survey conducted after the workshop showed that artisans felt empowered in several ways. Most artisans became more confident in communicating their designs to outsiders. They also reported feeling empowered from an authentic introduction of the historical context of Guatemalan weaving culture. Some expressed the enjoyment of sharing their cultural stories with the facilitators since they themselves rarely have opportunities to introduce the richness of their culture to a foreign audience. When unexpected challenges arose

throughout the week, artisans actively worked together independently to find solutions, something that leadership from the partner organization said was not normal and difficult to encourage. Artisans also showed curiosity and interest in techniques, patterns, and color usage of other cultures' textile products.

Reflection and Evaluation

After evaluating all 4 workshop sessions, the following 2 aspects needed to be given more consideration in future renditions of these workshops:

Indigenous vs Western Creative Process

Indigenous artisans don't use drawings to communicate their designs. Instead, they work directly on the loom when designing the piece. In the workshop, artisans were allowed to use drawings to design their pieces, before weaving on the loom, which is a more western approach. In retrospect, we wondered what could have happened if they used their creative process in the designs?

Various Literacy Levels

a few artisan participants had difficulties finishing activities that required writing, which discouraged their participation. In the future, we should take these situations into consideration and design activities that allow equal participation of artisans with varied literacy levels.

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REFERENCES

- [1] Mercado Global. 2020. Our Model. Retrieved May 4, 2020 <https://www.mercadoglobal.org/pages/support-artisan-women-in-latin-america>