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Intercultural Dialog as a Strategy for a Sustainable Society: Case Studies from Italy

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Abstract: In the last decades, Europe has been through important socio-economic changes and has seen an important influx of incoming immigrants and migrant workers. The paper presents on the case of Italian society, aiming to underline the impact that foreign incoming communities have on the traditional Italian system. The approach of intercultural learning will be introduced, arguing that responsible services supported by communication strategies can strengthen social cohesion and enable the creation of a sustainable hybrid culture. The main question asked is how designers can contribute with their expertise in this process? The argument will be sustained by presenting the case of a service design course in which Master level students from Politecnico di Milano had to work with local NGO’s that offer various services to foreigners. The objective of the course was to develop services to support the intercultural dialog. The conclusion explains how traditional cultures have to open up to incoming changes in order to become sustainable. In this respect, the starting point in preventing cultural clashes is to educate the young generation how to negotiate the balance between local cultural heritage and foreign influences through intercultural dialogue.

Keywords: Service Design, Culture, Immigration, Italy

Introduction

Italy is well known for its cultural richness and is probably one of the most sought after touristic destinations. The stereotyped imaginary about the Italian culture pictures an idyllic landscape populated by locals and highlights the iconic cities such as Florence, Venice and Rome. This idealized view still shared globally, sees the Italian society as a homogeneous one, somehow frozen in time, and tends to ignore the actual dynamics of a fluid and continuously changing culture. Instead, the reality of the Italian cities is the growing presence of immigration phenomenon and the contrasts that come from this shift in the demographic components. The number of foreign residents present on the territory of Italy raised exponentially by 21% from 2000 to 2003 and by 110% until 2006 (Direzione Generale dell’Immigrazione e delle Politiche di Integrazione, 2012). This phenomenon is particularly notable in the north of Italy where the immigrant population increased in the last decade with 11% by year, witnessing 19-23% increment in the period from 2003 to 2005 (ISMU-ORIM, 2011).

This major change in the national demographics brings an important change at a cultural level, introducing a multiple national cultural identity that mixes strong Italian traditions with incoming ethnic influences. If this phenomenon is presently relevant only in statistical terms, and perhaps less visible in the day-to-day life, the future of the Italian society shows the strong impact of these transformations as a result of two main factors: the negative demographic growth and a positive migration dynamic (ISTAT, 2011). In other words, several contrasting trends mark the evolution of the Italian demographics: the issues related to the ageing population, low birth rates, and the increased inflow of immigrants.

The changes highlighted above are generated by a larger socio-economic and political context and have important implications for the social policies of the country. This comes in the context of one of the largest and most rigid bureaucratic systems that functions based on outdated laws and regulations. While Italy is well known for the beauty of its landmark cities, these cities are governed by ambiguous welfare and inclusion policies (Bifulco et al., 2008).
In the presence of these contrasts many alternative bottom-up solutions are emerging, coming to complete the institutional public services. This could constitute an inspiration for the new generation of service and communication designers moving from the, somehow protected, academic environment to the reality of the contemporary socio-economic phenomena. The next paper tackles the necessity of updating the communication and service design curriculum in the higher education, in order to include and address emerging social issues. We argue that this type of interventions are necessary to make a step forward in promoting the values of cultural sustainability, and are relevant especially in the midst of the young design professionals.

**Milan as a Host City**

The north of Italy and in particular the city of Milan has always attracted businesses and commercial activities, due to its strategic location that links the southern and northern Europe. For this reason, the area has had an important economic development that called for augmented skilled and unskilled workforce. This triggered the first wave of regional migration within the Italian territory, a trend that was particularly significant in the 50’s and 70’s and counted more than 2 million regional migrants (Bonifazi & Heins, 2000). It is important to understand that the Milanese metropolitan area extends to Varese, Como, Bergamo, Brescia, Cremona, Pavia and Novara and constitutes the main industrial pole of Italy. The interregional migration played a main role, during that period, in transforming Italy into a modern industrial society in which the urban centers gained a major importance (pg. 29).

This experience has brought the diversification of the Milan demographics and contributed to the cross-cultural contamination between the southern and northern regions. In the mean time, the phenomenon of regional migration has decreased in the last years, resulting in the influx of foreign migrants. At the beginning of 2001 the city of Milan was the main immigration city in Lombardy, receiving more than half of the foreign population. This brief review of the migration trends in the Milan area depicts an already established cultural diversity on two levels: a regional diversity, expressed in the local traditions, different accents or dialects and greater, ethnic diversity in language, values, habits and religions. Even if the city of Milan has now acquired a heterogeneous population, the different ethnic communities tend to aggregate around their own nucleus with fairly informal intercommunity communications. In this respect the social fabric of the city could be seen as a patchwork of different pieces loosely tied together merely through medium or short term contracts; a shared territory that hosts parallel realities and social interaction dynamics and still has to gain the trust and affection, of its inhabitants.

**Cultural Sustainability and Social Cohesion**

Having seen the specificity of the Milanese context, it is important to emphasize the emerging role of culture as one of the main factors leading to social cohesion. In this sense in the next chapter we will argue that cultural sustainability is necessary to attain social cohesion. Looking at the migratory patterns described before, the city of Milan could be seen as having a relatively long history of managing diversity compared to other metropolitan cities in the European Union. A critical mass of new residents in the city leads to a process of change that passes through the societal disintegration and re-integration and affects both the immigrant population and the traditional local residents (Council of Europe, 2011).

This triggers a re-definition of the social relations that recognize the presence of diversity and its role in the ecology of the city. The acceptance of multiple cultural expressions and practices is the first step towards re-constructing a cohesive society. Here it is necessary to refer as culture as “a whole way of life” a “signifying system” through which as social order is communicated reproduced, experienced and explored (Williams, 1993, pp. 11-13) (Nurse, 2006, p.36). Looking closer at the ongoing changes in the Milanese context, several details have to be
Firstly the social fragmentation is generated by the presence of multiple cultural identities sharing the same territory, secondly it is a phase of a longer-term process of societal change, and thirdly it has to be geared towards a sustainable development. More important given the economic and environmental challenges faced at global level this moment of apparent crisis has to be perceived and exploited as an opportunity for sustainable change.

**Culture as a Main Factor in Sustainable Development**

Having seen a snapshot of the present situation of the social fabric, in one of the most important Italian cities, the question is: what are the main factors that could enable the re-definition of a diverse and more sustainable society? Adding to the consolidated sustainable development paradigm drafted by the Brundtland Report and Agenda (1987), a more recent view sees the cultural sustainability as the fourth pillar of the sustainable development. The importance of culture in the support and creation of sustainable communities is stressed by Hawkes, who argues that:

> Just as biodiversity is an essential component of ecological sustainability, so is cultural diversity essential to social sustainability. Diverse values should not be respected just because we are tolerant folk, but because we must have a pool of diverse perspectives in order to survive, to adapt to changing conditions, to embrace the future. (2001, p.14)

This perspective not only underlines the relevance of culture in the realm of social sustainability but also puts in perspective the essential role that cultural diversity has in society. Moreover Nurse (2006, p.38) pinpoints the centrality of culture in a sustainable society and prioritizes a series of values:

- Cultural identity (the social unit of development is a culturally defined community and the development of this community is rooted in the specific values and institutions of this culture).
- Self-reliance (each community relies primarily on its own strength and resources).
- Social justice (the development effort should give priority to those most in need).
- Ecological balance (the resources of the biosphere are utilized in full awareness of the potential of local ecosystems as well as the global and local limits imposed on present and future generations (Friberg and Hettne, 1985).

In this case the first two values are particularly relevant for the territory in discussion. In the first place the shift in the characteristics of a society that has to accommodate the diversity moves from single to multiple local identities. This change is reflected by the Italian Statistics Institute findings, which predict an increase in the foreign residents from 4.6 million in 2011 to 7.3 in 2020. In the mean time 9.3 million foreigners will acquire the Italian citizenship in the same time span (ISTAT, 2011, p. 8). This generates a hybrid culture that has to be supported by inclusive policies. The importance of the understanding and management of this key passage is emphasized by the Council of Europe that recognizes that “integration and community relations are not matters for immigrants and minorities but for society as whole.” (2000, p. 29). The passage from a fragmented society to the creation of a community is a lengthy process in which the younger generation of Italians plays and extremely important role. The trust and reliance on the strength and capabilities of the other, can only be achieved in the presence of partially shared social norms and values. Referring to the specific case of Milan, first and foremost it is necessary to see the different communities in the context of the city system linked through social ties.
Social Cohesion and Cultural Diversity

What is the character of a society that fosters cultural diversity and aims to promote social cohesion? In a certain way the two concepts present an inherent dichotomy, that of a multitude of diverse elements in contrast with a compact whole, and raises the question of how to best balance homogeneity with diversity (Jenson, 2002). The cohabitation of different communities on the same territory is more than anything else a complex process of constant negotiation. As the Council of Europe states, “the challenge is to avoid that cultural diversity and multiple affiliations lead to the denial or disrespect of universal and cross-cultural values that are vital for relations between individuals and groups of individuals within society” (2000, p.22). Jenson moves forward in the analysis of the role of culture in social cohesion identifying several key points. First social cohesion has to be seen as a process; second the concept delineates two distinct positions referring to who is “in” and “out” a specific social system. Third social cohesion has to be seen in terms of shared values and identities, from this the fourth point takes into account the frictions and conflicts that have to be mitigated in order to achieve (even temporary) a cohesive social dynamic. These findings are summarized in five dimensions that explain the concept of social cohesion:

Belonging ……………………………. Isolation
Inclusion………………………… Exclusion
Recognition………………………… Rejection
Legitimacy………………………….. Illegitimacy

(Jenson, 2002)

These findings illustrate both the perception of the community towards the individual, in the case of the recognition – rejection axis, and the feelings of belonging or isolation, that an individual might have towards the community and territory in which they live. The inclusion or exclusion of a person from a social group, is expressed by means of access to economic equality of opportunities, that also relates to the level of legitimacy and the legal status recognized by the bureaucratic system (Jenson, 1988).

The awareness towards diversity and the acceptance of its coexistence in terms of languages, behaviors, and rituals in the same urban area, increases the understanding of the different cultural values. In this case, the negotiation of shared meanings can be seen as the axis that balances diversity and social cohesion.

To control this balance and move towards the understanding of the social interactions within and among different cultures, an intercultural learning and dialog has to be adopted. Having introduced the state of the art of the Milanese territory, the next section will discuss the concrete result of the social changes outlined. Presenting the qualities and concerns of the second generation Italians we will then address the main question of the paper: seeing the overwhelming impact of the social changes experienced by the young generation, how can design education\(^1\) contribute to the promotion of intercultural dialog for cultural sustainability?

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\(^1\) Design education refers to the teaching of principles of design and their application to communication, products, services and environments. (Findeli, 2001)(Waks, 2001)(Lawson, 2006)
Towards a Multicultural Society: Second Generation Italians Growing up

Growing up between two languages and two cultures will be soon a general trend in Italy where one in three children, living in the major cities, was born from immigrant parents (Ismu, 2012). Children of immigrants grow up with a natural belonging to Italy. They were born in Italy or they came during childhood, they speak the same language as their native peers, they go to the same schools and they study the same Italian history and culture. As many authors have demonstrated, even if they are not yet recognized as Italian citizens, they feel part of Italian society and they usually imagine their future in Italy (Ambrosini, Molina 2004; Dalla Zuanna et al. 2009; Granata, 2011).

According to Andall (2002), if children of immigrants identify with Italians, Italians do not seem to identify with them. Integration is not yet a mutual process in an old, fragile and closed-mind society. Also Italian law about citizenship is one of the most restrictive laws (91, 1992) in Europe. It is based on an old conception of the nation, refusing to be an immigration receptive society and aiming to protect its descendants in the world. Italian inclusion policy presents a two folded paradox: while the children of immigrants born and living on Italian territory are not given citizenship, the descendents of Italian expatriates, who have never been to Italy, can easily claim it (Zincone, 2006).

Certainly, this legal and cultural anomaly affects growing up processes of second generation Italians. The time of growing up is, by definition, a time of passages. For the children of foreign origin, the experience of growing up is accompanied by other meaningful situations, as the experience of difference: a sudden and pervasive discovery of being “different” from their peers. Twine (1996) speaks about boundary events, episodes that take the shape of a blind reference to a difference, like a question, a compassionate look or true racist insults in school, on public transport, or on the streets. Such situations threaten one’s self esteem, and influence the identity which is taking shape and which is particularly sensitive to the judgment of the people around.

Children of immigrants in many cases risk developing a negative and fragmented identity and being considered a part of foreign minority, even if they feel part of the majority. The process of ethnic self-identification of this “post-migration generation” (Vertovec, 2004) is more complex comparing with their parents who have a strong identity built in the country of origin (Portes and Rumbaut, 2001).

Finally, building a multicultural society means creating a new mentality, able to consider and recognize second generation Italians as citizens. A useful lesson comes from new generations growing up in a multicultural context (children and young people, native or foreign). In fact, in their vision seems to be present a plural idea of Italian identity, including minority religions people and, “ethnic” marked people. As Enzo Colombo (2010) demonstrates, children of Italian natives think that citizenship is not linked to blood but to a way of life. They think that belonging is something that can be nurtured and can be achieved during life. It is based on choice and personal will, something different compared to their parents’ idea of citizenship. This multicultural generation can help society to modify the traditional mentality based on the monocultural and ancient ideas of Italians.

Intercultural Communication as a Design Brief

Communication design is usually seen as dealing mostly with the esthetics and form, in many situations being confounded with graphic design. In particular the design courses offered in one of the largest and best-known Italian universities are traditionally rooted in the master-apprentice model of education (Frascara, 2007) that emphasizes the quality of craft rather than its impact on the society. Recently, however a new orientation towards social issues has enforced the links between academia and a real, environment, establishing a new type of design education (Findeli, 2001). One of the examples of such interventions is the DESIS network, which has the aim of
connecting design schools and programs that focus on service design for sustainability. The course reported herein, is part of the larger pedagogical and research framework of the DESIS network (Manzini, 2011). The pedagogic experiment had a duration of three months and involved a team of four teachers, three tutors and ninety students in the first year master course in communication design.

As explained before, intercultural communication is one of the central issues that can lead to cultural sustainability, because concentrates on the understanding of the differences and the shared values of diverse communities. Simply put, intercultural communication occurs when a person from one culture sends a message to be processed by a person from another culture (Samovar et al., 2011). Rather than a simple process this type of communication involves a series of factors that influence the reading and decoding of the message. The perception, patterns of cognition, verbal and non-verbal behavior as well as the influence of context (pg. 15) can radically change the meaning of the message in the intercultural communication. The communications designer has the task to identify the meaningful messages, emerging from the intercultural encounters, and articulate them into mediating artifacts for intercultural dialog. The course reported attempted to attain this purpose by asking second year master students in communication design to tackle critical aspects of intercultural communication and address them using the design language.

**Course Description and Partners**

In order to accommodate the multifaceted phenomenon of immigration and the problems that foreign citizens encounter upon their arrival in a new country the partners involved were associations and private agencies, which responded to different needs of the foreigners in Milan.

Given the complexity of the brief the preliminary phase of the course was dedicated to a field research activity led by the organizing team, the contact with partners and understanding of the main areas of services in which the projects can be collocated. This phase was also dedicated to the coordination of the various inputs from the interdisciplinary teaching team. In this respect it is important to emphasize the importance of combining design skills such as ethnographic and user research, and the capability to envision service solutions and create communication strategies, with strong digital technologies content and with the experiential knowledge provided by the partners (fig. 1). All pedagogical activities reflected these three intertwined streams and provided students with theoretical lectures, practical exercises and project reviews (for a more detailed description see also Suteu, Pillan, 2013).
In particular we concentrated on three main categories of services: educational, sport and recreational and well-being. In the same time the students took in consideration the interaction between the Italian population and three main categories of residents: foreigners newly arrived in Italy, second generation Italians and foreign students. For this purpose the following NGO’s participated in the course:

**Asnada** school, is one of the few associations with a consolidated tradition of offering free Italian language classes to foreigners present in Milan and Rome. The school embraces an alternative approach to education, featuring an interdisciplinary range of activities, such as model making, acting and performing, singing and story telling. The school is open to both foreign and Italian citizens in mixed educational and creative activities.

**Naga** association is a non profit organization providing medical care and legal help to illegal immigrants in Milan. The association is not an alternative to institutional services, but comes to complete a services offered by the government and the municipality. The association is active in the Milan area and brings together more than 300 volunteers. In one year the association offers more than 1500 medical visits and legal advising sessions, and 800 persons are contacted by the Street Medical Unit service.

**Fondazione Intercultura** is another non-profit organization whose mission is to promote the intercultural dialog and cultural exchanges for high school students in Italy. The association has as main aim to bring an increased awareness on the intercultural dialog, being active in the secondary school system. By organizing international exchange internships for high school students, the Intercultura association and foundation, enables an opening towards the positive perception of other cultures, both on the Italian territory and overseas. Along with the above-mentioned associations, the students were introduced to the **Intese project**, an online platform developed by Metid center and dedicated to foreign students at Politecnico di Milano.

**Intercultural Dialog Solutions Drafted by Students**

The input provided by the partners contributed to the concept generation and the development of service solutions. The intervention areas individuated by students ranged from education to sports and recreational activities.

The educational services category considered a variety of issues raised by the lack of a consolidated pedagogical strategy to confront problems of language and adult education, the

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**Figure 1: Class Schedule**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Preparation (3-4 months)</th>
<th>1st Phase Introduction/Concept</th>
<th>2nd Phase Design Development</th>
<th>3rd Phase Service Prototype test</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Digital services input</td>
<td>Presentations and lectures</td>
<td>Lectures on service and communication design</td>
<td>Revisions with computer science and design teachers, Project refinement and test with partners</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Design input</td>
<td>Partners presentation</td>
<td>Lectures on digital tools</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Partners</td>
<td>Field study</td>
<td>Concept development and definition, Revisions with partners</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Concept presentation</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Presentation</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*3 MONTHS: MARCH - JUNE 2012*
integration of the foreign students in the Italian educational system and the lack of verbal communication in the intercultural dialog. This is the case of the Insegnanti Differenti (Different Teachers) project that addresses the lack of formal training for social integration in elementary schools and proposes a digital service that acts as a mutual help platform where teachers can share their experience in classrooms handling cultural differences. Another example is the ABCDiario, a project that brings together in a poetic manner the Italian vocabulary with the experience and cultural heritage most of the times unexpressed by the foreign residents. The project links the letters in Italian with their explanation through a short story from the participants’ migratory experience.

Figure 2: ABCDiario

*Sassi, Verrengia, Zangrandi*

The importance of sports and recreational activities as a potential enabling solution for social cohesion was stressed in several projects that proposed solutions for an alternative use of the public spaces as qualifying the multicultural street artists already present in the city as in the Unconventional Interaction project by Calvi, Frascogna, Maglio, or the use of the parks in the city for cultural activities related to diversity as in the ParcoTime by Cecchi, Chitti, Croce. Game Mate was perhaps one of the most interesting projects developed by Bozzato, Castro, Leoni and Xia, and consisting in an online platform that supports the organization of multicultural sport events. A hybrid between a social network and a database with information regarding sports throughout the world, the project encourages the creation of social ties between people from different cultures sharing the same passion for sport. The group tested the relation between online and offline interaction in a simulated event.
Another interesting approach was embraced by several groups of students who chose to explore the game paradigm in order to involve participants in the discovery of the multicultural side of Milan. Melting Dot by Ferrando, Gasparini e Sartor, recognizes the difficulties that foreign students have in connecting with their Italian colleagues. Most of the time the main social reference of international students in Milan is a restraint group of co-nationals and other international students. The game proposed aims to facilitate the communication between Italian and foreign students, by engaging players in a series of challenges that have to be completed through real social interactions.

Play with MI is an online and offline game aiming to invite the local residents of Milan to discover the multicultural events and interesting locations. Organized using the principles of a
touristic guide, the project is intended both for Italians and foreigners and proposes the collaborative creation of an alternative map that signals the presence of positive multicultural places.

Figure 5: Play with MI  
Peretti, Recalcati, Teruzzi

Conclusion

In the last twenty years the sustainability issues have been increasingly studied in the design research and implemented in the teaching curriculum. In particular the focus shifted from the tangible artefacts towards service and interaction design. This is in part due to the complexity of problems and needs that cannot be addressed only through product and system innovation, and they require the re-consideration of the social organization forms and different perspectives on the functions and the roles played by actors and stakeholders. In particular the research of innovative solutions becomes relevant in the presence of complex, conflicting problems with respect to the existent economic and social organization schemes (Kolko, 2012). Service design experiments have evolved in the last years especially in the area of participatory and collaborative services (Meroni, Sangiorgi, 2011). This phenomenon has found fertile ground in various design programs in universities throughout the world, and mobilized internal resources in order to tackle the local social issues, addressing them into design projects.

In the case of the design course described above, the objectives to be achieved were placed on two levels. From pedagogical point of view the teaching team experimented the collaboration with multidisciplinary partners, operating within Politecnico di Milano and outside. This allowed the group to introduce the highly debated issue of immigration and social inclusion rarely approached in the academic environment. In the same time, at the class level, the course opened an opportunity for the students to apply their skills to real issues that concern the future and quality of life in the place where they live. Moreover they were provided the necessary technical and theoretical knowledge that allowed them to express their intuitions and articulate service design concepts.

In many cases the services designed in the academic environment and involving students remain at concept level and don’t have the possibility to continue developing while the pedagogical activities end up with the presentation of the preliminary projects, or in the best situation with a mock-up and service simulation. However if the co-design activities with the institutional and NGO partners are well conducted and successful, the projects can be seen as
nuggets that bring their contribution to the development of a wider research frame work. More important in the case reported, the didactical activities opened up the delicate issue of living in a multicultural society sometimes even without knowing it, because of the parallel realities and lifestyles present in the Italian society. In this respect the course had the participation of a large number of NGO’s and external experts as well as a large body of students and teachers. The realization and implementation of new and innovative services requires an extensive amount of time and considerable financial investments that cannot be supported by the university. In the same time the academic experimentations have several advantages: they allow a major liberty of expression to the students, offer the access to a different perspective for the NGO’s and institutional partners, and are quite affordable in economic terms. Given all the above from the point of view of the teaching team, the course established a precedent in bringing the intercultural dialog as a theme for communication and service design.

Acknowledgement

The authors would like to thank all the students who participated in the course. The field activities have been made possible with the dedicated involvement of Asnada Association, Naga Association, METID Center, Intercultura Association; last but not least the course benefited from the excellent collaboration between prof. Marco Maiocchi, prof. Maristella Matera, prof. Alessandro Campi, and Dr.Davide Mazza from Design and DEI (computer science) depts. and Marko Radetta, from the Design dept. Special thanks to Barbara Pino and Gianni Perillo, for their insightful lectures.
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