NEIGHBOR-GAP-BRIDGE
EMPATHY DRIVEN, COMMUNITY INFORMED EDUCATION
IN A KNOWLEDGE ECONOMY

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1. EMPATHY DEFICIT
In recent years social scientists have framed concerns about the changing character of American society in terms of the concept of “social capital.” The core idea of social capital theory is that social networks have value and can both decrease and increase affecting the social glue that keeps us together as a society. According to Jean M. Twenge, a psychologist at San Diego State University, seventy-five percent of all students rate themselves less empathetic than students 30 years ago. In “Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community,” Robert Putnam warns, “our stock of social capital – the very fabric of our connections with each other, has plummeted, impoverishing our lives and communities.”

Digital communication replacing face-to-face interaction is often cited as the main culprit. In addition, our shifting economy has created inequality gaps between the wealthy and poor, which continue to widen at a dangerous speed, leaving disenfranchised citizens in its wake. Art and Design institutions are among those affected by these trends with rising tuition contributing to the big divide. Campuses filled with “empathy-at-risk,” millennial students are especially vulnerable. Art and Design education is in crisis, buckling under the strain of an antiquated infrastructure, at a crossroads — out of touch with clear purpose, and with human centered connection to both their college communities and the communities that surround them. This paper is an argument for empathy driven, community informed art and design education — for divergent thought + "liquid networks" of ordinary citizens working side-by-side with artists and designers, to build bridges to ideas for a better world.
2. NEIGHBOR-GAP-BRIDGE: A GLOBAL COMMUNITY BUILDING INITIATIVE

NEIGHBOR-GAP-BRIDGE is a global community building initiative, aimed at linking core human motivations and cultural experiences with the goal of increasing worldwide happiness. Digital connectivity, on the surface, appears to have narrowed gaps in communication, community and perhaps intimacy, but in reality has created new, more elusive, invisible gaps. The world appears to have gotten smaller and more connected, but these new, less visible gaps have resulted in an oversized sense of fragmentation in our relationships + communities.

NEIGHBOR-GAP-BRIDGE proposes engagement and processes that may close some of these GAPS, allowing a new context for behavior + interaction. This initiative benefits separated and disenfranchised citizens, both locally and globally, inviting them to assume leadership roles that help to create more meaningful connections. As a 2011 Design Ignites Change Award recipient as well as 2012 Teaching Artist in Residence at the Skirball Cultural Center in conjunction with the Library of Congress exhibition “Creating the United States,” NEIGHBOR-GAP-BRIDGE is in an advantageous position to shepherd an ongoing course, by the same name, at Otis College of Art and Design.

Taught within the Creative Action program at Otis College, in Los Angeles California, which fosters team-based, interdisciplinary learning, in an open-ended, art and design inquiry, NEIGHBOR-GAP-BRIDGE is designed as a laboratory and views a student’s role as ethnographer and the college’s surrounding environment as tribe. Using pedagogical tools for observation and inquiry, students actively investigate the customs, history, attitudes and peoples – in their own backyard.

![Figure 3. “Bridges” extend far beyond our local neighborhood connecting a broad array of people, nations and cultures.](image)

NEIGHBOR-GAP-BRIDGE “Neighbors” include: a third grade class at Loyola Village Elementary School (LoVE), The Westchester Senior Center, and The Custom Hotel. Our neighbors are located within 100 — 200 yards of one another; though close in proximity, they have virtually nothing in common and no connection. Gaps in culture, ethnicity, age, socio-economic level, education level and neighborhood
investment abound. Students are challenged to observe and analyze the distinguishing characteristics of each site (NEIGHBOR), as well as the space that separates them (GAP); students begin to develop the visual language of reciprocity, and compassion necessary to propose design solutions to connect these spaces (BRIDGE). By proposing “bridges” that extend far beyond our neighborhood connecting a broad array of people, nations and cultures, this approach creates “pre-design” conditions for developing both empathy based design thinking, originating from the investigation of local artifacts, and experiences with our neighbors. Might good ideas that lead us to build strong bridges be discovered in our own backyard?

3. SETTING THE STAGE FOR GOOD IDEAS

Good ideas are fundamental to Art and Design Education — ideas that are authentic and inspiring — ideas for, objects, films, products, experiences and systems that solve complex problems, ignite positive change and evolve society. Students are thirsty for them but do not seem to have all the tools to develop them in a human centered way. Educators want students to have good ideas, but find it difficult to “teach” thinking. Digital culture further complicates this, with endless design solutions available on Google, Pinterest and Design Milk, at student’s disposal to be inspired by, copied or cobbled together as their own. In “Is Google Making Us Stupid?” Nicholas Carr argues that the “Internet might have detrimental effects on cognition that diminish the capacity for concentration and contemplation.” Where do good ideas come from and how do good ideas “happen?”

Steven Johnson, author of “Where Good Ideas Come From,” suggests that good ideas don’t come from a lone genius working in a lab as often as they come from interactions between geniuses.” He talks about great idea “incubators” having “Liquid Networks” of communication; places for “Slow Hunches” to evolve thoughtfully into innovative ideas within a social construct. What happens when the definition of “geniuses” Johnson refers, to includes Art and Design students as well as local citizens — members of the multigenerational, multi ethnic, educationally diverse neighborhoods which surround us?

4. TOOLS FOR BRIDGING

Understanding our neighbors and ourselves increases our ability to share and exchange. Pedagogical tools for bridging include quantitative measuring tools like “Bridge-o-Meters,” “Gap Detectors” and “Empathy Testing” as well as qualitative interview tools such as neighborhood interviews. Nomadic or mobile classrooms replace the traditional ones, allowing for learning to take place on-site, in local cafes, diners, at the elementary school or at the senior center. A “Native American Potlatch,” in which students exchange simple gifts, uses generosity as a means of resolving conflict.

“Parallel Play” helps students connect with neighbors on their own turf. Attending exercise class with Senior Citizens, sharing the playground equipment with elementary school students during recess are examples. “Student Takeovers” happen at mid-semester at which time students officially become self-directed learners, while teachers and mentors take a back seat. “Empathy Films” utilize acting and video — inviting neighbors to switch places and temporarily experience what the other might feel.
5. IDENTIFYING A BRIDGE-CHALLENGE
The NEIGHBOR-GAP-BRIDGE process is flexible and acts as the underpinning for “BRIDGES.” A six-year history of this course has resulted in a variety of BRIDGES such as: HAITI BRIDGE, INDIA BRIDGE, KOREA BRIDGE AND STRESS BRIDGE. Bridges often involve not only local neighbors, but also
neighbors abroad. Bridges like HAITI BRIDGE occurred in response to the 2010 Haiti earthquake. Other BRIDGES initially focused on a seemingly local problem or “GAP” around which students and neighbors could potentially galvanize, which later expanded to include a broader cultural challenge. KOREA BRIDGE, 2012 developed when a NEIGHBOR-GAP-BRIDGE cultural probe identified deep feelings of misunderstanding, hurt and frustration that we had long suspected existed, in our culturally diverse academic community.

6. FALL 2013 GLOBAL CAFÉ: OUT OF THE CHATROOM AND INTO THE CAFÉ
The Otis College Director of International Education suggested that NEIGHBOR-GAP-BRIDGE might explore a “Global Café” to bridge the gap with our International student community. Though student interest in oversees travel abroad programs was high, interest in learning about other cultures on campus or confronting cultural stereotypes seemed low. NEIGHBOR-GAP-BRIDGE students used cultural probes to verify this hunch which confirmed the low interest in bridging to other cultures but suggested a possibly overlooked cause. Shocking levels of academic stress, anxiety and financial concerns plagued students and prohibited them from maximizing the opportunities presented by our rich international academic community.

Figure 5. Stress probes, sent out into the Otis community, revealed a pattern of tension and pressure. Faculty and students shared stress and anxiety concerns focusing on workload, academic expectations and finances. K-5 teachers and many other neighborhood professionals shared similar concerns.
7. STUDENT TAKEOVER—GLOBAL CAFÉ AS LISTENER
As a response to research, students designed a crowd-sourced participatory installation by inviting members of the academic community to “Tell us a Stress-related Story” and share it. Within a few hours an 8’ x 12’ wall in the Otis Café became covered with narratives about of a community’s struggle with mounting stress and anxiety. Responses from this inquiry, as well as one conducted at Loyola Village Elementary School were read and analyzed by NEIGHBOR-GAP-BRIDGE students. Patterns and themes emerged and became the platform for shaping final student BRIDGE responses.

8. FINAL BRIDGE RESPONSES: PRE-DESIGN THINKING
PILLOW WALL: COMMUNITY RESTING PLACE
Stress has no borders and neither does the love of our beds. We dream of them. We long for them. We take refuge in them. Pillowcases collected from local yard sales were screen-printed with community responses to the question: “Tell Me About Your Bed.” Each response was translated into various languages, courtesy of the Otis international community. This one week Otis Global Cafe installation, traveled to The Downtown Women’s Center, where pillows were donated.
SHARE CHAIR

Inspired by courting chairs from the 1600’s, the Share Chair was a proposal for community seating. It’s wooden barrier offers a measure of separation and creates just enough of a GAP to help strangers feel comfortable to BRIDGE a bit.

“IT’S NOT SO BAD”: AN EMPATHY FILM

Third graders from Loyola Village Elementary School helped shoulder some of the stress Otis College students felt, when they assumed the role of college students, and read their “Stress Story Interviews” on camera. This “Empathy Film, “It’s Not So Bad,” premiered at a popular Otis College event — outdoor movie night, bridging both a K-5 public school and a private college together. Third graders reported a better understanding of college age students while Otis students enjoyed some comic relief.
9. CONCLUSION
Empathy is one of the cornerstones of human behavior. It has enabled society to evolve so that we could survive and thrive in small communities. The “Empathy Deficit” is an alarming phenomenon but Dr. Sara H. Konrath of the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor in Michigan points out “if life choices can drive empathy down, then making different choices could nurture it. “The fact that empathy is declining means that there’s more fluidity to it than previously thought,” she says. “It means that empathy can change. It can go up.”

Dr. Paul J. Eslinger of the Departments of Medicine and Behavioral Science at Penn State University argues: “Role-taking and perspective-taking require a dimension of cognitive flexibility such as being able to generate and consider ideas and different response possibilities as well as incorporating changing information into decision-making, choice of behavioral responses and understanding of others.”

Perhaps increased empathy makes us better problem solvers, creative athletes and learners. In “How to Get a Job at Google,” Laszlo Bock, the Senior Vice President of People Operations for Google, talks about the value of “soft skills” — leadership, humility, collaboration, adaptability” as being core to the Google hiring philosophy. Art and design educators need to teach a full spectrum of these “soft skills,” in order to prepare students for both the Creative Economy and Knowledge Economy.

The capacity for empathy resides in the pre-frontal cortex and develops over time. Research indicates the pre-frontal cortex does not become fully formed until our mid twenties — making this an indispensable opportunity for college educators. Art and Design educators need to seize this opportunity — making empathy-driven education and the construction of social capital, a cornerstone of Art and Design Education.

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