

The New School collaborates

*Organization and communication
in immersive international field programs
with artisan communities*

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Visible Language 44.2

Lawson, 239–265

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abstract

Under the umbrella terms of “humanitarian design,” “social design” and “social responsibility,” educational institutions and specifically design programs are more and more searching for opportunities to engage their students in critical and hands-on learning via collaborations between students, faculty, communities in need and non-profit organizations. Such active learning is rich and meaningful for all parties involved, but the challenges are rarely discussed and yet compromise the collaborations’ sustainability and potential for activating local change and development. This article uses the first two years of “The New School Collaborates,” (TNSC) an ongoing project between The New School’s divisions of Parsons (design), Milano (non-profit management and urban development) and General Studies (international affairs) in New York, several external partners and groups of Mayan artisan women in Guatemala, as the central case study for the abovementioned type of work. Of particular interest is the central role that organization and communication play in immersive international field programs. This article argues that the key to a successful collaborative process includes a clear and transparent partnership upfront, with a clear understanding of the roles and opportunities for each

organization involved and a communication infrastructure that is sensitive to participants' skills and resources. The article refers to, and includes, documentation from specific experiences from two years of courses on campus as well as in Guatemala and the overall process and evaluation of this particular case. Of particular interest is a reflection on challenges faced and how an active and thoughtful analysis of them can lead to a more appropriate, and in the long-term more sustainable structure for this type of work.



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introduction

The “Design for the Other 90%” exhibition website states that “...of the world’s total population of 6.5 billion...90% have little or no access to most of the products and services many of us take for granted” (Design for the Other 90%, 2009). This statistic offers a responsibility and an opportunity for educational institutions to specifically engage students in collaborations that will ameliorate this percentage. There has been much engagement from social science disciplines, particularly around economic development and designers have been considering the positive impact their work can have since the 1980s (Papanek, 1984); but projects that bring together design and the social sciences are less common. Case studies, such as those documented by UNESCO, have demonstrated that design can play “...an important role in encouraging environmentally sustainable and economically viable models...of marginalized groups” (Designers Meet Artisans, 2005, 6). Furthermore, Ovidio Morales, Dean of the School of Architecture and Design in the Guatemalan Universidad Rafael Landívar, confirms that “...design professionals should be potential agents of change in society, to make it more human, more just, and more democratic” (Morales, 2009, 47).

These opportunities framed the creation of “The New School Collaborates” (TNSC), a cross-divisional and interdisciplinary faculty research group at The New School (TNS), a university in New York City, interested in how socio-economic and urban development can be achieved through design. Of particular interest is how students, through interdisciplinary on-campus courses followed by intensive international fieldwork experiences learn skills that would never be possible in a standard on-campus classroom setting and how interdisciplinary groups of students can holistically approach development work with artisan groups with the long-term goals of culture preservation and income generation (*see figure 1*).

What distinguishes TNSC from similar initiatives such as Designmatters at Art Center College of Design (<http://www.designmatters.artcenter.edu/>) and Design 4 Development at University of Florida in Gainesville (<http://designshares.com/share/>) is the multi-disciplinary approach. Design is leveraged as a process through which development can occur as a result of the cooperation of students from diverse backgrounds such as the development concentration of the graduate program in International Affairs as well as the School of Management, bringing together the expertise of social entrepreneurship, organizational change and urban development.

Universities are not always immediately able to engage with communities in need since they are in the “business” of teaching and learning, with a principle



Figure 1: Member of *Ajkem'a Loy'a* weaving on a backstrap loom, Fall 2007

focus on face-to-face on-campus semester-long courses. The role of a partner can help break the boundaries of the physical campus by connecting faculty and students to potential constituents. Since the partnering organization is often structured and organized very differently than a university, it becomes critical to adopt a model for the partnership that is sensitive to the needs and interests of each institution.

This article first proposes a model for how a partnership can be structured. It then presents TNSC as the central case study from which the argument is built. The article then highlights two categories of challenges observed in TNSC: those related to the organizations and the communication between them, and those connected to communication technologies. Finally, the article concludes with a proposal for a new structure moving forward.

partnership models

The “Partnership Cycle” model adapted by the Collective Leadership Institute (*see figure 2*) (Collective Leadership Institute, 2007) suggests several steps that have proven to be key moments in TNSC. The first part of the cycle indicates that an idea be tested before the partnership is initiated. This slow start to a partnership was successfully tested in TNSC by first conducting a feasibility study (Berdie and Dehejia, 2007) which investigated if it was feasible or not for CARE and The New School to collaborate. This feasibility study outlined opportunities, challenges and insights and informed the project’s framework for 2008. The step “clarify goals and identify resources” was only completed to an extent. Since TNSC was originally funded with a large single-donor grant, neither institution considered long-term resources, and as addressed later in this paper, resulted in the NGO partner no longer being involved in the project. Finally, a critical milestone in this model that TNSC did not apply is to “define roles, structures and procedures.” As discussed later in this paper, a lack of clarity in roles in both initial partnering organizations caused many issues that have since had to be addressed. The New School is currently in the process of redefining the partnership and is referring to this model as an opportunity to develop clarity and long-term sustainability of the project. The different sites of the project involve slightly different partners, but what is currently proposed should be a clear partnership between the university, local in-country designers and artisan organizations or individuals.

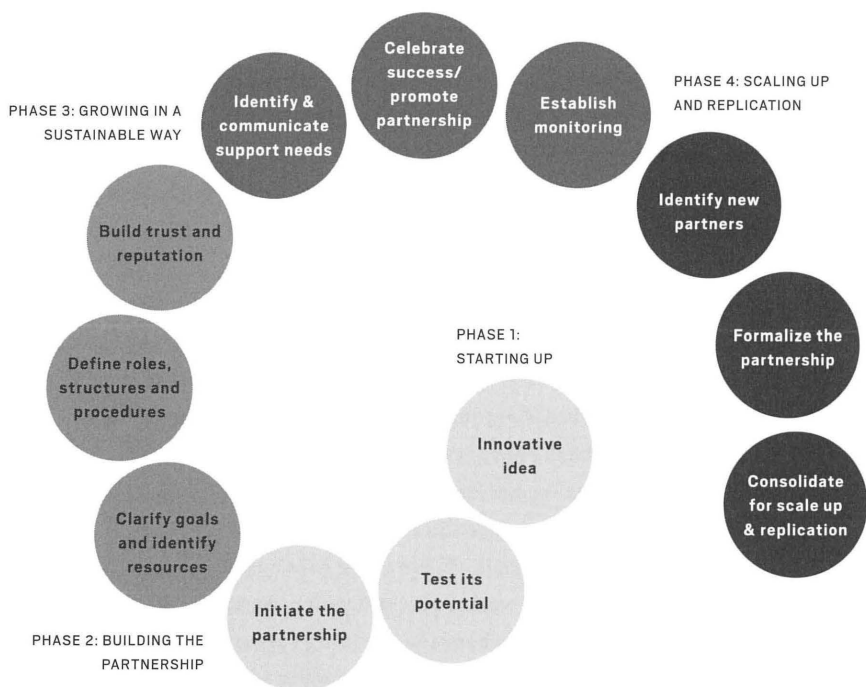


Figure 2: The Partnership Cycle

the new school collaborates

In 2007 the global humanitarian organization CARE and TNS began the aforementioned long term collaborative project “The New School Collaborates” to empower a group of Mayan women in Guatemala—*Ajkem’a Loy’a* (AL)—by helping them develop a business model to export their handcrafted products to the United States. The village of San Lucas Tolimán in Guatemala was selected as the site for the initial pilot project due to AL’s:

- Existing partnership with CARE
- All women participation—relying on research indicating that “if the goals of economic development include improving the general standard of living... then it is natural to work through women” (Yunnus 2007, 72).
- Relatively young membership. Since the project was initiated as a minimum year-year commitment, it was of interest to have both a broad age range (so

as to work with several generations) as well as to have young members so that they may remain interested in the project for a longer period of time.

- High literacy levels—critical to facilitate the running of on-site capacity-building workshops
- Interest in taking advantage of globalization to improve their business opportunities.

Several meetings in Summer 2007 led to a trip to Guatemala with representatives from TNS and CARE to meet with AL, and culminated in the publication of a feasibility study (Berdie and Dehejia, 2007). The women of AL lacked many of the skills required to convert their vision into reality. They did not have a real understanding of basic business skills like business development, marketing, sales, accounting, inventory and quality control; western market requirements or design trends; nor the necessary skill sets (sewing, patternmaking, sizing) to produce a finished product.

The study also established the goals of improving AL's business, organizational and design skills through training workshops; enhancing the academic experiences of the students involved by providing hands-on learning opportunities; developing a "Designed by" business model, as opposed to the practice of design from a developed country being handed down to a low-wage manufacturing situation in a developed country (Margolin, 2007). This approach elevates women in developing countries to a new economic and social position by playing a pivotal role in the actual design of the products; creating a business that is sustainable for the women and their communities; preserving and strengthening the women's culture, heritage and traditions; providing a model that can be replicated and scaled up within Guatemala and other countries; and linking to women in the US in a way that supports furthering the movement to overcome global poverty. In his article on design and social responsibility, Dean Ovidio Morales from the Guatemalan University Rafael Landívar, describes the situation that TNSC has also experienced with the artisan groups. He states that "...during the last few years, the Guatemalan artisan sector has had problems due to the fact that in the majority of cases, the groups working in this trade, are not well organized as businesses" (Morales, 2009, 47). This offers a challenging context; yet it offers a prime opportunity for university students and faculty to transfer business skills to groups of Guatemalan artisan women.

The pedagogical emphasis has been to establish an equal exchange between all participants (between faculty and students, as well as between university affiliates, and community partners and individuals). With this value as a priority, and with the assumption that students need to prepare on campus before being immersed in hands-

on fieldwork, faculty from several programs at Parsons The New School for Design and from TNS's Graduate Program in International Affairs (GPIA) structured a spring course as a prerequisite for the month-long immersive summer program in Guatemala.

The spring course, after iterations in 2008 and 2009, is structured as a lecture series and seminar and ends with an intensive prototyping phase in which teams of students apply what has been read and discussed to the real world context within which they will be working in the summer. The lectures (which are offered by the core faculty as well as experts from a variety of areas within and without the university) include teaching and learning in informal settings; digital media to communicate, represent and empower; social innovation and entrepreneurship; marketing; fundraising; and urban development. In terms of design, the approach taken in the course and more broadly in TNSC is that described by John Thackara in the section From Design as Project to Design as Service in his book *In the Bubble: Designing in a Complex World*. In it, the author points to a shift in design thinking from one that is product-centered to one that is process-oriented. Furthermore, he explains that although "...stand-alone products...are needed within product-service systems...the real action will take place among the organizations developing new services and infrastructures" (Thackara, 2005, 224). It is this kind of thinking through which TNSC wishes to position design, particularly with regards to the other participating disciplines (international affairs and management.)

Central to the course's pedagogy is the demystification of the master—the idea that a single person may have all the answers to the question—to create an equal field of questions, skills and knowledge to which all participants (students, faculty and community collaborators) can contribute and from which all can learn. This approach has been visibly successful while in the field when students actively position themselves as active participants (beyond just learners) with a wide variety of skills and life experiences (which often extend far beyond their declared major). It also comes up as a positive experience in anonymous student evaluations of the course or the program. One such comment from a summer 2009 evaluation pointed out, "I enjoyed the amount of leeway and responsibility the group experienced with regard to the project. I learned many invaluable lessons this way, and I am confident that I have gained skills applicable to an array of development projects and initiatives."

This positioning of students as active agents of the knowledge they have, prepares them to be the leaders, facilitators and teachers of the capacity-building aspect of the summer work in Guatemala (to which they travel for periods ranging from one week to two months). Workshops that students have prepared (*see figure 3*) and conducted span from ice-breaker activities to promote leadership and teamwork, to specific



Figure 3: TNS student leading activity on logo design, Summer 2008

skill-based workshops in product pricing, sewing, patternmaking and computers, as well as discussion based activities such as how to run an organization and how to manage inventory and quality control. In course evaluations, project debriefings and other documentation from the project, students have expressed that this is the most valuable learning experience they have ever had. They also speak to the sense of responsibility that comes with working on a real project. As shared by a Summer 2008 participant in the CARE-produced online article, *A Pattern Emerging*: “We have some expertise, but we don’t have all the knowledge. There is a tremendous responsibility when you come into someone’s life like this and try to help make changes” (CARE and Parsons The New School for Design, 2008). Additionally, faculty advise students in their role as project leaders once the group is in Guatemala. This hands-on intensive approach requires that students be able to quickly translate theory (from the spring class and previous training) into practice; this always results in a shift for students where they no longer feel that this is a “class,” but instead a situation in the real world in which they are playing a critical role.

Participation in the project is by application only, to ensure a high quality of students and a balanced variety of skills and interests. In 2008 and 2009 this process

resulted in a similar mix of approximately fourteen students from Design and Management, Design and Technology, Fashion Design, Fashion Marketing, Graphic Design, Integrated Design, International Affairs and Organizational Change.

This mix of students and the nature of the project lend itself to an integrative learning environment. “Integrative learning is an umbrella term for structures, strategies and activities that bridge numerous divides, such as...general education and the major, introductory and advanced levels, experiences inside and outside the classroom, theory and practice and disciplines and fields” (Klein, 2005, 1). To create such an environment, it is critical to have students from a variety of levels (undergraduate and graduate) as well as with a diversity of backgrounds, interests and skills. The project is then structured in such a way that students learn from one another, while at the same time leveraging the skills and strengths with which they join the project (so that once they are in Guatemala they are teaching, not based on their interests but on their actual knowledge.)

The fifteen-week Spring 2008 course was designed as a weekly lecture series with guest experts on Guatemalan history and culture, marketing and consumers, basic business skills, design & artisanship, and workshop development. During weeks six to ten, students engaged in a pilot run of the intensive summer project. Working in three teams, of approximately six members each, students developed prototypes of actual designs, as well as lesson plans for the summer workshop series in Guatemala that included the following pedagogical components.

BUSINESS. This component explored possible ways in which the women in Guatemala could organize themselves, it also established a pricing model that could be used for all artisan products.

MARKETING AND COMMUNICATION. This component entailed designing a variety of materials through which to market the story of the Guatemalan women and the creation of their products. They also prototyped a variety of possible brand names, logos and tag systems.

PRODUCT DEVELOPMENT. This component entailed prototyping a variety of designs based on their knowledge of the women’s current craft skills and access to materials. The intention was to demonstrate innovation through minor changes to current products woven on the back strap loom, as well as explore possibilities for interaction between the women who weave and those who bead.

Although with a lot of assumptions and uncertainty about what exactly would happen upon the group’s arrival in Guatemala, students developed an extensive curriculum of workshops (in business, marketing, design and product development) to offer to the women of AL. How well the spring course prepared each team was

demonstrated through how little involvement the faculty had in the pre-workshop preparations once on site with members of AL. The collaboration in San Lucas Tolimán was originally planned in two parts: two weeks of workshop delivery focusing on skill building in eleven key areas—work time valuation, pricing, inventory, quality control, the association's organization, new product development, patternmaking, sewing, marketing, computers and English; and two weeks for collaborative development of new artisan products.

An open discussion with all participants from TNS and AL at the end of the second week of June determined additional outcomes for the latter part of the month. One team of students continued sewing, patternmaking and product development workshops specifically supporting new products designed by AL; another team worked with AL as their client and redesigned both the association's logo as well as their local store. Members of the business team worked on a new organization for AL as well as a contract and microloan; and finally, one student team worked with AL to develop workshops for tourists on beading and weaving as a way to promote their heritage and tradition as well as generate income that would require less upfront investments of materials and time.

During the 2008–2009 academic year the project's faculty coordinators (from Parsons and International Affairs) focused on raising funds to continue the project as well as expand it to new areas within Guatemala. Since one of the principal goals from the beginning of the project was to design a model that could be replicated, it was critical to work with new groups in other locations to test its replicability. Therefore, TNS decided to connect with the local government (i.e., the mayor's office) of San Antonio Aguas Calientes to specifically work with several artisan women groups as part of their community tourism program.

The spring 2009 course was the elective Designing Collaborative Development in the International Affairs Master's program, also open to management and design students and team-taught by an international affairs and design faculty. This course focused not only on the project in Guatemala, but also considered broader issues, mainly how socioeconomic development can happen via community collaborations and how design can play a pivotal role in such initiatives. Most students in the course were participating in the summer 2009 program in Guatemala, but some were preparing to travel to Ethiopia and Malaysia for similar work, while others took it as a general elective.

The summer 2009 program in Guatemala was structured as a two-month field program, an expansion of the 2008 month long field program. In the first month, two faculty traveled with ten students (from International Affairs, Parsons and Milano)



Figure 4: TNS students leading information session open to all citizens of San Antonio Aguas Calientes, Summer 2009

to work with the new partners in San Antonio Aguas Calientes. Since this was the first time members from TNS were meeting the new collaborators, this first month focused on identifying exactly who the partners were, getting to know the municipality of San Antonio (*see figure 4*), assessing the needs and interests of the community, understanding how a diverse team of students could collaborate and determining if and how the university wanted to establish a long-term project in this new site. After several weeks of meeting with a variety of members in the community, TNS established a general goal for this new site to identify, engage with and foster community leaders who would ensure long-term project sustainability. Further, with a particular interest in the small village of Santiago Zamora, and a group of 10 artisan women, TNS (led by the International Affairs graduate students) focused on the goals of

- Building trust within the community / group
- Developing a plan to empower the participants by providing capacity training to enhance skills needed to be part of community group
- Promoting and cultivating a form of collaborative development (selling of



Figure 5: Member of IA records her colleagues performing a typical dance, Summer 2009



Figure 6: New scarf design by Ajkem'a Loy'a, Summer 2009

products and services) that would empower the community to preserve and respect culture, language and tradition

- Identifying and building partnerships with any institutions and community leaders that will aid in the project's sustainability moving forward (Cadavid, Edwards, Mazzocco, Smith and Wahi, 2009).

The collaboration with this new group of artisan women, *Ixoqui A'j Ru Xel Kiem* (IA), meaning "Native Women Weavers" focused mainly on building trust and running workshops in media (video recording), computers, design and group dynamics. The collaboration started with the media workshops. Framed with the goal of sharing their village with the world, the women of IA storyboarded and recorded a documentary about their daily lives (see figure 5) which some TNS students edited in Fall 2009. Students also facilitated the process for IA to become a formal group of artisans interested in establishing a business via the sale of their artisanal goods. They are a group of ten organized with the roles of Participants, Secretary, Treasurer, Design Manager, Quality Control, Public Relations and Communications, Production, and Advisor (a legal advisor in their village who will advise when requested but does not have a vote within the group). They also wrote a "Constitution" which outlines some of the responsibilities for each member of the group and indicates that decisions will be made by consensus.

A third faculty member spent a month in San Lucas Tolimán working with AL and a team of six design students whose primary interests were in fashion and product development. This team from TNS spent three days per week with members of AL working on a collaborative process of design and construction with the end goal of producing a new line of handbags that could then be marketed and sold in New York City. As described by one of the students on the project's blog on July 16, 2009, "We began our work with *Ajkem'a Loy'a* by introducing a series of inspiration images for them to look at. Each of the women selected a few of their favorites, explained to us why they chose them and began experimenting with their weaving, using the images as reference. The outcome was very pleasing: each of the women explained what elements they used from the images in their weaving (most of whom were initially attracted to the colors). Mayda, [from AL,] drawing inspiration from a picture of the ocean, not only incorporated colors from it, but also created a dotted pattern in her weave that represented the rocks underneath the water. Those rocks closer to the surface and thus received more sunlight were translated into brighter yellow dots in her weave, while the other rocks further from the ocean's surface were more subdued in her design (The New School, 2008). During this collaborative

process the faculty member, who had also traveled to Guatemala in 2008, observed a clear advancement in AL's design skills and approach to products. Specifically, they began to work with color palettes that were broader across their products, yet more controlled within each design, for example, moving from multicolor designs to using threads from the same family of hues (see figure 6).

They also became freer in their weaving techniques and were more likely to explore asymmetrical patterns or one-off details in the cloths they produce. These observations are in-line with those documented in cases such as *Sop Moei Arts* in Thailand, in which, after several years of working on designs provided to them (Jongeward, 2001), there was observable advancement made in the group's own design abilities.

The goal for the 2009–2010 academic year includes following up (via telephone) with *Ajkem'a Loy'a* regarding their products, potential sale outlets, as well as sharing feedback received from vendors; also following up with *Ixoqui A'j Ru Xel Kiem* to receive progress about their group and define goals for the next several years. Faculty coordinators will also continue to seek grants, update their colleagues on this year's progress and possibly start to segment the project to facilitate its growth and to share the administrative load amongst several faculty.

challenges in organization and communication

To ensure long-term sustainability and avoid reinventing the wheel, these kinds of projects can only happen via a well-structured and clear organization that include students, faculty, university administration, external partners and the artisan communities with whom the students collaborate. If a center or other centralized office in the university does not house the project then there must be a new organization created for its management. One challenge is to maintain information flowing throughout the different parties to make sure all participants are well in agreement as to where the project stands and what the next steps may be. Another challenge is to carefully assign roles and responsibilities (Shirky, 2008). The case described here has been complicated because at least three divisions of a large university were interested in participating; there was no obvious central home for the project; the faculty involved were also the project's principal staff and were in charge of coming up with its structure and pedagogical vision as well as overseeing its implementation; and finally to this day there is no multi-year funding that would permit us to set up an infrastructure to oversee the work.

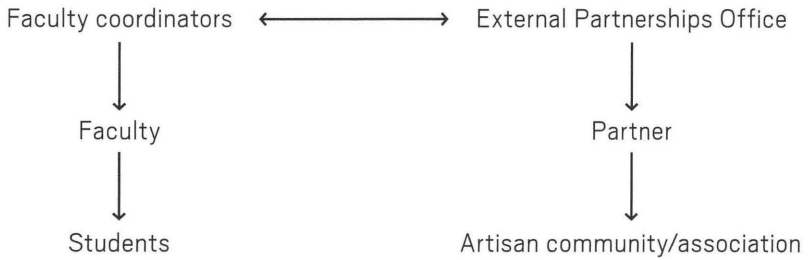


Figure 7: The New School / CARE partnership

In terms of partnerships TNS' collaboration with CARE was initially structured as depicted in Figure 7. Faculty coordinators worked directly with Parsons' External Partnerships Office, which in turn was the main contact with the partner (in this case CARE). The artisan communities only had direct communication with CARE; and students communicated directly with faculty involved who in turn were all overseen by the faculty coordinators for the project.

Figure 8 depicts the media (face-to-face, email and telephone) used for communications between all parties involved. Of interest is the fact that most internal university interactions happen face-to-face (this is the nature of teaching and learning outside of online environments), while the key liaison between the External Partnerships Office and the partner organization was mainly participating via email or by phone rather than in person (CARE staff assigned to the project were based in the organization's home office in Atlanta). The lack of clear communication throughout prevented all participants from feeling that the project was centrally organized. Instead, the students and faculty were well connected and with the External Partnerships Office and the partner organization was not really aware of what was happening in the classroom. Also problematic was the fact that the collaboration began with no direct connection between the students or faculty and the artisans and that this connection was established only once the summer program in Guatemala was under way.

This structure also created a need for many more meetings between the Faculty coordinators and the External Partnerships office to ensure that the goals of faculty and students were being clearly represented and communicated to the artisans. Without a centralized location (either online, in person or an office) to which all had access there was no guarantee that correct information was flowing through the entire organization. The final issue with this setup was the lack of potential

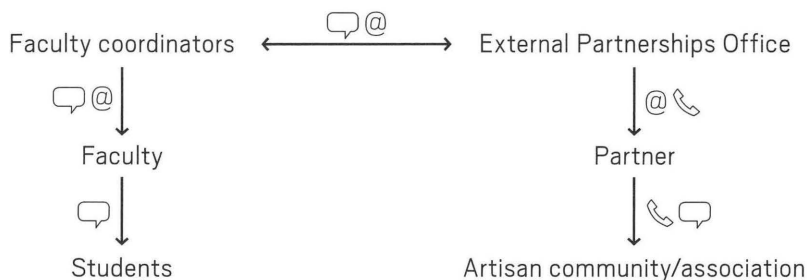


Figure 8: The New School / CARE partnership communications—2008

for sustainability of the project. This project was only one in the many that the External Partnerships Office was overseeing; so having this office be the central point of communication was not the best use of university resources (it would have made more sense to centralize all communications with one of the Faculty coordinators.)

Once CARE lost its funding related to the project in late 2008, TNS decided to continue working directly with the artisan community. The organization depicted in Figure 9 was established.

This new organization allowed for participation by the partnering organization without the project depending on it. Faculty were able to communicate directly with the artisan community and therefore plan curricula and apply for grants ensuring response to their needs and interests. Furthermore it removed the External Partnerships Office from a central position to one of advising the Faculty coordinators, who were now the ones who oversaw the project, which therefore truly revolved around teaching and learning. Since all participants were connected to the faculty, information could flow more freely through all the participants (via email between the faculty, partners and students and via telephone with the communities in Guatemala). Despite the improvement in communication, much work needs to be done in establishing continuity from one year to the next because, for the most part, the student group changes. One student participant from summer 2009 points out this issue in their course evaluation, “...work in the communities should continue, and I think that it is unfortunate that that work will not be done by the same students who worked on it this summer. I think some of the projects that were not completed this summer could be completed in the Fall and a proper debriefing and transmission of information could happen to make it easier to build upon in the next [International Field Program.]”

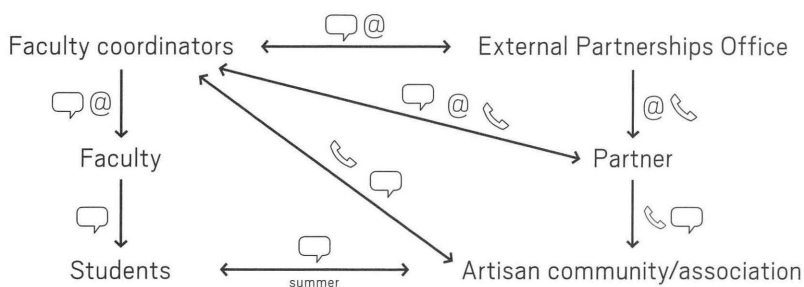


Figure 9: The New School / CARE partnership communications—2009

The initial project's location, San Lucas Tolimán, was identified by CARE and the artisan women involved had been working with CARE Guatemala in a Mayan leadership and empowerment program *Lideresas Mayas*, since 2005. Despite this TNS' main contact was with CARE Atlanta's Public Relations and Marketing staff who naturally had a different focus and interest when participating in conversations about the project. The first summer program was developed between TNS and CARE Atlanta which made CARE Guatemala staff not really understand their role when TNS faculty and students traveled to Guatemala—a missed opportunity since their on-the-ground experience and knowledge of the artisan women and their culture could have greatly benefited the project. Instead, as mentioned in the introduction, neither party knew exactly what CARE Guatemala's role should or could be, because it was not established from the beginning of the partnership.

During summer 2009 it was critical for TNS to identify staff members in the municipality of San Antonio Aguas Calientes (SAAC) who were also in direct contact with the community participants, to ensure clear and transparent communication between all parties from the beginning of the project. It was advantageous that TNS group met with SAAC's mayor and members of his staff from the beginning of the summer with continuous contact. The major disadvantage of partnering with a local government is the uncertainty of what happens to the project when there is a change in party and/or leadership—this will need to be addressed in 2012 when the mayor of SAAC is up for re-election. Even before traveling to the new site, faculty participants observed a clearer relationship with the project and new site.

The artisan groups in the project also have their internal organizations that at times facilitate or complicate their associations' functions. In the case of *Ajkem'a Loy'a*, this group was originally constituted as an association with the roles of President, Vice-President, Treasurer, Secretary and Participants, assigned to the

women who were in the groups, without a sense of term lengths or how the roles could change. During summer 2008, the student business team led two sessions for AL about their association, in which the team proposed a new structure that would both facilitate a stronger sense of group and unity, as well as support and continue the work started during the month long collaboration. After these sessions, AL adopted a new horizontal structure for the association, which eliminated the positions of President and Vice-president and democratized decision-making through the creation of additional positions such as Design Manager, Quality Control Manager, Store Manager, Communications Manager and Workshops Manager. All positions were proposed to rotate on a six-month basis. Additionally, the association assumed a micro-credit in the amount of Q6631 (approximately U\$800), the sum of all the materials purchased for the summer collaboration with the project's initial funding (six sewing machines, threads, patternmaking supplies and all of the materials related to the store's redesign) which had to be repaid in a year at an interest rate of twenty-four percent, to a savings account in the association's name (Lawson, 2008).

The assumption was that with rotating roles and financial investment in the association, the women would be motivated to function as a group, strengthening the trust between them and thus ensuring a higher success rate for the group's future endeavors. This success rate has been clearly documented by micro-credit endeavors around the world (Yunnus, 2007). Additionally, with more specific roles (focused on areas and not hierarchy), decisions in the group could be made more easily. In reality this horizontal organization was not truly adopted by the group and *Ajkem'a Loy'a* continues to function with its original hierarchy (President and Vice-President) and no clear sense of rotation. In summer 2008, a member of AL brought up the issue of collaboration within the group, which has been observed as an ongoing challenge now that the project is in its second year. "[My goal is] that the group gets closer because I see the group very distant. When there is something to benefit from, the group shows up but otherwise not. I want the group to organize better" (Raxtún, 2008).

In the case of Santiago Zamora there was no official artisan group before TNS's arrival. This allowed for a participatory approach to the establishment of the artisan group, the project and a vision for the collaboration. Thus, *Ixoqui Aj Ru Xel Kiem* has adopted a much more horizontal and non-hierarchical structure similar to what TNS was advising AL to adopt in summer 2008 (Lawson, 2008). Of interest moving forward will be to compare and contrast, for the two artisan groups, the impact of organizational structures on their business development and interaction with TNSC project.

challenges in technology and communication

Digital technology has inevitably played an important role in this project—and more because of its absence rather than its presence. The use of media can be broadly divided into the categories of documentation, empowerment and communication. Media as documentation is commonplace in these kinds of projects, in which documenting what happened and being able to share it through beautiful images (moving and still) is critical to securing interest and funding from others. The cases described above are documented at length on a blog created for this purpose (The New School, 2008) and have also been presented in publications from some of the partners as well as on-campus exhibitions. In summer 2009, with the new group in Santiago Zamora, there was emphasis in sharing documentation with the artisan collaborators—so that it wasn't just faculty and students documenting "them" but both sides documenting the project and collaboration.

This shift in point of view is what then relates to media as empowerment. The popularity of kids with cameras projects, like the ones described in Wendy Ewald's book (2001) *I Wanna Take me a Picture* has to do for the most part with giving a voice to underrepresented communities. Instead of feeling like outsiders are observing them, these communities can be empowered to depict themselves directly. Sharing cameras with the community in Santiago Zamora, for example, helped build a very fast level of trust. Soon after the footage was shot, viewers at a conference in Guatemala City were amazed to see the level of comfort with which the women were recording, as well as speaking to the camera (these comments came from Guatemalans who are more accustomed to seeing depictions and recordings of shy and reserved indigenous women). AI, the group with whom this collaborative media project occurred, also expressed excitement over the fact that someone external to their village would be interested in seeing them and learning something about their place and culture.

As shown in Figure 8 communication throughout the project occurs face-to-face, via email and over the phone. Since "women in the Third World appear to be the group most aided by the new telecommunications technologies, including the cell phone" (Kasprzak, 2007), it was expected and confirmed that most of the participants in the project in Guatemala own cell phones. And although many reports point to a closing of a digital divide for women and younger people (Haddon, 2004), most of TNSC's community participants had had little exposure to the Internet before the collaboration started. This has made the principal vehicle for communication between faculty coordinators and artisans to be the telephone (and

face-to-face interaction when the field program is running). What is interesting is that although the artisans are interconnected via cell phone, all group decisions are made face-to-face (driven both by their culture and financial struggle) they have set meetings on the first Saturday of every month, and additionally the president calls extraordinary meetings in case there is an important decision to be made. In spring 2009 during the planning for the summer program faculty coordinators observed a breakdown in the communications with AL. The president of the association (and the main contact person) was not reachable via phone, so all calls had to go through another member of the association who would then contact the president (presumably via phone as well), who would call a local association meeting at which point decisions could be made. This process created a delay of at least two weeks for any decision to be made; an extremely long time in the framework of modern technology in which communications are instantaneous and decisions are made within a few minutes' notice.

The main technological hurdle these artisan groups need to overcome in order to successfully sustain businesses is precisely the immediacy of communication of their market (well-to-do professionals in urban centers). With a long-term goal of having the artisan groups function independently and sustainably, it is critical that they become fluent in emailing as well as comfortable with the Internet, browsing and computers in general (*see figure 10*). Without these skills these groups would not be able to compete in today's market, and most importantly, to connect with their consumers who are not just local, but also located internationally.

To address this goal both summer programs have included computer and Internet workshops. However, there has been an observed lack of engagement with the topics since participants do not own these technologies and therefore do not feel they can necessarily practice what is being learned. Furthermore, operating systems, browsers and free web-based email programs use metaphors that these groups are not necessarily comfortable with or exposed to, such as desktops, work spaces, books and dictionaries. Much of this challenge of technology in developing countries has been addressed via the design of inexpensive technology, such as the One Laptop per Child (OLPC) project (<http://www.laptop.org/en>). However, initiatives such as OLPC raise the issue of the usefulness of the hardware if the metaphors on which the software was designed do not translate culturally. Would it be possible to instead focus on a different kind of user friendliness in the software being used? What would a web-based email program specifically tailored for adults with little schooling look like? Are the current software and hardware metaphors necessarily adaptable to all societies? What would technologies rooted in local

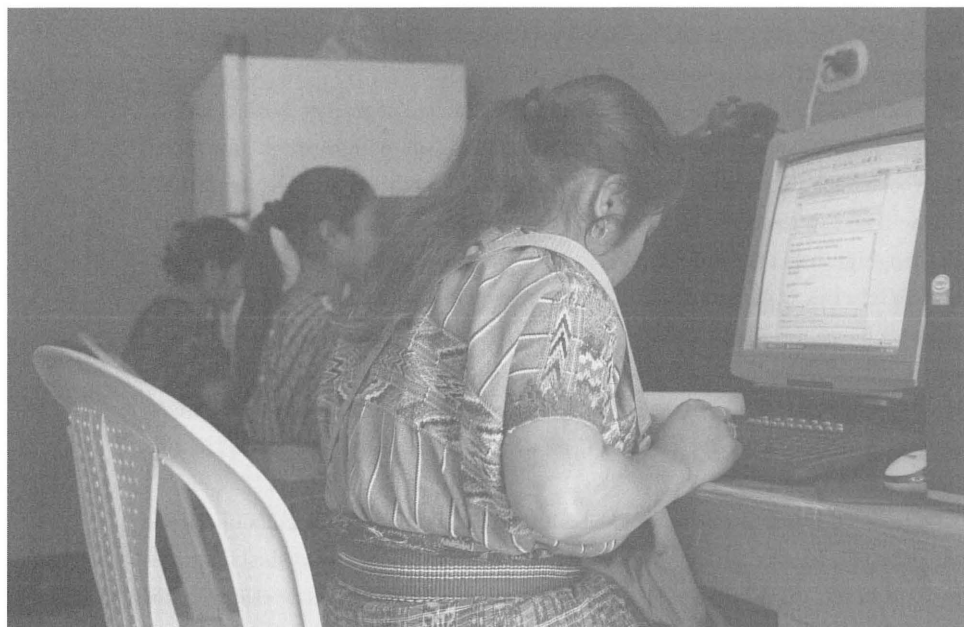


Figure 10: Computer workshop with *Ajkem'a Loy'a*, Fall 2008

contexts and specifically designed to meet the needs of local communities look like (Mariátegui, 2009)?

In December 2008 a TNS faculty member traveled to Guatemala to teach the members of AL how to email and browse the Internet. Two strategies were implemented to address some of the issues above. The first was to counter-intuitively start the workshops outside of the computer room. It is commonplace for schools and universities to teach about computers in front of a computer. However, because of the unfamiliarity of this particular group with these technologies, it was important to first explain the computer, the operating system and the browser, without the distractions of an Internet café. The second strategy was to use metaphors familiar to AL. For example, in explaining web-based email it was most helpful to talk about the URL as the address for a post office, and to connect the steps for sending an email with the steps for sending a letter via mail. The biggest challenge following the workshops has been the issue of financial resources, since the members of AL do not have Internet-ready computers at home, and those who do cannot afford the cost of Internet access. It has been the experience in TNSC that all participants in the project had to use an Internet café to check their email, and with Internet being an essential component of every modern day start-up business, it is clear that future

funding for the project should include a small stipend for at least one person to consistently check email on behalf of the group.

Two principal shifts need to occur in the artisan collaborators with regard to their Internet connectivity. The first is that they need to understand how the Internet can play a critical role in their business—as a place to sustain networks that will benefit them and as a source of design inspiration. The second, and most challenging, is that there needs to be a significant change in the women's sense of time in terms of communication. In each computer workshop, faculty and students from TNSC have had to emphasize the importance of frequently checking email. Checking email once a month (which seems to be the frequency which most appropriately fits with the artisans' everyday activities) is not appropriate if the group is doing business with someone who is used to email as a way to receive immediate response.

Finally, it is impossible to speak about international programs and not address the issue of language. In the case described, there was a significant shift from 2008 to 2009 in this regard. In 2008, not all students and faculty who traveled were fluent Spanish speakers, so there was a constant need for translation between English and Spanish. It was a definite challenge to not have dedicated translators in the team, and to have to rely on Spanish speakers to undertake the double tasks of leading or participating in workshops, as well as translating. The Spanish speakers also encountered communication issues due to the level of schooling from the women in AL (most participants had not attended school past the third grade and two could not read and write on their own). Based on the assumption communicated by CARE, that all of the women would be able to read and write, workshop facilitators planned materials and activities that included reading and writing (Lawson, 2008). In reality, at least three of the women had difficulty reading and writing independently. The women in AL helped their peers who had the most difficulty, but there was an observable lack of engagement with the learning process and overall project on the part of the less literate women.

In 2009 it was a requirement for students to either be fluent in Spanish or to study at least one semester of the language before traveling to Guatemala. This requirement caused a significant and positive shift in how the various members of the student team could relate to the artisans. In 2008, there were a select few who could freely communicate with the artisans, whereas in 2009 more of the members of TNS team were able to speak directly with individual artisans, accelerating the process of trust building and aiding in the communication flowchart described above.

conclusion

Immersive, international field programs are important for universities to engage in, as meaningful and hands-on global learning opportunities. However, there are also myriad of challenges for all organizations involved—the university, partners and local artisan groups—including:

- ensuring clear and transparent communication between all parties
- gaining the trust and interest of local communities
- setting teaching objectives that are ambitious yet realistic
- meeting those objectives in spite of cultural differences
- appropriately introducing Internet technologies to indigenous communities
- appreciating and overcoming challenges posed by the hierarchical structure of the groups

The faculty team in The New School Collaborates, based on many of the challenges faced, is proposing a revised model for summer 2010 which would include partnering with local designers in Guatemala. This local partnership will hopefully alleviate some of the stress and miscommunication that occurs throughout the year, when faculty and students are back on campus in New York City and cannot sustain an ongoing communication with the artisan groups in Guatemala. The local design partners will play an important role in maintaining continuity with each group after the summer collaboration, as well as in connecting the artisans with local opportunities for the sale of their artisan products.

What is yet to be determined is how critical the role of technology can really be if the artisan communities see computers and the Internet as something completely foreign to their everyday lives and routines. This article suggests that communication technology must play a central role so that the groups have a chance at succeeding as businesses, and will certainly be one of the priorities for TNSC moving forward. Finally, it is the hope that TNSC serve as a model that can be adopted and adapted by other universities, non-profit organizations and artisan communities.

acknowledgements

The author would like to acknowledge the participation of all of the staff, faculty and students of The New School without whom The New School Collaborates would not have evolved the way it has. The case study referenced in this article has been taught, facilitated, designed and critiqued by the author along with Fabiola Berdiel, J. Erin Cho, Alice Demirjian, Pascale Gatzen, Mark Johnson, Edwin Torres, Tatiana Wah; the twenty-seven students who traveled to Guatemala in summer 2008 and 2009; and the members of the Mayan weaver associations *Ajkem'a Loy'a* and *Ixoqui Aj' Ru Xel Kiem*.

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