CEPS – Creativity, Engagement and Problem Solving: Building confidence and new capabilities in disadvantaged youth.

AUT University
DESIS Lab Auckland
New Zealand
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Promoters/Funders:

- Auckland University of Technology (AUT), School of Art & Design.
- The Southern Initiative, Auckland City Council.
- Oceania Careers Academy
Context.

Auckland, New Zealand, is the largest Polynesian city in the world, with the majority of ‘Pasifika’ people residing in South Auckland. This cultural group also represents the largest growing youth population in New Zealand, but faces unemployment levels double that of the national average, and low prospects of securing a professional career.
The project.

The Oceania Careers Academy provides mentorship and trades-based skill development opportunities for South Auckland youth. Although successful, the organisation has a vision to further develop the creative potential of its clients to provide opportunities for more ambitious career pathways. AUT students were invited to work with OCA to this end.
The design process.
AUT students used a participatory co-design process to engage with directors, facilitators and students at the academy. Initial ideas to develop a dedicated design studio for the OCA students were abandoned when empathy mapping and stakeholder feedback provided new insights, prompting students to re-evaluate perceived benefits of the original idea.
Activism and Civic Participation

OCA founder, John Kotoisuva, resigned from a government task-force on youth, concerned that the top-down model would be ineffectual in addressing unemployment and underachievement. He believed it was not that Pacific youth were failing, rather, that the system was failing Pacific youth. His alternative strategy brought selected youth out of schools one day per week.
Having rejected the idea of building a physical design studio at the academy, the AUT university students decided to focus on educational content. Their revised proposal was a model for a design-led curriculum that fostered creativity and problem solving skills to complement and enhance the technical proficiencies already being achieved in the academy. This was prototyped at the academy, with the current cohort being offered a live design project.
Trade school students were tasked with designing seats to be used at the academy. Certain criteria and constraints (such as aesthetic appeal, load bearing and use of sustainable materials) were imposed. The project allowed for the development of creativity, critical thinking and problem-solving capabilities that were absent from the previous curriculum goals.
AUT university students acted as mentors throughout the project, encouraging collaborative practice and sharing their understanding of design-thinking processes. This engagement served to break down socio-cultural barriers, and also highlighted the creative pathways available in higher education.
South Auckland youth are disproportionately represented in low-skilled labouring jobs, and equally, are under-represented in professional roles. Engaging the trades-academy students in creative design-led projects highlighted that career paths in areas other than manual labour were open to them, and removed preconceptions about such ambitions being unattainable. The success of the trial led to the integration of the model into existing teaching frameworks.
The project was branded CEPS (Creativity, Engagement and Problem Solving) and was communicated using graphic design, videos, portfolio and oral presentations that encapsulated the aims, design processes and outcomes of the project. The success of the trial led to an invitation to present the proposal to the Oceania Careers Academy board. It was also presented to academic and community stakeholders, with local government representatives describing it as a ‘game-changer’.
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