A Creativity Gap in Craft Design Training

A case study of pre and post-design and creativity training for wooden sandal craftsmen in Tasikmalaya, Indonesia.

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Abstract : 手工芸従事者にデザインの教育を行う場合、創造的とするデザインの基準に、専門的なトレーニングとの間にギャップがある。インドネシアで工芸デザイントレーニングのアクションリサーチ及び、ボストトレーニング（ポストトレーニングを用いた観察、インタビュー、教育プロセスのモニタリング）の、4年間にわたるプロジェクトを報告する。デザイントレーニングとポストトレーニングの結果、手工芸従事者に合致したカリキュラムの必要性と、伝統に固着する観念を破壊する練習が、後の創造的行動を引き出すことが分かった。また、異なる分野の事例提示の効果が示唆され、伝統的工芸とモダン工芸を融合する能力が手工芸従事者にもたらされた。

Keywords: Design Training, Craftsman Customs, Symbolic Domain

1. Introduction

Traditional wooden sandal making industry is one of several potential handcraft industries of Tasikmalaya city, Indonesia. Authorities at all levels were concerned and provided technical assistance and design training to improve skill level and creativity of the local craftsmen.

Teaching design and creativity to the craftsmen is certainly a difficult task. Due to their genuine conservative viewpoint and lack understanding of creativity, raising a handicap and resistance. Even more, no curriculum reference is available for design trainer as a subject assigned to conduct the training. A conventional Design Principles subject is utilized as it was unfamiliar to the craftsmen. In some cases, familiarity become highly important issue, Davis (1999) argues that “make the familiar strange” encourages us to see common objects and situations in new ways [1]. Another term is, expressing the communal values (familiarity) concerning what is “good”, “useful”, “just”, and “pleasurable” is the ultimate role of design field to craftsmen [2]. In a study on an extensive experience of craft promotion in developing countries, Suzuki (2005) concluded that design trainers miss the notion to interpret living environment and culture indigenous to be valued in design improvement [3].

Conventionality is a typical traditional viewpoint that always becomes main issue for creativity. The term denotes the quality of being governed by custom or a subject to the control of social agreements [4]. In a certain extent, one must be conventional or conservative to be creative, because creativity is the process by which a symbolic domain in the culture is changed. Being only conventional leaves the domain unchanged, at the same time, taking too many chances of creativity is not necessarily meaningful. Therefore, mastering a symbolic domain means to learn its rules of unconventionality [5].

2. Purpose of Research

The purpose of this study was to identify the gap of design creativity of craftsman by examining a case of design training and its impact for 4 years. The result may provide important clues that meet suitability at an appropriate level for craftsman in order to produce desirable handcraft products. The main research questions are: Does the curriculum articulate the customs of the craftsmen? Do craftsmen internalize other symbolic domain in the culture?

3. Research Method

This research combines an action research and semi-ethnography method by employing observation, interview, reflection, and monitoring to evaluate the whole process of teaching creativity. The steps comprise of:

1. Design training, for 20 days (8h/day) in September 2007 [6].
   The curriculum was structured into three major sessions:
   a. First session of theory:
      - The Design Principles (balance, proportion, etc.).
      - Creativity Icebreaker games/exercises for habituation.
   b. Second session of practice: design development
      (Preliminary ideas, developing ideas and evaluation).
   c. Third session of practice: workshop prototyping
      concerned on foam modeling, upper strap variation and finishing system.

Two design trainers (designers) and 15 craftsmen (participants) were involved in this training. Each participant were required to propose 2 preliminary ideas. After idea development, 10 were selected for 1:1 scale prototype. Only one design, model No.4—the ‘Upside-down heel’ model—was selected and will be investigated as a case in this study.

2. Post-training informal random visits to the ex-participants’ workshops and local craft fair were conducted 16 times in four years (2008-2011) to observe how they apply the new skills.

3. Online trading monitoring (2009-2011) was a secondary observation of how they continue develop the model No.4 or the ‘Upside-down heel’ model and to follow the update.

The whole post-training observations and interviews were done in informal manner. Data collection was comprised of photos, memos, curriculums, handouts, preliminary sketches, technical drawings, and prototypes.

4. Findings

4.1. During the design training

The first session (theory & exercises) of the training was the most critical fundamental session. Design trainer introduced the sense of design and encouraging creativity to the craftsman with focus on Design Principles (balance, proportion, etc) and Creativity Icebreaking game (unconventionality, rationality, etc). On the other hand, craftsmen are less formal educated people and lack understanding of sense of design—even, many design terms seemed odd to match the local words. Questioning and hesitance came up at this stage.

The second session was to apply the theory on drawings. At this stage, they strongly showed unfamiliar feelings and opposed when pushed to break the conventionality. Although, the session of Creativity Icebreaker exercises was occupied as habituation was occupied beforehand.
On the third session (prototyping), a new design with a cut-off mid-sole part (see Figure 1: model no. 4, the ‘Upside-down heel’ model) was selected to be prototyped. Participants felt reluctant because of the unconventional look—later known as ‘extreme’ wooden sandal (Kelom Ekstrim in Indonesian) in the domestic market. They expressed their hesitancy: “seems uncomfortable if worn”, “an odd upside-down sandal”, “seems easily broken”, etc. In general, participants always felt clumsy and skeptical to come up with unconventional ideas; therefore, the trainer should be somewhat authoritarian in driving the coaching.

Apparently, the curriculum was unable introducing the existence of another symbolic domain (a domain of unconventionality). Disengagement from traditional/conventional viewpoint will locate craftsman on the right track to observe. Owing a good observation of another symbolic domain may easily catch the unconventionality in general according to Csikszentmihalyi [5].

4.2. During post-training informal random visits (2008-2011)

Initially, only one ex-participant continued to produce this new improved product and tested it to the market. Though skeptical, he encouraged to apply unconventional modification, a gloomy color with tiny ring metal ornament planted (initially subject referred it as Punk or Harajuku style (原宿)) which then became his initial hit on the market. More variants began to appear after the first hit, and again, reapplying the existing local ornaments (a traditional floral decoration) as a familiarization. It took a year for this new improved product to gain its popularity in the market and subsequently became copied massively by other craftsmen with more variety of familiarization.

This proved that craftsmen kept trying to familiarize their communal values that seem missing over the previous training.

Familiarity is optimizing one’s domain-specific development through conformity, agreement and compliance to suit the individual [7]. This missing articulation brought unfamiliar and odd feeling and hesitance.

4.3. Online trading monitoring (2008-2011)

Until 4 years after the training, no new model emerged, unless they improved and gave perfection to the appearance by applying what they familiar to, floral decoration with carving or batik. They simply switched back rely on their conventional thought.

5. Conclusion

Firstly, the curriculum should be able to articulate craftsmen’s customs and familiarity (communal values) for compliance to fit the individual, instead of precisely transfer the conventional Design Principles and Creativity Icebreaker exercises. Secondly, the curriculum should be able to introduce another symbolic domain other than the craftsmen’s; thus, allowing to have capability to observe the difference of conventionality and unconventionality.

References