

# DESIGN EDUCATION – EVOLUTION FROM MAKERS TO CHANGE MAKERS

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## ABSTRACT:

This paper explores the ways in which design education can take up an ongoing dialogue from the environment and successfully create solutions for the community that sustains it. Over the years designers have realized that Design Thinking can effectively transform the society by identifying a situation/problem/opportunity area in the ecosystem, analyzing, ideating, and evaluating possible solutions to address the concern.

This paper shares the socially relevant solutions created in the 'Content Design' module by semester five students of Communication Design at Pearl Academy. It addresses the usefulness of starting from the 'why,' (the emotional reason people connect with a concept) and creating life of an idea to arrive at possible solutions. It evaluates the effectiveness of engaging students to explore opportunities at various levels starting from a single word, interpreting its meaning, contextualizing it to the society we live in and creating systems for sustaining the idea through media strategy, multidisciplinary approach, and building fresh content.

This project was divided into 3 phases:

- Phase 1: Understanding the WHY? - Introduction to the design thinking – explore the opportunity and get insights. Develop an ability to understand the need for design intervention and factors that influence design solutions
- Phase 2: Exploring the HOW? Students set the scenario/ context of the issue/ situation and identify related communication design opportunities
- Phase 3: Creating the WHAT? Develop concepts and create functional and validated design solutions for specific design opportunity area

This paper further discusses the methods and process adopted in understanding and analyzing the issues/opportunities and concludes by discussing the sustainability of solutions offered by students.

**Keywords:** Design education, Design Thinking, Changemakers

## 1. INTRODUCTION

In today's fast changing world complexity of issues is expanding and culture is getting redefined. Culture describes "how things are", "how things operate" and reflects how we view the world (Kruse and Louis 2009). Simple social interactions have been redefined with

the advent of the virtual space. With swift change in technology boundaries are blurring and we humans are no more mere spectator to this scenario but are at the center of it. This is not just limited to the virtual space but also extends to the wicked problems in the real world. Youngsters who are the digital natives are adept at embracing change and are redefining the human values. They are setting the trends and lead the change as innovators, designers and leaders of the future. They become the change agents.

TheBetterIndia (2015), an initiative that celebrates positive stories of innovations, empowerment and social development, has featured several such young change agents in the recent past. These range from a team of girls from Women’s Christian College, Chennai who conduct a hair donation drive annually to collect hair that can be used to make natural wigs for cancer patients; to 22-year-old Kalyani Khona who through her Loveability app is helping people with disabilities find their perfect life partners; to Mansoor who using technology and people management skills, is making waste collection a well organized profession. These stories of change, propelled by social media, are inviting wide participation, and in turn inspiring more people to make small, but thoughtful efforts for bringing about lasting changes to their communities and the society at large.

## 2. CONTENT DESIGN

B.A. (Hons.) Communication Design at Pearl Academy is a 4 years degree course validated by Nottingham Trent University. It covers a broad range of skills, knowledge and career options, all centered around the design of visual communication for print, screen, space and interactive.

Content Design is the first module in the third year of the course. This module gives the students an opportunity to learn how to create powerful content, and take design solutions in new directions by following their curiosity, refining their expertise, and selecting appropriate mediums based on factors like client, market, contemporary needs, environment, and community that influence possible solutions. They then evaluate the design solution with validation and feedback. Having studied this module, students should be able to demonstrate an understanding of current issues and concerns and formulate persuasive design solutions for identified situations taking into account differences in mediums, context and materials etc.

### 2.1 THE CHALLENGE – FROM CONCEPT TO REALITY

There were five concepts for students to pick from. Their project had to address ONE of these concepts to help find an interesting idea for the course project!

Five concepts were: Silence | Change | Connection | Secret | Light

As Dewey noted, “If we teach today as we taught yesterday, we rob our children of tomorrow” (Crichton 2014). Higher education colleges, where a large number of youth start to question and form their own views/ opinions, play a key role by encouraging new ways of thinking about – and being in - this world. Our goal with the choice of concepts over well-defined brief was to give students freedom to build their own association, meanings and

interpretation. This way they realize their unique point of view, preferences, biases and interests, as well as the underlying reasons why those points of view are important. It gave them the liberty to steer the project in the direction they liked and willingness to personalize and make it important.

All the students picked up a concept and started to think and jot down what it meant to them. They also went out and started questioning people to understand their explanation of the chosen word and whether it matched with the student's own understanding. Now was the time to put the inferences together and draw mind maps for a better understanding. They had to focus on different facets of the chosen concept to make 20 interpretations and present it in 'Pecha Kucha' style in which 20 slides are shown for 20 seconds each (6 minutes and 40 seconds in total). Each slide should show a different dimension/ interpretation of the concept. By the end student had to identify one interpretation that excites them the most and based on it work out a project brief.

Generating interpretations was not very difficult but evaluating and identifying those ideas that were close to the student and how could those be made real took some time. It was interesting to see students pick up topics like sexual abuse, concern for blind, cleanliness, alternate healing methods etc, which might have seemed run of the mill/ routine/ boring topics. This way their perception had shifted and the interest level appeared higher. They diligently created mind maps with insights, reflection, interpretations, and stories to understand the causes and conditions from which the issue emerged. This served as evidence for critical thinking on the selected topic. They wanted to really make a difference; a challenge that is more adaptive and is addressed through changes in culture, people's beliefs, values, habits and loyalties. They can:

- Cope effectively with change,
  - Care about societal problems and solutions,
  - Envision and are willing to help create positive scenarios for the future,
  - Experience a strengthened political efficacy, and
  - Effectively Implement change
- (Rowe, Bartleman, Khirallah, Smydra, Keith and Ponder 1999 from Rowe 2002)

"If I had 60 minutes to solve a problem and my life depended on it, I'd spend 55 minutes determining the right question to ask." – Einstein (Einstein's secrets 2008)

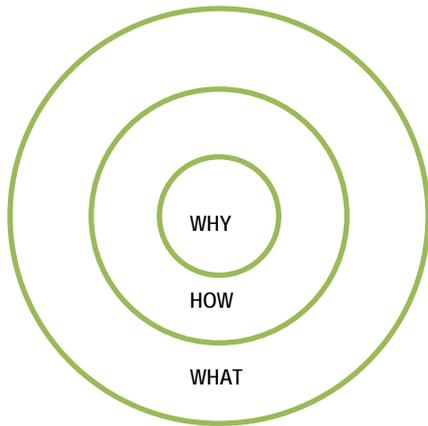


Figure 1: Simon Sinek's Golden Circle

What Simon Sinek has been able to do is capture this idea, which has been around for millennia, in a way that is simple, easy to understand and actionable - The Golden Circle - What we do, ~~Why we do it, and~~ **Why we do it, and** 'what' level is responsible for all rational and analytical thought and language. The problem is that 'what' and 'how' do not inspire action. Facts and figures make rational sense, but people do not make decisions purely based on facts and figures. It is the 'why' that is responsible for all emotions, human behavior and decision-making (Simon Sinek 2014). Designers so far have been more interested in the 'what' questions than the 'why' of a context. With the current shift towards a human-centered approach and sustainable solutions, the social and environment framework within with design must function has become more absolutely critical.

This process of understanding a situation and designing an appropriate solution that better meets end-user's needs and desires is quite inspiring and magical. And sharing this insight with students, as they go along discovering and analyzing the important information in an attempt to find a suitable design solution is an exciting experience.

The project from here was divided into three phases

**Understanding the WHY?** - Identify one interpretation that excites you the most. Explore the opportunity, analyze the information and get insights. Develop an ability to understand the need for design intervention and factors that influence design solutions.

**Exploring the HOW?** Students set the scenario/ context of the issue/ situation and identify related communication design opportunities. Collect, write, draw, research and generate approaches that make it special. Document your working process using logbooks or sketchbooks.

**Creating the WHAT?** Develop concepts and create functional and validated design solutions for specific design opportunity area. Select appropriate media to share the idea. Validate the solution with your target audience. Deliver the final output

## 2.2 LOOKING AT THREE PROJECTS ATTEMPTED IN THIS MODULE

"Personal empowerment rarely comes with big, dramatic splashes," says Scott Boylston, "but instead usually sneaks up on us in the most unexpected ways, and through the most unlikely of individuals" (Fastcodesign 2015)

The experience of going through this transformation was filled with iterations, feelings of frustrations, failure, mental block, helplessness, dejection and wondering why do mentors ask so many questions, what do they want from us, 'why' do we need to research so much, what will people think when we keep going back to them? As the weeks progressed and the strategies began to take shape students became more assured and convinced to seek clarity of 'why,' discipline of 'how' and consistency of 'what' and the great impact it can make. The process adopted by three students is highlighted in the illustrations that follow.

### **Student Project 1: SOCH (a thought)**

Aim: To create awareness towards gender equality and instill respect towards women. To design an experience for middle class youth, majority of age group 15 – 35 years residing in Delhi/NCR to have an emotional connect and realization to the current cause i.e 'Sexual Abuse'.

### **Student Project 2: LOO-NEAR-YOU**

Aim: To bring about a change in the perception/ mindset of people to use public toilets instead of taking a leak in open spaces in cities. The intent is to create a responsible network to provide people in need with directions to nearby clean public toilets. It will also give information on efficient ways to use a public washroom.

### **Student Project 3: CARE**

Aim: To help the partially blind/ conditionally blind (who have experienced vision and then lost it due to an accident or a medical condition) to overcome frustrations, perform their daily life routine activities on their own and rebuild their confidence, sense of pride and place in the family.

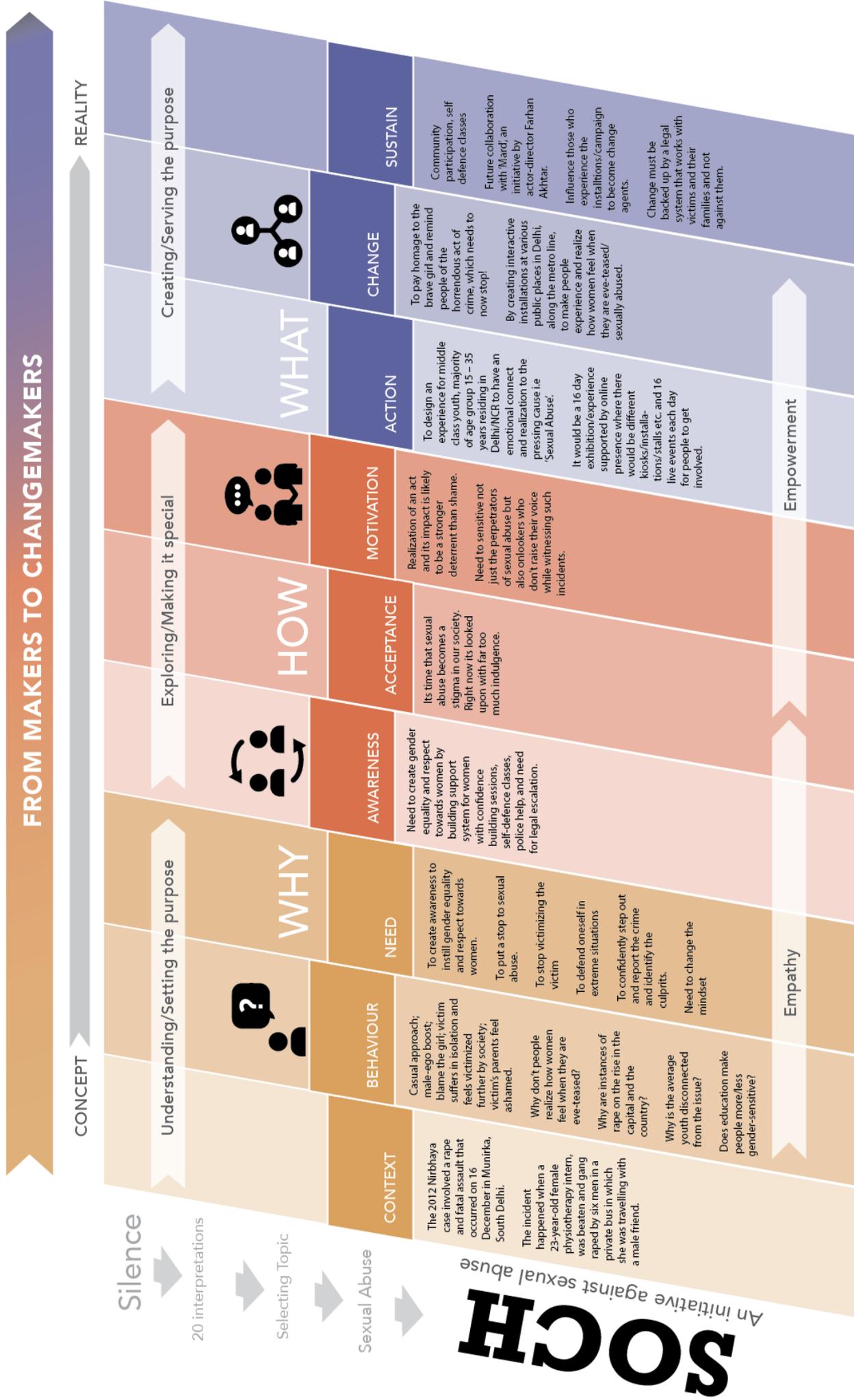


Figure 2: Student Project 1

\* Icon made by Freepik from [www.flaticon.com](http://www.flaticon.com)

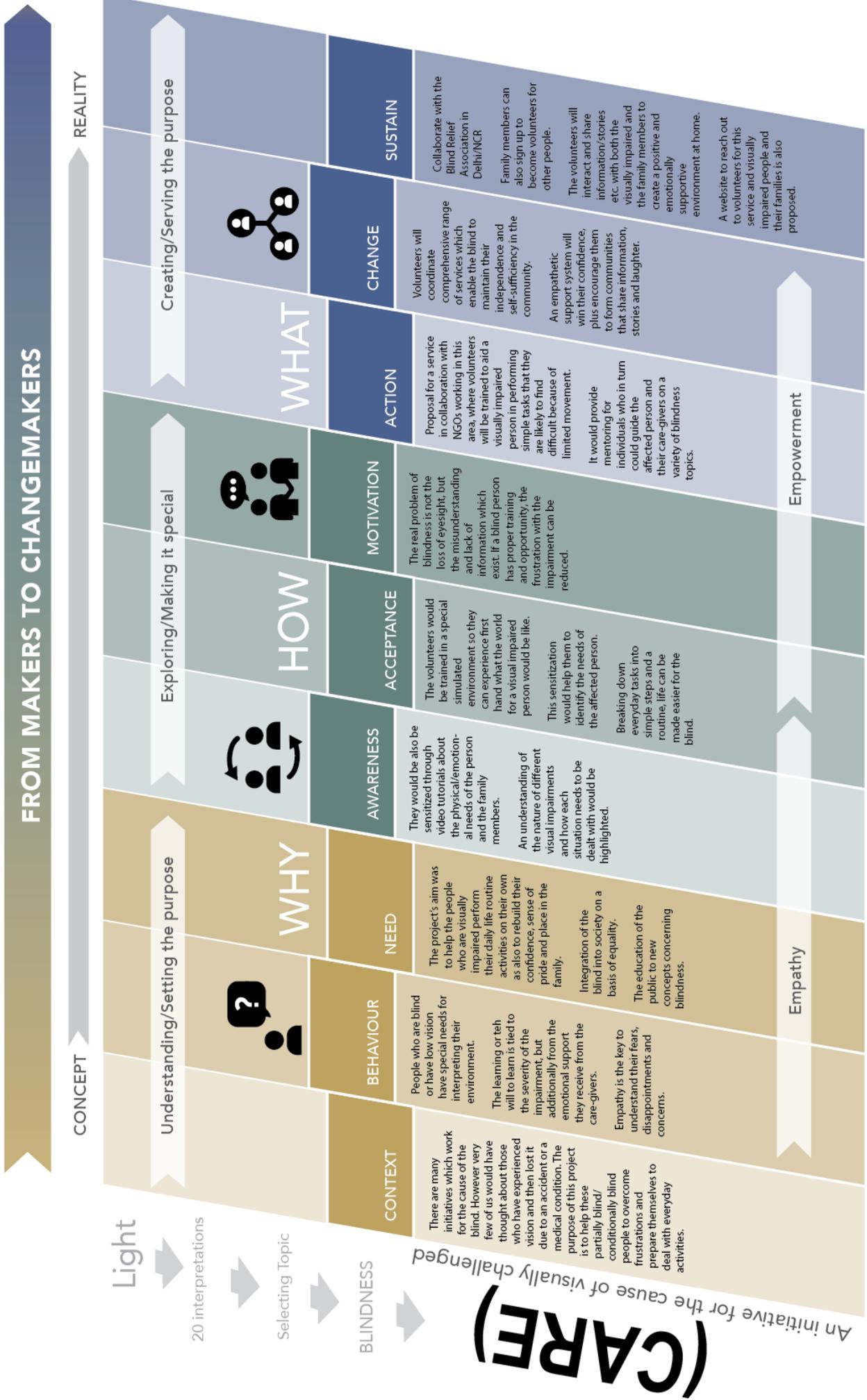


Figure 3: Student Project 2

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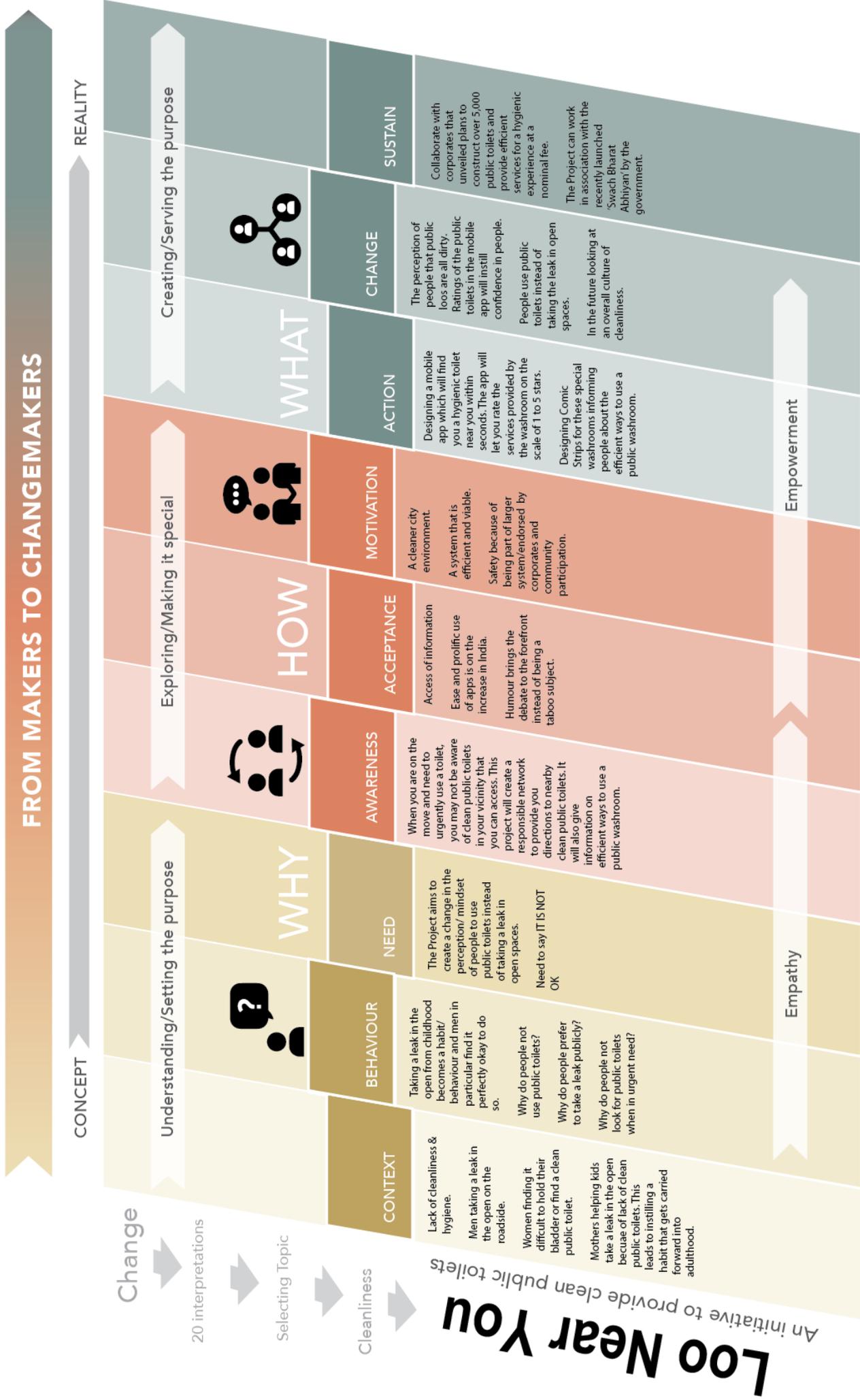


Figure 4: Student Project 3

\* Icon made by Freepik from www.flaticon.com

### 3. SUSTAINABILITY OF SOLUTIONS

#### 3.1 EMPATHY

In a changing, technology-driven and connected world, hierarchies are flattening and power decentralizing to give rise to individuals that increasingly want to voice and manage their problems. These problems however are socially, economically and ecologically interdependent thereby forcing people to think collaboratively first as a community with common concerns, and then in turn as communities with interlinked concerns.

Ashoka (2015), one of the pioneering organizations on social entrepreneurship outlines that “empathy is one of the most important skills,” to navigate this new complex landscape. “Every individual needs the skill of empathy to succeed. Empathy is foundational to the ability to resolve conflict, to collaborate in teams, to align interests, to listen effectively and make decisions where there are no rules or precedents, to solve problems and drive change.”

As design students conceive projects that move communities to think and act for the betterment of their neighborhoods and beyond, engagement with people through “learning and listening in the field, before speaking and designing”: is becoming a critical skill for them. Once the designer begins to view people not as “unfortunate obstacles to change plans” but as “key elements in these plans.” (Herold and Fedor, 2008) and develops the will to reach out to the community, the building of effective solutions is seamlessly supported by a deep understanding and respect for that context.

In each of the projects students had a direct and personal engagement with their audience to identify their thoughts, feelings, concerns and motivations. For SOCH tools such as DILLO’s (with young women in Delhi), story collection (of eve-teasing and sexual abuse in public spaces) and personal interviews were carried out to understand the underlying issues better.

In the CARE project the student spent several days both with the community at the local Blind Relief association in Delhi, as well as in the home of a visually impaired person - observing, listening and interviewing both the affected person and the people supporting the affected person to identify needs that were both physical and psychological in nature.

For the LOO-NEAR-YOU project, the student did personal interviews with people out on the street on a daily basis to identify reasons for not using public loos, as also testing what tools/features/media would help them to form and support the information network of public loos.

The understanding gained in these preliminary exercises by the students formed the basis of the responsible content generation and design solutions in their projects.

#### 3.2 FROM PRODUCTS TO SYSTEMS

Design thinker M P Ranjan, a strong proponent of Systems thinking in design states “Design exploration extends beyond the object and communication strategy to business models and global trends and perspectives” (Ranjan 2013).

Starting from an understanding of the people and their concerns, designers have the ability to put information in context, drawing inferences, relate information to one another and finally the creation of 'meaningful' systems and experiences. Designers are therefore seeking opportunities to participate in the initial planning of the projects, and use Design thinking, which at its roots questions the 'Why' of a problem. Authoring strategies and solutions that have a life beyond the making of an isolated product, is empowering for design students wanting to engage their world critically through insights, planning and making.

This process is embedded in the module aim of Content Design where students are encouraged to reflect on diverse knowledge base, and communicate, with reasons, their strategies and solutions across different media disciplines.

In SOCH, the student envisaged a campaign of a series of installations and events that would span across 16 days leading to the final event on the 16<sup>th</sup> December as a mark of respect, remembrance and realization. The choice of venues (high footfall public places within or near important metro stations in the city) and the content of each of the events was critical to the success of the campaign.

CARE, ensured that the solutions were not focused entirely on the 'training' for the visually impaired, but also building support system around the affected person through a sensitization program plus website and CD for the family/care-givers/volunteers.

LOO-NEAR-YOU proposed a mobile app that would track and advise on a nearest public loo to a user on the road, but would additionally become a responsible network with participation from the community using tools such as ratings of public loos, comic strips for using toilets in a civic way and suggesting technology for disposal of bio-waste.

### 3.3 STUDENTS MADE THE TRANSITION FROM MAKERS TO CHANGEMAKERS

Design institutions are negotiating a future of education that is not about giving students the skills and knowledge to fill existing jobs, but to create new ones (Falck 2014). While this approach would lead to a more robust economy of responsiveness and innovation, at another level it is challenging the students for responding to change – the ask is for strategies in sustainable development, which is at the intersection between economic, social and environmental concerns.

Young change makers, from culturally and geographically diverse backgrounds, are purposing their skills towards serving the larger good in the society. Besides the making of products and systems there is convergence "toward a range of initiatives whose purpose is not to offer immediate solutions to problems, but to spark interest in these areas and show, often paradoxically or provocatively, that there are different ways of seeing and resolving them." (Manzini 2015)

Communication designers in particular, adept to stimulate, energize and educate the human mind, can harness their skills to change behavioral patterns and possibly the more complex human mindset. This requires systems thinking skills to conceive and realize the design solution, as also strategic skills in determining how and who to collaborate with, such that

the design and its impact is sustainable. As J.Toy defined the goal of socially responsible design as “enabling a community to take on a project and to create a life of its own after we’ve left.” (Lasky 2013)

In addition to installations that would sensitize the youth towards sexual abuse, SOCH proposes self-defense classes for women during the 16-day campaign to help them stand up to abuse. The project also sought to collaborate with MARD, an initiative by a Bollywood actor to voice concerns of violence against women.

LOO-NEAR-YOU proposes to align itself to the Prime Minister’s call for ‘Swachch Bharat Abhiyan’ (Clean India Movement), and also collaborate with private organizations that unveiled plans to construct over 5,000 public toilets and provide efficient services for a hygienic experience at a nominal fee.

CARE plans to collaborate with the Blind Relief Association in Delhi /NCR, utilize social media for promoting the cause and getting volunteers and funds to make the project live.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

Design education builds our confidence that if we get to the core of any issue (real, varied or complex) we can transform the world, however difficult the challenge may be. If we realize the need and take responsible initiatives to pursue common good, we can contribute to our society. But the change starts within – when we make it personal, we make it important; and therefore act on it with complete passion.

India is a young country with more than 50% of its population under the age of 25. This generation believes that they have the right resources, energy and passion to bring significant change; all they need is guidance and support in the right direction. We have recently experienced the power of Indian youth where online activism built quick connections with likeminded, which then translated into real world movements.

No idea is small if we study and understand the issue and then take on the responsibility to make a difference through various initiatives. A strong belief and initiating simple approaches can lead to big dynamic changes in the future. Designers are poised to play a catalytic role in the defining and developing of communities that create positive and sustainable impact. It’s time for the Maker Movement to become the ChangeMaker Movement and technology can lead the way for digital natives where online activism translates into real world stimulations and vice versa.

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