

Designing Futures: Cultural Diversity, Narrative & Sustainable Practice

– 15th Cycle, September 2025

**UNESCO YOUTH
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**Art for 2030
Program**



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Del Giovani Per L'UNESCO

PREFACE

This publication, developed with the **Centro Di Ricerca Sull'Educazione Dei Giovani Per l'UNESCO** as part of the **Art for 2030 Program**, documents the 15th Cycle: Designing Futures: Cultural Diversity, Narrative & Sustainable Practice (September 2025), led by **Dr. Tommaso Maggio**.

The course emphasizes design as a tool for empathy, inclusion, and resilience, addressing challenges like gender equality and climate action aligned with the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

- The guide has three parts:
 - **Part 1** covers core principles of cultural diversity and narrative design.
 - **Part 2** features student-led case studies applying the methodology to real-world SDG challenges.
 - **Part 3** offers a Practitioner's Toolkit for replicating the approach.

The collaboration aims to showcase how creative education can foster global citizenship and sustainable futures. Dr Maggio expresses hope that this guide will assist educators and practitioners in integrating cultural diversity and narrative into design education for sustainable development.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This publication was made possible through the support and collaboration of the **Centro Di Ricerca Sull'Educazione Dei Giovani Per l'UNESCO**, under the **Art for 2030 Program**. The author expresses sincere appreciation to the Center for initiating and facilitating the **15th Cycle: Designing Futures: Cultural Diversity, Narrative & Sustainable Practice** (September 2025).

Special thanks are extended to the cycle module and to the participating students, whose creativity and dedication form the core of this work. Their projects provide compelling examples of how design, when grounded in cultural diversity and narrative, can contribute to the achievement of the **United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)**.

This work reflects a shared commitment to fostering inclusive, resilient, and sustainable futures through education and design practice.

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INTRODUCTION: THE GLOBAL CLASSROOM EXPERIMENT

This guide chronicles a unique educational experiment designed and instructed by **Dr. Tommaso Maggio** at the **Centro Di Ricerca Sull'Educazione Dei Giovani Per L'UNESCO**. The 15th Cycle of Designing Futures was conceived to demonstrate that design is a critical tool for building equitable and sustainable futures. Within this global classroom, I guided students to explore how the intentional integration of cultural diversity and narrative design can empower creators to tackle pressing global challenges.

The central thesis of this approach is that when design is infused with cultural understanding and storytelling, it transforms from a functional practice into a powerful engine for social and environmental change.

This guide is built on three pillars, which form the foundation of the methodology I developed and taught

- Cultural Diversity
- Narrative
- Sustainable Practice

INTRODUCTION: THE GLOBAL CLASSROOM EXPERIMENT

- **Cultural Diversity:** Rooted in the UNESCO principle that cultural diversity is “as necessary for humankind as biodiversity is for nature,” this pillar frames diversity not as an optional add-on but as an essential creative and ethical resource. Students learn to integrate multiple perspectives, fostering empathy, innovation, and inclusive solutions.
- **Narrative:** Storytelling is central to the methodology. I instruct students to design with narrative in mind, shaping meaning through stories that make designs memorable, relatable, and trusted by users.
- **Sustainable Practice:** Applying these pillars to tangible problems, students produce real-world solutions for SDG-aligned challenges, demonstrating the efficacy of this approach across issues like gender equality, migration, biodiversity, and public health.

We invite educators, practitioners, and students to use this guide as a tool for cross-cultural exploration and design innovation. The projects and principles within these pages demonstrate that with guidance, empathy, and intention, designers can actively contribute to building inclusive, resilient, and sustainable shared futures.

INTRODUCTION: THE GLOBAL CLASSROOM EXPERIMENT

The document is structured in three parts:

- **Part 1** – The Foundations establishes the core principles of cultural diversity and narrative design, as taught through my pedagogical framework.
- **Part 2** – The Global Classroom in Action offers deep-dive case studies, analyzing student projects guided by my methodology.
- **Part 3** – The Practitioner's Toolkit provides actionable guides and exercises so that educators, students, and practitioners can apply this methodology in other contexts.

We invite educators, practitioners, and students to use this guide as a tool for cross-cultural exploration and design innovation. The projects and principles within these pages demonstrate that with guidance, empathy, and intention, designers can actively contribute to building inclusive, resilient, and sustainable shared futures.

PART 1: FOUNDATIONS – CORE PRINCIPLES IN DESIGN FUTURES

1. Cultural Diversity as a Design Imperative

In today's interconnected world, design no longer exists in isolation. Solutions conceived in one context may be deployed globally in minutes, making cultural awareness a strategic and ethical necessity. This principle underpins my teaching at the Centro Di Ricerca Sull'Educazione Dei Giovani Per L'UNESCO: to design without considering culture is to risk irrelevance, exclusion, or offense.

Defining Cultural Diversity in Design

Cultural diversity in design goes beyond surface demographics to encompass the full spectrum of human experience. My framework emphasizes three dimensions:

- **Beyond Demographics** – Diversity is more than age, gender, or ethnicity. True diversity considers socio-economic status, beliefs, abilities, and lived experiences, shaping worldviews in unique ways.
- **User-Centered, Culturally Aware** – A culturally aware designer understands the lived experiences of users, cultivating empathy beyond personal perspective. Students in my courses practice field research, interviews, and cross-cultural engagement to internalize this principle.
- **Context is Key** – Symbols, colors, gestures, and social norms carry different meanings across cultures. Design that ignores this context risks failure and harm. My pedagogy emphasizes preemptive research and testing to anticipate cultural misinterpretations.

PART 1: FOUNDATIONS – CORE PRINCIPLES IN DESIGN FUTURES

1. Cultural Diversity as a Design Imperative

Ethical Responsibilities

At Centro Di Ricerca Sull'Educazione Dei Giovani Per l'UNESCO, students learn that ignoring culture is not merely a missed opportunity—it is an ethical lapse. For example, the 2019 Kim Kardashian shapewear line initially named “Kimono” sparked international backlash for appropriating a Japanese cultural symbol. This case underlines the necessity of careful research before incorporating cultural elements into design.

Practitioner's Reflection Identify an everyday object that embodies cultural diversity. How does it reflect specific cultural practices? What can its design teach you about context-aware creativity?

PART 1: FOUNDATIONS – CORE PRINCIPLES IN DESIGN FUTURES

2. Narrative as the Engine of Meaningful Design

If cultural diversity establishes context, narrative gives design its soul. Storytelling transforms products from mere objects into meaningful experiences. In my teaching methodology at Centro Di Ricerca Sull'Educazione Dei Giovani Per L'UNESCO, students learn to structure design around narrative principles, linking user needs with cultural context to create emotionally resonant solutions.

Core Elements of Storytelling in Design

Every design project guided by my methodology incorporates:

- **Character** – The user as hero, with unique needs, aspirations, and challenges.
- **Context** – The environment shaping the user's journey, from digital interfaces to physical spaces.
- **Conflict** – The problem or unmet need the design addresses.
- **Resolution** – The solution that fulfills the user's journey, delivering value and satisfaction.

Practitioner's Reflection

Select a nearby object and narrate its story in four sentences: its origin, a pivotal moment, its purpose, and potential future. This exercise trains students to see every design as a narrative experience.

PART 2: THE GLOBAL CLASSROOM IN ACTION – CASE STUDIES IN SUSTAINABLE PRACTICE

3. Workshop: Object Research & Group Project Prep

Purpose

Before addressing complex global challenges, students began with something deceptively simple: a single everyday object. This warm-up exercise served as a bridge between the theoretical principles of cultural diversity and narrative design (Part 1) and the applied group projects (Part 2). By researching the cultural history of an object and presenting their findings in a single-slide narrative, students practiced the skills of:

- Researching cultural and historical context
- Translating information into story form
- Communicating insights visually and concisely

This process revealed that even the most ordinary objects are saturated with meaning—stories of tradition, innovation, memory, and cultural identity.

Structure & Timeline

Time	Activity	Output
00:00–00:15	Briefing – Workshop goals (individual focus) + introduction to group project expectations	Understanding scope
00:15–01:15	Individual Research – Each student selects an object and investigates its history, cultural significance, and evolution.	Notes, cultural/historical insights
01:15–01:45	Submission – Students distill their findings into a one-slide narrative.	1-slide research output
01:45–02:00	Transition – Facilitator introduces team roles for the final project.	Team preparation

PART 2: THE GLOBAL CLASSROOM IN ACTION – CASE STUDIES IN SUSTAINABLE PRACTICE

Sample Case Studies

- **Case Study 1:** The Radio – From Shared Listening to Digital Intimacy The story of the radio reflects the tension between community and individuality—a theme that continues to shape how we design for connection.
- **Case Study 2:** The Shoe – Walking Between Protection, Identity, and Ritual Shoes reveal how a universal need (foot protection) is transformed into an object of cultural storytelling—an everyday artifact loaded with symbolism and personal meaning.

From Objects to Systems:

Scaling Up to Global Challenges This initial workshop was intentionally modest in scope. By focusing on everyday objects, students learned to uncover the hidden stories embedded in material culture—stories of heritage, innovation, and personal meaning. These single-slide narratives served as training grounds for a larger design challenge: to apply the same storytelling and cultural awareness to issues of systemic importance.

The progression was deliberate:

- **Objects** → build individual research and narrative skills
- **Groups** → combine perspectives and define roles
- **SDGs** → expand focus from personal artifacts to shared global challenges

In the next section, you will see how these foundations were scaled up. Students formed collaborative teams, chose topics aligned with the **UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)**, and designed interventions that address pressing issues such as gender equality, migration, biodiversity, climate action, urban safety, and health equity. Where the object workshop highlighted the micro-narratives of design, the following projects reveal how those same tools can be leveraged to shape macro-narratives—stories of inclusion, resilience, and sustainable futures.

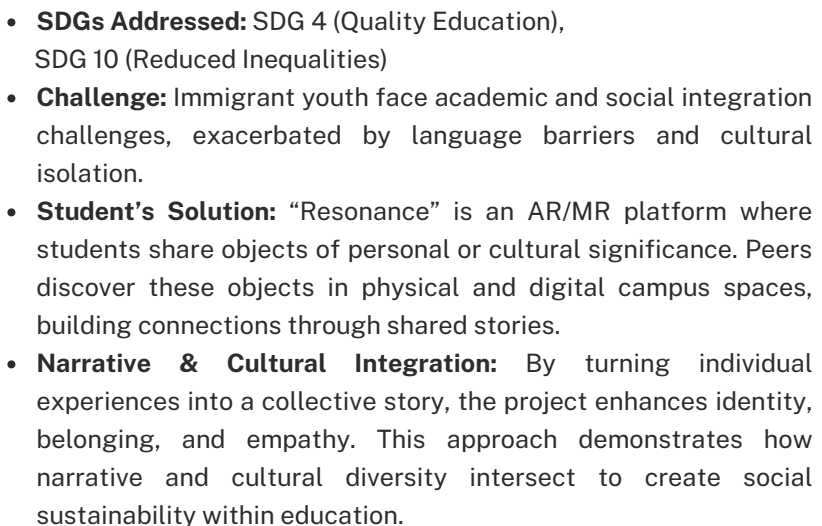
PART 2: THE GLOBAL CLASSROOM IN ACTION – CASE STUDIES IN SUSTAINABLE PRACTICE

4. Making the Invisible Visible: The “Conneny” Project

- by: Xingyu Pang, Wenjian Zhang, Feiyu Fu, Yutong Jiang, Yige Pei



- SDGs Addressed:** SDG 5 (Gender Equality), SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities)
- Challenge:** Unpaid household labor disproportionately falls on women, yet remains invisible in family and societal discourse.
- Student’s Solution:** “Conneny” uses IoT sensors and data visualization to passively track household tasks, presenting the information as a tool for communication rather than competition. The system fosters transparency and empathy, turning routine labor into recognized, shared effort.
- Narrative & Cultural Integration:** The project reframes domestic labor as a collective story, making invisible contributions visible. By addressing culturally ingrained norms, students learned to design tools that shift narratives within households, fostering equity and collaboration



PART 2: THE GLOBAL CLASSROOM IN ACTION – CASE STUDIES IN SUSTAINABLE PRACTICE

6. Protecting Biodiversity: The “Monarch Migration” Project

- by: Junhao Zhao, Juno, Alex, Eris, Siyi



- **SDG Addressed:** SDG 15 (Life on Land)
- **Challenge:** Monarch butterfly populations are sharply declining due to habitat fragmentation, urbanization, and lack of public engagement.
- **Student’s Solution:** Students designed an integrated system combining co-design workshops for local habitats and an AR platform for citizen scientists. Participants upload sightings and habitat data, making conservation interactive and educational.
- **Narrative & Cultural Integration:** The project narrates the monarch’s journey, fostering emotional connection. Collaborative participation turns community members into stewards of biodiversity, illustrating how narrative drives environmental action while respecting cultural and local practices.

7. Embodying Climate Action: The “GreenPulse” Project

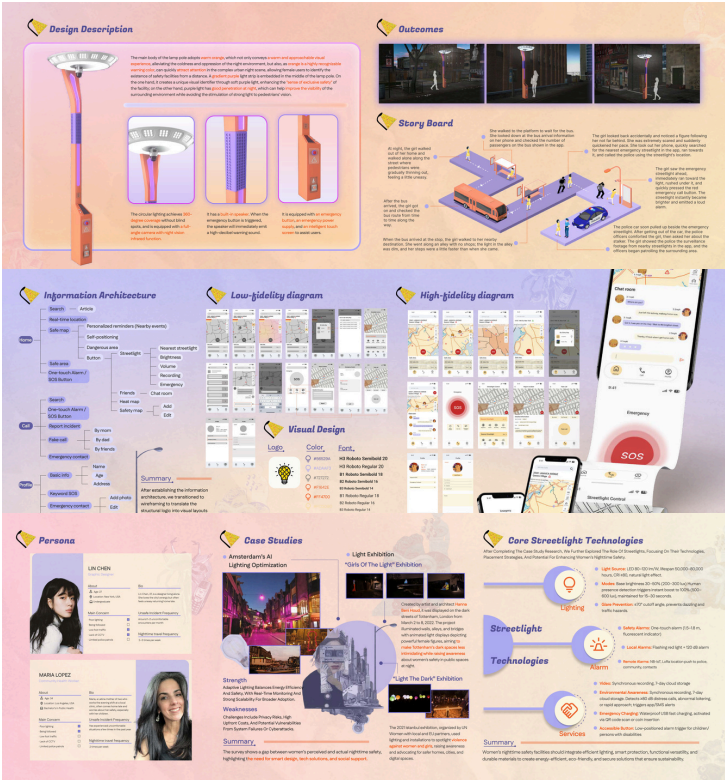
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- **SDG Addressed:** SDG 13 (Climate Action)
- **Challenge:** Climate change feels abstract and distant, reducing individual motivation for action.
- **Student's Solution:** "GreenPulse" combines AR with scannable temporary tattoos. Users see virtual plants grow on their body, reflecting local climate data and their environmental actions.
- **Narrative & Cultural Integration:** By making climate impact visible on the user's body, students created an intimate, actionable narrative. This project illustrates how cultural storytelling can transform abstract global challenges into personal responsibility.

PART 2: THE GLOBAL CLASSROOM IN ACTION – CASE STUDIES IN SUSTAINABLE PRACTICE

8. Designing for Safety: The “HaloWalk” Project

- by: Shutong Zhang, Yuzhu Gong, Jingyi Li, Yuqi Wang, Yibing Wang

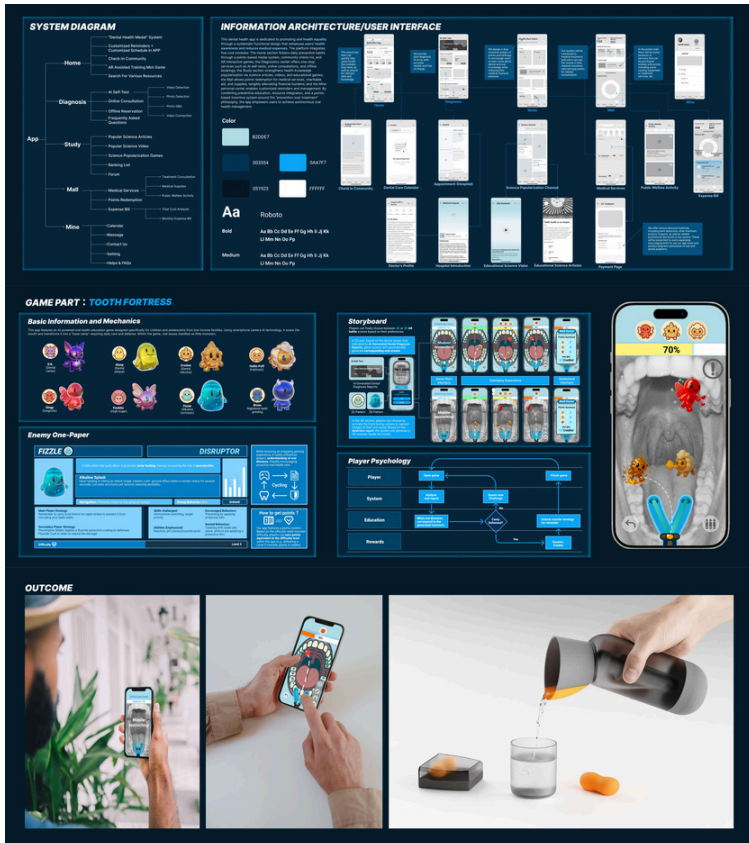


- SDGs Addressed:** SDG 5 (Gender Equality), SDG 11 (Sustainable Cities and Communities)
- Challenge:** Many women experience fear when walking at night due to poor urban infrastructure.
- Student's Solution:** Smart, sensor-based streetlights paired with a companion app create safe, well-lit routes. Users can trigger SOS alerts and share location information with trusted contacts.
- Narrative & Cultural Integration:** Streetlights become “visual safety anchors” in a larger urban story. The project demonstrates culturally responsive design, addressing the lived experience of women in diverse urban contexts.

PART 2: THE GLOBAL CLASSROOM IN ACTION – CASE STUDIES IN SUSTAINABLE PRACTICE

9. Tackling Health Inequity: The “Smile Future” Project

- by: **Zhangchun Cai, Yijie Fang, Yuying Lu, Kaidong Wang**



- **SDGs Addressed:** SDG 3 (Good Health and Well-being)
- **Challenge:** Oral diseases disproportionately affect low-income populations with limited access to care.
- **Student’s Solution:** The mobile app promotes prevention through AI-powered self-tests, gamified hygiene education for children (“Tooth Fortress”), and points-based incentives redeemable for oral care products.
- **Narrative & Cultural Integration:** The gamified story engages users, making oral health culturally relevant and fun.

PART 3: THE PRACTITIONER'S TOOLKIT – APPLYING THE FRAMEWORK

This section transforms the lessons from the global classroom into actionable tools. It is designed for educators, students, and practitioners who wish to replicate or adapt the approach: integrating cultural diversity, narrative design, and sustainable practice.

10. The Design Futures Workshop: A Step-by-Step Guide

Phase 1: Individual Object Research & Deconstruction

- **Objective:** Develop deep awareness of the stories embedded in everyday objects.
- **Outcome:** Students learn to tell concise, compelling cultural narratives that inform design thinking.

Phase 2: Team Formation & Role Definition

- **Objective:** Amplify creativity through structured collaboration.
- **Outcome:** Teams learn to integrate diverse perspectives into collaborative design, reflecting on cultural diversity.

Phase 3: Cultural Timeline & Poster Series

- **Objective:** Synthesize research into a visually engaging, narrative-driven presentation.
- **Outcome:** Students practice translating cultural research into accessible, story-driven visual communication.

Phase 4: Presentation & Evaluation

- **Objective:** Share findings effectively and critically.
- **Outcome:** Students refine narrative, cultural, and collaborative skills essential for the Centro Di Ricerca Sull'Educazione Dei Giovani Per l'UNESCO design approach.

PART 3: THE PRACTITIONER'S TOOLKIT – APPLYING THE FRAMEWORK

11. Synthesis & Forward Look: Designing for Shared Futures

This methodology, as taught by **Dr. Tommaso Maggio**, and supported by **Centro Di Ricerca Sull'Educazione Dei Giovani Per l'UNESCO**, demonstrates that design education can be both a practical toolkit and a force for sustainable change.

Ultimate Principles:

- **Diversity is Non-Negotiable:** Ethical, innovative, and globally relevant design begins with cultural awareness.
- **Storytelling Drives Impact:** Design without narrative risks being functional but forgettable; meaningful narratives engage, inform, and inspire action.
- **Research is the Foundation:** Thorough investigation into history, culture, and lived experience underpins effective and lasting solutions.

Call to Action: Educators, students, and practitioners are encouraged to apply these principles to their own contexts. By doing so, design becomes more than a technical practice—it becomes a shared, inclusive, and resilient pathway for addressing the world's most pressing challenges.