

Student Voice: Kat Valachova, Class of 2022

Kat and two classmates designed several projects for an handicrafts hobby group made up of elderly ladies from the neighborhood. The students used bioplastics and recycled materials to make products that protected and showed off the ladies' handicrafts.

Since I was in high school, I have been extremely interested in sustainability as well as working with communities. I come from the Czech countryside. When I was about 3 years old, my parents built a house with a garden because it has always been my mom's dream to have chickens. I grew up with animals and because my dad is very knowledgeable about nature, he taught me the names of all the plants. He also taught me the importance of having a relationship with nature so I don't just see it as something to be taken for granted or to exploit. If we had leftover food, it would go to the animals or get composted. So I was always brought up to value things. Even if something gets broken, it's still usable material.

I had a friend who was in the first cohort of the *Re-made in China* course. Because I spent a lot of time on the eighth floor where IMA courses are held, I saw what they were doing in the class. When there was space in the class the second time it was taught, I jumped at the opportunity to enroll. I also know Professor Godoy is an amazing person in terms of sustainability. She knows so much. I thought, why don't I challenge myself?

Learning from guest speakers

Before this class, I thought I knew quite a lot about sustainability. But we had these guest speakers come in and talk to us and we started to research different materials, conducting experiments, and trying to collect plastic in our everyday life. I realized how different reality was from what I thought I knew. I collected all the trash I made in a week and thought, "There is no way this is me!" It was a good reality check and I highly recommend it to everyone.

Professor Godoy brought in a lot of guest speakers from different areas, like an elderly man who collects trash and is very hard working. He told us his life story. We got a lot of ideas about how trash recycling works, what gets recycled, and what does not. A presentation by guest speaker Mr. Gabriele Tempesta was extremely helpful too. I took notes. It was about people-oriented design: putting yourself in the shoes of the other person and trying to look at the situation from the bigger picture. If you ever try to help someone, always try to speak with them, look at the situation, and observe them, because many times people don't even notice that they have so many resources around them. You don't necessarily have to get materials from the outside. You just need to look around the area and see how people live. As long as you're thinking creatively, many times you're able to find solutions on the spot. I think that is my biggest take away from this, which I plan to apply elsewhere as well.

Challenges

At the first meeting, the ladies in the handicrafts group who were our community partners told us that they hoped to put their art in display boxes, but the boxes were too expensive for them to buy. We immediately thought of looking for sustainable materials that could be made into a display box that they could later replicate on their own. However, after we had already started making prototypes, they changed their mind about what they needed. Instead, they said, "We are going to have a charity art sale. Make us some gift bags that can be used at the sale."

My teammates and I felt a little bit confused and lost. We did not want to argue with them and we wanted to make them happy. However, we had also expended a lot of time and effort already. I realized that we should have defined with the ladies at the very beginning what the goal and timeline was more clearly so that we all knew what to expect.

To make the gift bags requested, my teammates and I experimented with recycled bioplastics material and very quickly scheduled another appointment with the ladies to show them our progress. In the end, they were very appreciative and happy to see the results. They immediately pulled out their handicrafts and put them in the gift bags to check what they looked like. I could see that they appreciated our work the same way that they appreciate their own work, which I think is very important. It felt like we were accepted on a similar level, on similar grounds, which was good.

Improvements

If we spent more time with the ladies and accompanied them as they went about their daily life, we might have realized earlier what they truly wanted and needed. The guest speaker Mr. Tempesta told us an analogy: Imagine somebody tells you that they need a drill because they need to make a hole. But they don't really need a drill. They just need the hole. You can find another way to make the hole. Similarly, sometimes people have ideas about what they need, but maybe you just need to step back and look at the actual issue.

Support from instructor and peers

Professor Godoy was extremely helpful. She's always around the work space and basically, anytime I messaged her, she responded right away. She was always ready to give recommendations and help us out. The same goes for my classmates. We work in an open area and get to talking easily. This is how you end up generating ideas you would never have thought of on your own. CEL Coordinator Chunhao also came to class and helped us reflect on our process. We got different perspectives on our work, which was, I believe, very useful.

Impact of the course

This course inspired my capstone senior thesis. I was a RA (Resident Assistant) in the dorms. I've seen firsthand how much trash people leave when they move out of the dorms. It is very painful to see. Connected to this course, I felt the pressing need to address this issue. I designed a Virtual Reality experience to motivate people to change their consumption habits, combined with an app follow-up that gives them concrete suggestions on how to do so.