Design thinking as a superpower: Meet Calvin Mayanta

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Suddenly, the mic was in Calvin Mayanta's hands. At first, he stuttered, looking bewildered by the news he'd just received. He scanned the room full of entrepreneurs, designers and design thinking experts. An uncomfortable moment passed. Then things clicked - and Mayanta began to speak.

"I answered all the questions," he says proudly, reflecting on the moment at the 2022 d.confestival when he and his team, Inspiring Minds, had been named as one of five winners of the Global Design Thinking Challenge. The contest aimed to address the 4th Sustainable Development Goal: 'Ensure inclusive and equitable education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all.'

"I had to sit down after and just observe everything. I was like, Oh snap. Is it me? Is it us?"

Of the 340 participants across 12 institutions throughout the world, Inspiring Minds had been identified as having the most potential for impact. Their solution to the challenge was to create the I.C.E (Ignite, Create, Equip) Programme, a system which aims to spark innovation and growth among learners; build and harness community, teamwork, and creative expression; and equip learners with essential critical thinking skills, from effective communication, to moral imagination, to open mindedness.

The team built a space that children are able to walk into and feel as though they are champions – a place where they are able to choose what they learn. That may be contemporary, futureproof skills such as coding, or the ability to successfully write a CV: hard and soft skills that are essential for the new world, but that are excluded from most schools – public or private.

"That was actually a beautiful experience," Mayanta says of the challenge. "It hit home. Like, I went through that – it's something I've experienced." Mayanta recounts the schools he has walked through – while performing research, and in his own childhood – that do not feel conducive to learning. They left him asking: "Why do these places feel like prisons? Why

don't they feel like a learning place for a child?" So began his journey to create the type of classroom where children could "transform into butterflies," he says.

His work with personally resonant challenges does not stop there. Alongside his full-time job as a UX Designer, Mayanta also runs four (4!) start-ups. One of those aims to improve parents' ability to see their children's progress at school. It is an important step in improving accessibility in teacher-parent-student relations, particularly in a country where many parents are unable to attend school meetings because of commitments at work.

Mayanta explains the gist: "It's a dashboard where the teacher will upload everything related to that child. If they're skipping classes, not doing homework, not submitting assignments – the parent will just have to log in and then they will see everything."

Already, Mayanta has tested the prototype at two schools, and they "fell in the love with the idea," he says.

Of his extraordinary busyness, plethora of ideas, and drive to make a difference, Mayanta credits the Hasso Plattner d-school Afrika. In 2018, he participated in the design thinking foundation programme – and it changed his life.

"I honestly feel like I have some sort of superpower now. I'm low-key like Superman," he says, and his delivery verifies just that. He speaks with a self-certainty that has struck a fine balance between confidence and modesty. It is based on evidence too: a recent string of successes has aligned him on a powerful, steady flightpath. But it has not always been that way.

In 2020, three of his businesses "failed dismally," he says. "That was the most painful experience I've ever felt. Like, I put so much blood and sweat and so much work and time and then..." He pauses. "There was this moment after – not peace. Just quiet."

He had to take a few steps back. Absorb everything. Emit it again. Eventually, the knowledge of the importance of failure returned to him. He had failed early – he had failed fast. He had taken the principles of design thinking into the real world.

Now, he decided he had to use them within himself. After a period of deep reflection, cracks in the quiet began to appear. His energy was coming back – his ideas were breaking through.

"I started to help other people build businesses, to help them succeed. When they won, I was happy. It was like I had to help them with theirs before I could start my own."

Small steps built him up again. And Mayanta continues to flourish. He still returns to the d-school Afrika at times to meet project partners or simply to work. It reminds him of the 2018, the year that he became himself and discovered his power.

"That seed of design was planted in me," he says. "It's growing and this is the outcome of it. This is my home."

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