Beyond the Studio: Collaboration and Learning Outside the Formal Design Studio

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Abstract: The Design Studio is seen as an integral part of all design practice, both professional and educational. It is the creative environment where ideas are conceived, developed and shared amongst the collective. In the design student’s eyes, however it can sometimes have associations with ‘work’ and assignments causing negative connotations. These associations can dilute the creative atmosphere of the studio and lead to strategic learning on the students’ part where they strive for marks instead of a holistic learning experience. This paper explores student design ‘work’, undertaken outside the conventional studio setting, through a series of novel design-based activities which emphasise collaboration and participation. The intention of these is to encourage voluntary (not assessment driven) participation in creative practices within an environment that is fun and light-hearted. The first activity was a co-design project between design students and community partners. The second involved a number of short multi-disciplinary projects between Product Design, Marketing and Architecture students, using a design slam format (short design challenges where the ideas developed during these projects are generated and realised over a limited period of time). The final activity was a strategy used to encourage informal interclass dialogue between design students through an open platform where parity exists between students and lecturers. This paper draws together the experiences of both students and tutors from these activities and reflects on how informal learning activities can engage, excite and encourage students to become more pro-active in their own teaching and learning experiences.

Keywords: Product Design, Design Education, Collaboration, Peer Learning, Non Formal Learning

Introduction

Despite shifts in industry practice and changing global drivers (technology facilitated communication, homogenisation of the design process, changing consumer and stakeholder demands), the teaching of design is still firmly based on the Bauhaus method of the mid. 20th Century. Classes revolve around projects undertaken in traditional design studios, with emphasis placed on aesthetics, functionality and form (Naylor 1985, Droste 2002 (1990), Whitford 1984). While it is necessary that the design studio remains at the centre of the design process, contemporary designers must learn to practice and collaborate with a diverse group of stakeholders that span disciplines and social backgrounds.

The transition to a more collaborative way of working is not always easy for design students. In design education students can find themselves rigidly focused, not on the acquisition of key life skills, but on gaining the maximum result with the least effort possible (Entwistle 1983). This type of ‘strategic learning’ leads to surface learning and resultantly changes how educators teach and interact with their students (Entwistle 1983, Sterling 2001). Often individual competition, not collaboration takes the focus away from a more open, natural learning
process (Miller 2001). This can be attributed to the challenge of limited resources (financial and physical) and increasing student numbers which can necessitate larger class sizes and reduced tutor/ student ratios (Zilahy et al. 2009). This directly opposes the model of studio-based learning when tutors mentor students on a one to one basis (Lackney 1999).

Industrial and Product design education has always been fortunate in the flexibility of its teaching method and content delivery. This stems from the practical, project-based approach of design; an approach that facilitates pragmatism, creativity, and individual experience. The teaching method however risks falling foul of the numbers and resources game if efforts are not made by design educators to maintain the dynamic and innovative approach to teaching and learning.

Design education, must also keep pace with industry demands which require that designers participate in in-depth research, new product development, strategic planning and multidisciplinary collaboration (Kolko 2005). The practice of design is changing and also the types of problems designers are being asked to solve are expanding beyond traditional tangible ‘products’. Real-world problems are now driving design and innovation, as the benefit of applying design thinking to social, environmental and economic problems is becoming apparent. These changes in the design field and the challenges in education show a need to adopt an approach that will give students a critical, self-directed and reflective learning role to tackle the diversity of the design challenges they face (Martinsuo 2009).

This paper discusses a number of design activities put in place to lift students out of their studio and class based environment and encourage learning beyond conventional structured modules. The activities were run amongst student groups undertaking a BSc. undergraduate degree in Product Design + Technology (PD+T) at the University of Limerick and a mix of other stakeholders both internal and external to the University. Course tutors (including the two authors), tutors on the collaborating courses (in the case of the multi-disciplinary design activities) as well as community partners, acted as facilitators on the design activities.

These activities aim, not to change the fundamentals of design education, but to expand and enhance the student experience, enabling them to develop as well-rounded designers, capable of bringing a holistic set of skills and competencies to their professional practice. The paper begins by providing a background context for the changes in design practices and highlights resultant changes in educational practices that must occur. Three design-based activities are described and analysed in an effort to demonstrate how this new learning can be implemented within a 3rd level degree program. The paper concludes by drawing together the experiences (of both students and tutors) from these activities. This study contributes to design education by reflecting on how informal and non-assessment driven work can engage, excite and encourage students to become more pro-active in their own teaching and learning experiences.

Background
In professional design practice and education the Studio is central to the creative development of new ideas. It is seen as a place where students work together in an open and collaborative environment and where conversations and relationships develop, creating an atmosphere of shared learning and informal peer reviewing. Studio-based learning encourages ‘learning

1 Modules in this instance refer to subjects taken by undergraduate students. The academic year at the University of Limerick comprises 2 13 week semesters with students taking 6 ECTS credited modules in each semester.
by doing’ in a professional environment similar to industry practice (Ellmers and Foley 2007). In the studio, the design tutor engages the student in action-based activity with a master-apprentice approach (Schön 1987, Kvan 2001). While this is the ideal it is not often the case in reality. Students can become so focused on their own project work and the outputs, that little opportunity exists for interaction with their peers or non-assessed learning simply ‘for the pleasure of learning’. Research recognises that students should be provided with the opportunity to acquire valuable skills in engaging ways and that these skills should reflect industry and societal needs (Designophy 2010). The focus therefore, must be on stimulating motivation, inquisitiveness, an interest and appreciation of other disciplines, as well as fostering the ability to interact and collaborate in a productive and positive way.

Today the design industry practices a collaborative approach where real–world research engages with all of the stakeholders throughout the entire project from problem definition to final design realisation (Kelley 2000). Professional designers work within teams of varied experts who inform the process at the different stages. Designers recognise the richness of experience that can come from creating dialogue between these partners, whether they are experts, end-users or social collaborators. Within teams there exists a wealth of experience, worldviews and stories that can be drawn on. The benefits of expanding the designer’s surroundings and influences cannot be undervalued (Lau 2007).

Teams are of major importance in any organisational context because, with increasing complexity, groups of individuals can work together in order to accomplish problems they cannot solve on their own (Stempfle and Badke-Schaub 2002). Multidisciplinary team-work though well practiced in industry is much rarer in education (Design Council 2007, Davis 2008). Traditional methods of learning have focused on the individual. Newer perspectives of learning, however have recognised that learning is less a solitary act and more about the collaboration with others to pool knowledge, skills and tools (Jonassen et al. 2006). The advantage being individuals take a more holistic approach to projects with a good understanding of other specialisms; enabling them to work effectively with colleagues. An additional benefit is mutual learning, where designers learn about other disciplines and those from other disciplines learn about design (Design Council 2007). It is within cross-disciplinary and collaborative project work that a real opportunity now exists to find methods of bridging and reconciling ‘disparate discourses, traditions and methodologies’ (Warburton 2003).

The role of collaboration between co-designers is critical to creativity (Engeström 2001). Designers do not work in a stereotypical or mechanical fashion when designing products or experiences and solving real-world problems. More integrated and collaborative processes can lead to more successful outcomes as they tap into collective creativity (Burns et al. 2006). Designers tend to be innovative, creative and often playful in order to collaborate and successfully meet the demands of building new products and services (Vyas et al. 2009). Methods frequently used by designers such as role playing (Boess 2008) and body storming, aid in problem solving but also promote interaction and experimentation in the design of the product experience (Vyas et al. 2009).

Collaboration encourages the development of deeper learning and critical thinking. Deep learning requires high levels of self-motivation pursuing new ideas through a variety of strategies and methods in the search for understanding (Mockford and Denton 1998). The skills of critical thinking and deep learning require students to, not just accept what they are told, but instead to ask questions, consider all opinions and reflect on all the information to provoke more questions and answers (Tilbury and Wortman 2004). This type of learning
moves away from the spoon-fed approach, to a situation where students look critically at their own work and that of others, in order to come up with a solution that is based on an understanding of diverse ideas.

Emerging research has shown that design students need to be exposed to as wide a range of collaborators and issues as possible in order to reflect real-world practices. This has not been evident on the PD+T course which has a structure similar to U.S and European design courses. Opportunities for peer-learning and support are limited. The projects students undertook as part of their curriculum were not engaging them on a deeper level (lack of critical thinking). The inability to collaborate effectively in group work yielded less than adequate design outputs. The student experience therefore became limited and polarised instead of more holistic. The three activities run with the PD+T students were designed and implemented to address the recommendations of the literature and the issues observed daily in the studio.

**Methodology**

The research was conducted using Action Research (AR) with qualitative methods being employed for data collection and analysis. Action research (AR) was appropriate as it is used when an issue has been identified with existing practice; in this case shifting the emphasis in education from strategic learning to holistic experiences. Through a process of trial, reflection and iterative improvement solutions emerge. The pragmatic and ‘learning by doing’ nature of AR mimics the design process and allows for students to become active participants in their education.

The AR approach enabled the researchers to become involved through action, with the students and thereby develop a deep understanding of this complex phenomenon and allowed for continuous feedback and testing of the content and delivery of the activities (McNiff and Whitehead 2006). Data was gathered in a number of different ways: student diaries (online and written); interviews (semi structured); anecdotal conversations (between tutors and other participants); feedback from participants (students as well as collaborating partners); reflective discussions (formal and informal) as well as observations (video, photographic and ‘live’) throughout the project duration. The information was then collated, analysed and key themes and patterns emerged. These themes are discussed in relation to each specific project below.

**Activity 1: ‘Design by You, for You’**

The premise for the first case study was to explore how students could work collaboratively with community partners. A group of Year 3 Product Design + Technology students at the University of Limerick undertook a project with a group of second level students (aged 12-14) from a disadvantaged area. Through ‘The Northside Learning Hub (NLH) Learning Buddies’ project, the designers developed a brief with the students to provide flexible furniture solutions for a designated space within the NLH. Resources, equipment and materials were limited so cardboard was decided upon as the primary building material. The project lasted for 12 weeks (with 6 weeks of contact with the second level students). Throughout the project...
the designers negotiated, interacted and collaborated with the students, the social workers, the building managers and the administrative staff in the NLH.

A co-design\(^3\) approach was employed for the project, students worked collaboratively and in parity with stakeholders to design solutions that best fulfilled everyone’s requirements. This immersive, co-operative, human centred and inclusive approach to design was to encourage social entrepreneurship in undergraduate students. The project highlighted how adopting this type of collaboration can bring about empathy, engagement and personal enthusiasm in a student that is often lost from typical design projects.

**Objectives**

- To develop the student experience beyond the structured studio environment.
- To facilitate design students in engaging with community and industry in order to expand their practice.
- To enable students to learn skills of negotiation, dialogue and compromise.

**Outcomes**

The observations from the project were surprising considering the project was primarily self-directed. The design students engaged in ways not always evident in college projects. They were enthusiastic, motivated and very pleased with both the final outcomes and the process involved. The key learnings from the project were distilled into the following:

- **Students** applied their skills to solving a real-world problem which enabled them to assess the impact of their efforts. They also recognised the limitations of their own skill sets, requiring them to ask for help when it was needed along the process.
- **Reflection**: designers could see issues from the perspective of others. ‘Taking what I had learned and teaching it to someone else- seeing them understand it - it was rewarding to see how they feel about it’. (Student participant)
- **Dialogue**: designers were required to use language that all the stakeholders could understand so design jargon was replaced with clear concise descriptions.
- **Compromise**: the outcomes at the various stages were not always what the designers ‘wanted’, expected or agreed with comprehensively. Students soon realised that they had to be flexible and willing to change through the project.
- **Motivating others**: the designers found that by motivating others they themselves saw the value of design and were also engaged and motivated. This added to the overall experience of the project and led to it being hugely successful.

\(^3\) Co design is where the users or other stakeholders participate in the design process in a collaborative effort. The user, who has deep insights into the particular application becomes engaged with the team in the design process Sanders, E. and Stappers, P. (2008) ‘Co-creation and the new landscapes of design’, CoDesign, 4(1), 5-18.
Activity 2 ‘Not just me, Myself and I’

The second study involved a number of interdisciplinary projects involving students from different disciplines across the University of Limerick. The first multi-disciplinary project was undertaken between groups of marketing and design students and the second comprised groups of architects and product designers. Using a design slam format (24 hour design challenge) the ideas are conceived and realised over a short period of time. Earth Hour 2009 formed the brief for the project between marketing and design students. Each group was asked to design and implement an awareness campaign in a specific location on the campus. This could be realised in whatever format the groups deemed appropriate. The project with Architecture centred on bringing functionality and vitality to ‘dead spaces’ around the University campus.

Collaborations between three groups that don’t know each other (in this case Product Design, Architecture and Marketing students) can bring a fresh and alternative approach to undertaking project work. The reason for this is that ‘strangers’ can provide access to new information and draw on diverse experiences that those who are familiar with each other can’t offer (Hansen 1999). Knowledge share becomes more efficient and ideas can be stretched further as unknown individuals seek to find common ground and an understanding of each other’s motivations and practices (Lesser 2000). Design briefs were therefore generated to facilitate all disciplines contributing in equal measure.

Objectives

- To determine how the sharing of skills can affect both the process and the final outcomes.
- To understand and appreciate other disciplines.
- To develop a shared language to work effectively with other disciplines.
- To determine what skills students display as they negotiate with their partners in order to find solutions in a short period of time.

Outcomes

The lessons gleaned from this project were the experience of engaging in multidisciplinary team interaction which third level students don’t get the opportunity to do very often. The key observations from the project were:
• **Interaction:** Initially students were nervous working with people they did not know and found it difficult to express their ideas at times. A lack of confidence and fear of being judged by their peers added to this. Once the students began to build a relationship with their partners the work pace increased and the team became more productive and effective.

• **Others eyes:** Students found the experience of ‘seeing how others do it’ very interesting. Through informal conversations and interactions links were created that may endure beyond the project.

• **Peer motivation and learning:** Students mutually learned from each other through the demonstration of skills and the dissemination of information across disciplines. This helped them to identify what their individual contribution was within the team.

• **Contributions:** Not all the outcomes were positive. Some students complained of uneven workloads amongst group members. It fell to the design students in the Earthhour project, with marketing, to build the physical solutions that were decided upon. The marketing students worked better in the ‘planning stages’ and found that the realisation stage called for skills they simply did not have. In the architecture/product design project the workload was more evenly distributed as the skill sets of the two groups were more closely aligned.
Activity 3: ‘Designer’s Democracy’

The final case study describes the Designer’s Democracy, a forum created at the University of Limerick to bring together the four years of the product design students as well as design staff. The Designer’s Democracy facilitates students and tutors to collaborate on an equal footing with the objective of creating a greater awareness of and appreciation for design and the creative industries. The activities and topics vary, but all revolve around a spirit of recreation and entertainment to encourage all to participate. Students take a self-directed learning approach where they are given the opportunity to plan and deliver a short workshop related to design and the creative industries. This promotes improved relationships between staff and students. Staff take the role of team members, contributing and participating, alongside students.

The workshops take the format of short design slams conducted over an hour. The sessions have included an ‘egg drop’; design quizzes; empathy research; full scale renderings and 3D model making. One activity focused on body storming which is an empathy tool used in ethnographic research. The focus was to evaluate the effectiveness of body storming as a tool. The group was split into teams where one person per group took on the role of a disabled person. Work shop goggles were sanded to replicate visual impairment; hands were tapped, strapped and gloved to replicate arthritis, a wheelchair and crutches were also used. Each team had a mission to carry out in which the individual body storming a disability had to: get a drink from a vending machine, get a book from the library and buy a cup of tea from the shop. As this was a team effort the other team members’ role was to observe and record the activities. The teams regrouped after forty minutes to review the findings.

Objectives

- To direct students away from strategic learning where everything is focused on attaining marks instead of the broader and more enjoyable experience of learning.
- To encourage students to take an active role in shaping their own learning experience.
- To allow senior students to demonstrate their skills to junior students.
- To facilitate a more peer-like relationship between staff and students.
- To create a relaxed setting where students can interact and mix with a focus on a design theme.
- To build a set of ‘softer’ skills for the students such as collaboration, compromise, dialogue, participation as well as the organisation and the facilitation of workshops.
Outcomes

While the academic elements are a key part of design education there is also a need to evoke a passion and interest for the discipline. With the studio occupying a pivotal role in the student learning experience it is an ideal opportunity to stimulate an atmosphere of fun and enjoyment. Students can also learn invaluable lessons and skills from each other. The other key observations included:

- **Studio Atmosphere**: The Designers Democracy created a positive atmosphere in the studio and students have begun to build relationships across the years.
- **Peer support and learning**: Students have begun to share skills and assist in various projects in the studios, the workshops and computer labs.
- **Demonstration**: With increased communication the lower years gained an understanding of what they can expect through the rest of their studies.
- **Recognition**: The experience of the senior classes was recognised through the dissemination of information to the junior years.
- **Positive relationships** were fostered between students and staff. The more open channels of communication led to more effective feedback loops that have helped improve teaching and learning.
- **Tutor Learning**: Tutors took part in design projects. The benefit to staff was that they were able to appreciate issues from the perspective of the students. It facilitated staff in maintaining their hands-on design skills, through learning by doing and learning from and with the students.
- **Self-Direction**: Students began to self-manage their project work. By assuming responsibility for the project planning and implementation they developed skills necessary in professional practice.
- **Profile** The ‘public’ aspects of the project work raised the profile of the course within the University.

Discussion

The activities described above demonstrate that informal learning needs to be embedded in design education. The students acquire skills not always found in more formal project work; such as an appreciation of other disciplines; self-direction; responsibility and curiosity and
a motivation and interest in life long learning. These projects have created positive dialogues between the design students and other stakeholders both inside and outside the studio and the University. This facilitates students to understand how skills can be transferred from one problem to another (Kolodner et al. 2003). One student for example, in the co-design project, continued working with the second level student group and the community partners for her final design project in 4th year. Without participation in the project this connection might never have been made or maintained over a longer period of time.

There are downfalls however. Students didn’t always have the time to dedicate to extra-curricular activities. The work-load from their academic course took precedence over the optional Designer’s Democracy projects and the co-design activity. As a result tutors found that students disengaged themselves from the informal project work at certain critical times in their formal work (e.g. close to exams or project deadlines). Institutional changes need to occur that facilitate this ‘learning for experience’ model where students can be ‘rewarded’ or recognised for their participation in informal project work.

Commitment too, is an essential input from both students and staff. Extra time was required to plan, deliver and participate in the projects which came from outside the conventional university timetable (lunchtimes, evenings etc.) with little recognition for students or staff. As with many universities (including the one studied here) the structure can be rigid and difficult to manipulate due to centrally timetabled modules. This inflexibility also proved problematic for the cross-disciplinary and co-design case studies as the timetables of the participating groups didn’t always align. Participants often had to work outside their times scheduled which impacted on other project work and personal commitments. Institutional change needs to occur to encourage these types of activities.

Research shows that interdisciplinary collaboration is most effective when the individuals are experts in their own field (Breitenberg 2006). As students are still learning their level of understanding, experience and knowledge can sometimes limit their contribution. This lack of experience was seen to inhibit their engagement (particularly in the multi-disciplinary activities) and was manifested in the fear of presenting or expressing themselves in front of their peers. The short length of the activities in some cases, didn’t allow for relationships to build and as a result students were nervous about presenting their work in front of the larger group. Contrastingly some students ‘showed’ off during their presentations using the opportunity to demonstrate the skills and capabilities that set their discipline apart (whether it was design, architecture or marketing). It took the designers in the NLH co-design project less time to become comfortable with presenting in front of their audience as they had greater confidence in their skills and experience. One way of overcoming this is to have a physical environment that is conducive to interaction (breakout spaces for small group interactions; seating layout for larger presentations that is less intimidating for the speaker etc.).

It is worth noting that not all of the collaborations were successful. Team projects can be inherently difficult to manage and comments from student diaries and feedback during reflection sessions highlighted some of the issues that were not observed during the projects. Within the multi-disciplinary projects some of the teams gelled together brilliantly and the outcomes reflected the effective team-work. Unfortunately some groups didn’t mesh as brilliantly and the results were poor and sometimes even disastrous. Group dynamics and individual personalities played a key role in the success or failure of the team projects. It was clear that enthusiasm, commitment and ability varied between group members. This coupled with uneven workloads led to frustration and breakdowns in communication. Reflec-
tion between student groups, facilitators and students and between the facilitators themselves throughout the entire process could have identified and helped eliminate the issues as they arose.

The action research approach to reviewing these projects will allow for the ideas to be improved upon and implemented again so that the outcomes are more successful and beneficial to students. A more structured approach would be included in future projects to allow students to actively reflect throughout the project. This would stimulate deeper learning and more critical analysis, as well as allowing students to apply a broader skill set to any project they are undertaking.

**Conclusion**

Formal education doesn’t always provide the holistic learning experience that is required to produce a well-rounded professional. Design education is progressive but increasing numbers and academic pressures can lead to a loss in dynamism. The case studies carried out demonstrate an alternative approach to learning that enhances the students experience beyond the studio. This paper contributes to a better understanding of design education and activities in the design studio. It highlights how some skills and competencies now required from designers can be developed in students in a manner similar to how they could expect to work as professionals. The efforts of collaborating with new partners across disciplines and roles has helped towards expanding the perspective and curiosity of the individual; as well as creating an atmosphere of peer-learning, motivation and enthusiasm in the design studio. As a result students are better prepared for their transition into industry.

While they have proven to be worthwhile experiences for all the participants, the design activities were not without difficulties. It is essential that educators be aware of the realities of bringing informal learning activities into formal academic environments. The intention of the researchers is to develop and expand this informal approach to learning and to deliver subsequent phases in the Action Research process. Whilst there are challenges in ensuring success, it is essential to bring this type of experience into the design students’ life.

**References**


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Members of the Design Community meet at the International Conference on Design Principles and Practices, held annually in different locations around the world. The Design Conference was held at Imperial College London, in 2007; in conjunction with the University of Miami, Florida, USA in 2008; at Technical University Berlin, Germany in 2009; at the University of Illinois at Chicago, USA in 2010; and at Sapienza University of Rome, Italy in 2011. In 2012, the conference will be held at the University of California, Los Angeles, USA.

Our community members and first time attendees come from all corners of the globe. Intellectually, our interests span the breadth of the field of design. The Conference is a site of critical reflection, both by leaders in the field and emerging scholars and practitioners. Those unable to attend the Conference may opt for virtual participation in which community members can either submit a video and/or slide presentation with voice-over, or simply submit a paper for peer review and possible publication in the Journal.

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The third major publishing medium is our news blog, constantly publishing short news updates from the Design Community, as well as major developments in the field of design. You can also join this conversation at Facebook and Twitter or subscribe to our email Newsletter.
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