
Conclusions

Alt/Shift 02

Creative education
for a digital context

17.04.13
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Key themes from the day

Education is too outcome focused. / Students should dare to fail. / Industry is collaborative & networked. / Successful practitioners are open, inquisitive and curious – They are able to empathize with the needs of the user. / We need to nurture utilizers and adapters – not passive users. / Students need to learn how to relinquish control. Take risks, make mistakes – fail. / Ideo's concept of the T-Shaped designer is increasingly relevant. We also need a T – shaped discussion, between HE and industry, but also drilling down through education from tertiary through to secondary and primary. / Computers are more than simulation machines. Technology is only as powerful as what you do with it. / Disrupt and re-think. / Re-define the term vocational. / Iterative/ adaptive/ generative. / Education should differentiate according to the needs of different students and different areas of practice. / We need technical implementers as well as creative innovators. / Education should hold students in the journey. / Attitude is more important than skills. / Unstructured, anarchic art school activities are good ways to develop creativity and employability.

Action Points

'Learning rather than outcomes'

Problem:

Assessment pressures make current creative education too outcome driven. This hinders the kind of learning / teaching that would better nurture contemporary employability skills. The skills that industry identify as important – empathy, analysis, collaboration, synthesis – can be hard to match to learning outcomes.

potential solutions...

- > **Alternative portfolio crit, where students show the ideas they got excited about (but failed to make work) to industry professionals.**
- > **Describe courses differently. Define principles rather than specifics in course documentation and embrace flexibility.**
- > **Look at creating new criteria for judgement that embrace some of these less clearly assessable skills.**
- > **Look at new forms of qualification. Or keep headline course labels and change what is taught.**
- > **New collaborative ways to validate courses, bringing industry practitioners into the mix in much more meaningful ways. Achieve accountability in different ways.**
- > **Force students to test / assess ideas in the real world, with real people.**

'Dynamic / contemporary learning'

Problem:

Educators aren't always able to get access to new skills & learning, in order to keep pace with the pace of industry developments.

potential solutions...

- > Industry and education away days. Emphasis on making, not just thinking.**
- > Online facility for industry / education discussion.**
- > Easier access to industry professionals for academics across the country.**

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'Cross Disciplinary Collaboration'

Problem

The complexity of the contemporary creative industries means that outcomes almost always require work across disciplines. This means that increasingly creative practitioners work collaboratively. Empathy for the work of others has increasing value and an understanding of other disciplines is essential. In education assessment requirements often focus students inward and traditional infrastructures create subject silos. As a result design education is often overly focused on individual portfolio development.

potential solutions...

- > Broader subject titles – e.g. 'communication design', 'experience design', 'environment design', 'sequential design'.**
- > Create cross-course / cross-college / cross-disciplinary projects and initiatives.**
- > Collaborative projects between education and industry.**
- > Projects that take staff and students out of the college environment.**
- > Encourage industry input into new course development.**
- > Use the 'tech city' clout to lever change.**
- > Live document stating industry needs and education challenges that can be referred to in creating courses / devising projects / justifying principles.**

'Clarity of aspiration'

Problem:

Contemporary design practice does not relate to Design & Technology or Art & Design as taught in schools, as a result young people and their parents have a problem making the jump in perception required to understand the emerging career opportunities the creative industries might provide. Maybe one of the reasons why Illustration is so popular is because it relates more closely to Art & Design as taught in schools.

potential solutions...

- > Communicate what our subjects are / what the different disciplines mean / what our industry is / what its values and the principles that drive it are.**

- > **Build an exploration of industry practice into the curriculum at secondary and tertiary level. Industry and Higher Education could support schools and colleges by providing resources.**
- > **Sell our industries, not our courses at University open days.**
- > **Create better, informal, more accessible events for prospective students – Pick Me Up for Communication Design? Does the new Design Museum have a role here?**

'Political Implications'

Problem:

Government / university decision-makers don't always understand changing values of design and creative practice. This makes it hard to institute changes in the way that we teach.

potential solutions...

- > **Create collaborative projects for social good that become a news story in the public domain. Public success is a powerful way to communicate the success of collaborative learning.**
- > **Communicate to university / students / government through these projects.**
- > **Make sure that the projects are emotionally driven to create maximum impact.**

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From attendee James Branch's blog: 'Lines of Enquiry'
<http://www.linesofenquiry.co.uk/post/48268506761/alt-shift-2-1-creative-education-for-a-digital-context>

In my experience it is not often that “industry” people and “academic” people sit in a room together and have lengthy talk about design education i.e. what we value, what we think should change and what frustrates us. So the first thing to say is thanks to AltShift / Derek Yates et al and Ustwo for getting us in one place and hosting yesterday's discussion. In attendance were various people working in the digital media industry, aswell as teachers and educational staff from a range of HE and FE institutions. Over the course of an afternoon we had a few reoccurring themes that were articulated in different ways so I'll start with those...

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One of the key issues the panel identified was the changing face of what a designer/creative practitioner is, or should be. In the past this inspirational figure (often male) was the lone creative genius. Now of course digital creative practice is collaborative, open, networked and social — so the archetype needs to change. But I felt (and certainly this was echoed by other academics) that many aspects of the academy infrastructure are still geared towards producing these lone creative genius types... The challenges I took from this are — How we as teachers find ways to encourage cross disciplinary collaboration? How we change assessment procedure so its less focused on outcome and more on process? How we introduce more group work? I recently took part in a module assessed entirely orally, through verbal contribution — maybe this is way to shift away from outcomes? We really questioned whether a portfolio is still a relevant endpoint for an arts student? Taken to a rather nice extreme the panel started ruminating on the value of failure... We agreed that to be ambitious, try an idea in new area and fail spectacularly constituted a really valuable learning experience, but our assessment systems don't recognise this sort of endeavour. We decided on the “Failed Gloriously Award”... D&AD are you listening? Lawrence Zeegan pointed to Green Week — a UAL project that stepped outside of the module system and assessment and possibly encouraged a less outcome driven educational process. Also, a couple of references to interesting digital media / education projects also popped up: Sugata Mitra — Hole in The Wall and Granny Cloud well worth checking out.

But if we don't want so many of these lone male ego maniac creative types, what types of designers do we want? The panel came up with lots of adjectives to describe their perfect graduates and I thought these might be quite helpful for students to hear: Collaborative, resourceful, inquisitiveness, empathetic... In a reference to IDEO's Tim Brown's description of the ideal designer some of the panel advocated 'T' shaped people. In terms of skills, Joe Macleod from Ustwo was looking for students that understood design principles and core design competencies over and above highly specialised software skills. i.e good research, problem definition, thinking iteratively and the ability to synthesis information. Chris Downs from Method came up with some relevant insights in this area. As he runs service design company he often has the challenge of recruiting grads. for a discipline that doesn't exist yet in the academy. He explained service design is utterly reliant on multi-disciplinary teams so the things he looks for in candidates are a willingness to collaborate, a point of view, passion and ideas about how they see and want to change the world, rather than a cemented previous professional title or position. He went on to suggest that in the past a designer's job was all about control, specifying how things

should look and making sure they looked the same everywhere — but now its about relinquishing control and assuming responsibility...(be good to unpack that a bit in a later post) It was quite sad to hear that the courses he wants to teach on are all outside of the UK and he cited CIID ,NYU, Ireya and Fabrica as examples of institutions he felt were running interesting courses.

How we prepare graduates for this changing/changed employment environment was touched upon. Certainly a commitment to life long learning seemed to be something important with staff, students and industry all needing input to keep up with change. How educational courses adapt to change was also mentioned. The pace of change within the academy it was universally agreed was very slow..."they are big beasts" was muttered... What we even call these new courses was also identified as tricky... a problem reflected in the industry with words like interaction, social and media so widely assigned that meaning has become tricky to pin down. Some of the academics in the panel rather mutinously decided we should keep our old course titles and just change the content, that way we don't scare the horses.

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Derek Yates our MC was rightly keen to move our discussion towards some actionable points and solutions to these seemingly intractable issues. In this regard, Fred Deakin had a great idea to start a series of small live projects that combine industry and student teams. He expressed bafflement that our student's final pieces are often hidden away — why isn't their work in the public domain? This desire to see art school project outcomes in public would inform these potential projects described as "small ongoing forays into the public arena"... As I understood it, these would be socially responsible projects that tackling real world problems. He added that if we really wanted to change the way education works then small successful projects that engage the public might be a great forerunner for change and a way to circumvent the bureaucrats. A couple of other ideas I liked: Move away from the narrowness of course structures by making design education much more project focussed (project centred education) — encouraging interdisciplinary approaches. Educate parents about what a design education is and what a career in the industry might look like... Seems like any move towards demystifying what we do is a good one to me.

Overall I think what the discussions clearly pinpointed was there was quite a bit of frustration on both sides, in the sense that industry feel its hard to find the graduates they want and the academics feel the structures of their institutions make it hard to meet change. But to return to my opening comments, what I would say was very positive about this event, was that it gave us a bit of space to air these issues... And in doing so I could see that, although there are gaps between industry and education (and some gaps are important to maintain), we also share a lot of the same concerns and motivations for change. Maybe more platforms for this sort of dialogue is one way for us to improve how we educate students, not just on the topic of digital media but in other areas as well? Returning to our subject, it did seem that for us in education, we need to find ways to take on board and engender in our students the shift in attitudes, mindsets and behaviors that a digital context has brought about. That said we should avoid knee jerk responses to change, that lead to rooms full of kit that nobody uses, or creative applications of digital media being taught in a superficial or purely skills based way. Instead we need to enable students to grasp the contexts, theories and political implications of this technology so they are empowered by it and use it not just to fit into the industry but to evolve and challenge it.

From designer, educator and critic, Nick Bell...

Alt/Shift 2.1 – Digital. At UsTwo. Wed 17 April 2013
Following a little reflection, my thoughts...

I'm asking questions that apply to both the design industry and to design education equally. I see myself as someone with a foot in both camps.

One of my motivations to question current design practice comes out of my concern, that as a career, graphic design appears to be becoming economically unsustainable. Fred Deakin referred to the 'black hole' or 'cliff' that looms large for every design student.

My main motivation is centred on the possibility that graphic design, specifically, will render itself irrelevant if it doesn't start to embrace new kinds of practice – especially the kind that can bring it closer to the needs of people. Other areas of design have already begun this process – notably product design (out of which came service design). Graphic design has some catching up to do.

I'm a graphic designer, and my close attachment to the craft of what I do is the source of much satisfaction. I know I'm typical in this respect and this obsessional behaviour can hide the big issues from view on which it is critical I have a point of view. Was this what Chris Downs (of Method) was alluding to when he spoke of how his graphic designers found it hard to get the hang of service design? Its true, we prefer not to 'relinquishing control' and we do tend to fixate on the end result.

We are 'I' shaped designers which is ironic since growing an ego is an occupational hazard in graphic design – ask anyone who has worked with me. We need to grow arms if we are to become the 'T' shaped sort that Nick Farnhill (of Poke) advocates. As Andy Huntingdon (of Berg) said, we need to develop a level of design and technological literacy that will enable us to collaborate with designers and technologists from other fields.

Durrell Bishop gave us a healthy dose of scepticism about digital in the school classroom: the danger of too much focus on coding as 'the glue' when the thing that all children can do very well is draw. Imagination still has to be at the centre of creative practice and this fact moves me to question a provocative Alt/Shift tweet from Karsten Schmidt: "you need techniques, not ideas" - the latter are usually borne out of the former". Techniques without ideas is a hell that prompts the stock question 'so what?!' While I enjoyed Decode at the V&A immensely a few years ago I found myself asking that question quite a few times.

Techniques and ideas are often indistinguishable, inseparable in design. Surely you need both. And as for if it matters at all which comes first, if I had to I would hazard to say that it is often ideas. Ideas emerging out of the researching of needs and circumstance – of there being a purpose for the idea. The world where an idea only emerges out of a technique is a design bubble floating in the rarified air of a design universe far, far away from people.

Some bullet-pointed thoughts about the way things are:

THE DESIGN PROCESS IS ADJUSTING TO ACCOMMODATE:

- participation of the user (increase of)
- in-house client controls (proliferation of)
- testing of service/product (pre-launch)
- measurement of service/product effectiveness (post launch)

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OTHER MODELS OF DESIGN PRACTICE ON THE RISE:

- inter-disciplinary collaborative practice
(granular – teams of individuals retaining independence)
- pro-active practice
(entrepreneurial, don't wait to be told – self-written brief or no brief)
- designer as publisher/talent/entertainment label
(we are in possession of the media tools)
- in-house design teams
(design's importance in business continues to rise)
- nomadic designer
(not only the freelance but the consultant with laptop, no studio)
- independent educator
(summer schools and other fee paying alternatives)

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GRAPHIC DESIGN EDUCATION IS STILL COUCHED WITHIN A TRADITIONAL MODEL OF PRACTICE THAT:

- prioritises complete creative control
- is distant from users
- tends to be reactive rather than proactive
- has no truck with testing and measurement
(so far this has been done by marketing – the arch enemy! Design must foreground its own user-centred forms of measurement)
- designs products rather than experiences
(hence the traditional names for courses within knowledge silos very attached to their craft, eg: graphic design)
- is shy of the big research questions

COMMUNICATION DESIGN COURSES NEED TO SHOW HOW:

- models of practice are changing because
- the way we consume media has changed because
- communication media has changed

AND HOW:

- business is responding with new economic models because
- all this is changing people – we are thinking and acting differently

IN DOING SO, PRESENT BOTH SIDES OF THE STORY:

- the digital doubters (Jaron Lanier, Evgeny Morozov) as well as
- the digital evangelists (Clay Shirky, Eric Schmidt)

NEW DESIGNERS OF THE FUTURE NEED TO UNDERSTAND:

- the new order in which design principles are prioritised
- new models of design practice
- new models of business
- new economic models
- the 'ergonomics' of how users think and behave, what they need
(and how to work with them, understand them and empathise – enter the sociologists, anthropologists and psychologists)

AND LEARN HOW TO SEIZE:

- the opportunities the above paradigm shift presents
(both creative and entrepreneurial)

THIS WILL REQUIRE DESIGN EDUCATION TO:

- establish and develop their research activities
(who is asking the important questions?)

TEACHING AND LEARNING IN DESIGN EDUCATION IS NOT AS DISTANT AS WE THINK FROM TEACHING AND LEARNING IN INDUSTRY BECAUSE:

- both are grappling with the same issues
- both can learn from each other
- a lot of self-teaching is going on in both

- while industry is the ultimate testing ground
- many experiments are best conducted in the academy

SOUNDS OBVIOUS, BUT BOTH EDUCATION AND INDUSTRY CAN COME CLOSER TOGETHER IF:

- more of us split our time between both **MEANING:**
- lower proportion of full time tutors
- higher proportion of part time tutors

THE RESEARCHER'S VIEW:

Longer views addressing larger scopes of inquiry

“... we are moving from the design of categories of ‘products’ to designing for people’s purposes.”

ON THE ONE SIDE...

“The traditional design disciplines are centred around the product or a technology. Here the designer gains the skills needed to expertly conceive of and give shape to products such as brand identities, interior spaces, buildings, consumer products, etc.”

WHEREAS ON THE OTHER SIDE...

“The emerging design practices centre around people’s needs or societal needs, and require a different approach in that they need to take longer views and address larger scopes of inquiry.”

Sanders & Stappers: Co-creation and the New Landscape of Design: CoDesign Journal, 2008.

A GOOD TOPICAL EXAMPLE OF THAT:

The design principles of the Government Digital Service (GDS) that produced gov.uk – the winner of the Design Museum’s Design of the Year 2013.

GET WITH THE PROGRAMME

While it may be difficult to give degree courses names that reflect the nature of design practice now and in the future, in larger universities it is possible to achieve that by grouping courses into programmes. The name of the programme can signal its “longer view and larger scope of inquiry”.

PROJECTS WORK

Lawrence Zeegen (LCC, in case anyone didn’t know) told us that the upside of universities raising funds through student fees (and consequently receiving less from government) means they have more licence over how they spend it.

If I read him correctly, it was this situation that enabled him to fund the 30 projects of LCC’s Green Week. 30 projects that got students from across many complimentary disciplines and courses thinking about a single issue: sustainability. To avoid the problem of ‘congestion’ (Darryl Clifton quoting Ronald Barnett) or what Lawrence plainly called over-teaching, he was able to clear space for it in the curriculum which he admitted might only be possible if you are a Dean and hold the pot of funding to cover such an exercise.

The exciting thing about projects such as Green Week is that it provides a reason, for cross-programme/cross-department/cross-school interdisciplinary collaboration. It created a purpose around which everyone could gather and produced a week long ‘festival’ of ideas that the School could pile their energy into and use as a focus for media attention.

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Staying with this theme I'll take this opportunity to mention a programme of issue-based projects I initiated at the Royal College of Art in 2009 in the then department of Communication Art & Design (now School of Communication). Similarly, the aim here was to encourage collaboration in practice based research across disciplines through focus on a central issue. In 2009 the theme was Wealth (concepts of value in the context of economic collapse) and in 2010 it was Real (the currency of the physical and experiential in a world of digital media).

My strategy was to re-establish collaborative design practice in a department dominated by autobiographic tendencies that isolated students not just in their own disciplines but in their own heads. The research-based projects helped students develop their own point of view on issues that interested them. The aim was to help students find ways to develop the confidence to be proactive as they begin to understand that every design project begins well before the design brief is written. Students develop the ability to identify opportunities for communication themselves and write their own briefs connecting their own practice with issues in the wider world outside of the comfortable confines of graphic design culture. I established the Issue-based Elective project as part of the first year programme which is now continued with by Visiting Professor Adrian Shaughnessy under the title Research-Design-Publishing (RDP).

Also in 2009 at the RCA, indicative of the appetite for cross-college collaboration that it was felt wasn't being met by the College, students took it into their own hands to found Department 21 a temporary cross-departmental experimental interdisciplinary space. More a project or programme than a department, it gave students the chance to witness each others daily working methods and processes as well as discuss them and have a go at working together.

Green Week and these other initiatives can be the vehicles for simply trying things out while at the same time carrying the seeds of greater, more radical change that could happen in the future.

I look forward to the next opportunity to discuss all this further.

- ENDS.

Nick Bell, 22 April 2013
Director, Nick Bell Design
Visiting Critic, Royal College of Art
Special Consultant, Eye magazine

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