Beyond the classroom – pedagogy for the real world

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Abstract:

'The nature of sustainability, and the prospect of unsustainability, require a fundamental change of epistemology, and therefore of education. Changes are necessary in curricula, pedagogy, policy and institutional structures.' (Jones et al, 2010)

Social design highlights design-based practices aimed towards collective and social ends rather than predominantly commercial or consumer-orientated objectives. This paper shares staff and students experiences of participating in an interdisciplinary approach to social design practice and describes the key aspects that arose from the implementation of a collaborative approach to teaching on the MA/MFA Design Programme at Sheffield Hallam University.

The author believes that social design has a key place in design education as threats including precarious economies, social and financial inequities, global warming, war and mass migration are real-world issues impacting on world citizens and the planet. Opening up the right forums for discussion and experimentation, including the right mix of skills and knowledge to enrich discussion, needs careful consideration and facilitation (Bateman, R. 2016). Initial work on the MA/MFA Design Programme has focused on placing social design within a module and employing cross-disciplinary and interdisciplinary working and learning. Our current projects widen the learning experience taking place over a one-year period with dual entry and multiple points. This work includes the local City Council, city residents and our DeSIS Lab[1]

Taking the conference theme of 'expanding communities of sustainable practice and a sub-theme of a holistic design curriculum, this work particularly highlights the value of situating learning beyond the classroom in real-world contexts supported by a community of practice[2]. Holism here relates to the recognition that learning is socially situated, that it draws on the individual strengths and resources the student bring and that by involving practitioners from different specialisms learning has the potential to bring about real-world transformation and change beyond the boundaries of the subject discipline.

Keywords:

Holism, social design, student engagement, interdisciplinary, cross-disciplinary, communities of practice.

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[1] http://www.desis-network.org/courses/uk-london-sia-desis-lab/

Introduction:

Research informed teaching is very much at the core of the MA Design Programme at Sheffield Hallam University[3]. Students are in the first instance able to learn about research findings specific to their subject area (research led teaching). Students learn about research methodologies and processes (research orientated teaching) and finally students are offered the opportunity to engage in real-world research projects (authentic learning or situated learning). This is illustrated in a first semester module that investigates Social Design (SD) and more broadly Socially responsible Design (SRD). The overall SRD project strategy focuses on enabling students to participate in socially responsive design practice with a particular focus on developing collaborative interdisciplinary student-generated responses to working in partnership with people. The inter-disciplinary make-up of the teaching team, drawing on expertise from design and health and engaging with staff from the Lab4Living means that students can be supported and 'sign-posted' to key resources. Lab4Living[4] is a trans-disciplinary research group at Sheffield Hallam University based on a collaborative community of researchers in design, health care and creative practices (Langley et al, 2016).

Today, the word "design" means many things. The common factor linking them is service, and designers are engaged in a service profession in which the results of their work meet human needs (Friedman, K., Stolterman, E, 2015). Over recent years the design profession had undergone profound transformation continuing to do today as designers and design pedagogy struggles to keep up with equally rapid changes is the world.

The emergent area of social design can be defined variously. In his book 'Design, When Everybody Designs: An Introduction to Design for Social Innovation' Ezio Manzini (20150 writes; in it's original meaning, social design is a design activity that deals with problems that are not dealt with by the market or by the state, and in which the people involved do not normally have a voice.

Armstrong et al (2014) make the following differentiation; Although all designing can be understood as social, the term 'social design' highlights the concepts and activities enacted within participatory approaches to researching, generating and realising new ways to make change happen towards collective and social ends, rather than predominantly commercial objectives.

This concept is not new. In one sense it has always been recognised that designers have an important role to play in contributing to society. John Ruskin, William Morris and Christopher Dresser writing in the nineteenth century were conscious not just of the quality of the objects produced but also about how they were being manufactured and the wider social conditions relating to their production (Bateman, R., Craig, C 2016). More recently social design has become synonymous with the work of Victor Papanek (1985) Ralph Erskine (1978) and Manzini. Manzini continues to champion design for social innovation through DeSIS, Design for Social Innovation and Sustainability, a network of university design labs that work with local, regional and global partners for change and sustainability.

The Projects:

To date the MA Design Programme has explored a number of projects under the heading of Social Design. This paper briefly introduces two of those projects

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[3] http://www.shu.ac.uk/sia/
[4] http://www.lab4living.org.uk/

1. Designing out Vulnerability
2. Community, Design & Engagement.

Both projects focused upon each student designer becoming part of a multi-disciplinary and cross-disciplinary community of practice (COP) of between 6 and 7 students who share their COP content for garnering feedback from the other COP's. Each physical COP was augmented by a single virtual COP using facebook as a platform for socially oriented learning.

Methodology:

The SD module has five core goals:

- Exploring social design outside of the classroom.
- Widening students understanding of their role as designers.
- Creating a shared exchange for teams of students, staff and external agencies.
- Enhancing collaboration between student, staff and external agencies.
- Exploring the use of online content as catalyst for pedagogical change.

Action Research:

The project used a participatory action research methodology (Swantz, 2008; Wadsworth, 1998) with the 2015 project forming a research cycle informed by work in 2014 and the 2015 project informed subsequent project iterations for work in 2016 that further explored and widened collaborative co-creation in real-world scenarios.

Theoretical Frameworks:

The project is founded upon social learning theory informing the choice of 'scaffolding' that support the types of interaction and assessment strategies implemented within the project, forming a type of 'design framework'. The theoretic frameworks used are:

- Social Constructivism: Vygotsky (1978) argued that learning is a collaborative process. Social constructivist pedagogies are interested in enabling students to develop creative, critical thinking, and collaborative skills, rather than focusing upon course content (Evans, 2005 in Cochrane et al 2011).
- Communities Of Practice: Communities Of Practice are made up of groups of people with a common interest who act as peers as they explore issues within a particular context. (Lave and Wenger, 1991)

The Projects:

1. **'Designing out Vulnerability'** In 2014-15 the MA/MFA Design Programme worked with dementia sufferers and the open knowledge sharing platform fixperts.org. Initial sessions offered students the opportunity to hear from specialists in dementia care and on-going contacts were made contact with a large third sector organization in the form of Alzheimer Society.

Figure 1. Dudley & Geoff courtesy of Gillot, Gulliford, Richardson

2. ***'Community Design & Engagement'*** In 2015-16 the MA/MFA Design Programme worked with Sheffield City Council on a project in the Page Hall district. The overall aim of the *'Community Engagement and Design* Project' was to employ design thinking and design knowledge to co-create, with local partners, socially relevant scenarios, solutions and communication programs. The scope of this project is wide reaching and will take some years to full explore. The role of the students was to help build up a collection of potentially socially relevant scenarios for the Page Hall district with their contributions to be seen as starting points for wider discussion and not end points for implementation. Traditionally a working class district, Page Hall has over the last few years seen a dramatic population shift with the influx of approximately 1,500 Roma with the vast majority being Slovak or Czech.

Figure 2. Page Hall District, Sheffield, UK. Courtesy of R.Bateman.

Throughout both projects students were required to document the process through film and video (Shrum, et al 2005). Methodologically in an action-research context this was a key aspect of the student learning in relation to reflecting back on these with different stakeholders, offering a way of capturing learning as well as building skills in reflexivity. These films also provided a vehicle through which to disseminate the project and will form learning objects, to be viewed and used by future cohorts of students.

By working in this way students are supported to understand ways of accessing communities and how to develop projects, avoiding Katie Swenson's (2012) concern regarding some curricula, which fail to 'teach students about how projects actually happen' (Bateman, R., Craig, C., 2016). It also meant that support could be offered in relation to navigating and coping with the emotional complexities that working with people living with illnesses or long-term conditions such as dementia or migrants living on the poverty line can evoke.

Discussion:

This project represents an important first step in building understanding of how to develop curricula to equip students with the skills required to work in social design projects. Social learning theory (Bruner) posits that isolated facts do not take on meaning and relevance until learners discover what these tools can do for them. Our study very much reflects this position and closely corresponds with Siemen's (2004) assertion that true learning occurs when the learner is able to make personal connections between the learners' own goals and the broader concerns of the discipline (Bateman, R., Craig, C., 2016).

However if change is to be supported and sustained it is important to design educational opportunities so that they are sustainable. As such Communities Of Practice made up of groups of people with a common interest are a valuable way to support group and interdisciplinary work. Lave and Wenger (1991) assert that new peripheral (or partial participation) community members learn from the active members of a community, and learning occurs as they are gradually brought into an active role or full participation in the community. The process of moving from a position of legitimate peripheral participation to full participation within a community of practice involves sustained activity and requires time for the ontological shifts that must occur. An ontological shift is "the re-assignment or re-categorizing of an instance from one ontological category to another" (Chi & Hausmann, 2003, p. 432), or simply put, a reconceptualisation. The sustained engagement of a community of practice creates a supportive framework for cultivating participant ontological shifts as members reconceptualise their roles from individual experts to members that facilitate co-generated content. (ibid)

Conclusion.

The work undertaken constitutes a small study into teaching social design within a Postgraduate Design module. The authors believe that social design has a place in design education as threats including increasingly precarious economies, financial and social inequity, global warming and war are real issues impacting on world citizens. Opening up the right forums for discussion and experimentation, including the right mix of skills and knowledge to enrich discussion needs careful consideration and facilitation. Our work to date has focused on placing social design within a module and employing cross-disciplinary and interdisciplinary working and learning. Our current project (2015-16) widens the learning experience and is taking place over a year-long period with multiple entry and exit points. This project includes the local City Council, city residents and design students and will finish in October 2016.

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