CoLAB – Collaborative exhibition as a method to open interior design

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CoLAB – COLLABORATIVE EXHIBITION AS A METHOD TO OPEN INTERIOR DESIGN

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ABSTRACT

The importance of employability in higher education led leaders on an interior design degree to introduce an innovative module that embedded the notions of collaborative working. This paper presents the analysis of three different iterations of the collaborative exhibition module in a post-1992 UK University. The module was designed to provide students with the opportunity to work and engage with their discipline beyond the studio environment. Using data from a digital questionnaire, interviews and the module evaluation, the paper explores the student experiences of the module as a form of independent learning, the challenges they encountered and its relevance to the wider employability agenda. We present these findings under three themes: (1) the importance of employability'; (2) the 'challenges of collaboration' and (3) 'time for reflection and autonomy'. The paper concludes by emphasizing the value of this mode of study for producing deep and autonomous learning.

Keywords

beyond the studio, collaboration, peer learning

INTRODUCTION

Employability has been high on the higher education agenda for the past decade in the UK and many universities have developed employability strategies, which are embedding elements into the design of their courses. Smith, Clegg, Lawrence and Todd (2007) report on the pedagogical benefits of providing opportunities for work-related learning where students can reflect upon real world work experience. The UK Higher Education Academy (HEA) and the Higher Education Council for England (HEFCE) have been at the forefront of supporting British universities to design the curriculum with an employability focus. The literature in this area is developing rapidly but there is a paucity of research within the field of Interior Design.

The "Collaborative Exhibition" project reported on in this paper has been the output of a second year Interior Design BA (Hons) module in a modern UK university. The project was designed to provide the students with the opportunity to develop as a reflective practitioner and progress an understanding of different professional contexts in which they may work and enhance their ability to contribute to them. By working with a range of external 'experts' (who offered a research topic or design brief) the project aimed to engage the public and the

student designers together with complex research and societal issues.

The paper starts with a brief review of the literature, concentrating on theory to practice links. We then outline the context for the study and explore the pedagogical intentions of the modules' designers. The methodological approach outlines and our findings are discussed. We conclude with a brief discussion on the effectiveness of the approach and challenges for students of moving between different forms of knowledge.

CONTEXT

As the leaders of the "Collaborative Exhibition" project, we designed the learning outcomes of the module with a key focus on the need for the learners to develop an interdisciplinary and collaborative approach to their learning. We were especially concerned with providing opportunities for the transfer of learning from the University environmnet into the workplace environment, and then to incorporate that learning back into the students' learning.

Mestre (2002:3) has described the transfer of learning as "*the ability to apply knowledge and procedures learnt from one context to new contexts*". Within the module under discussion here, that transfer of learning is described as "*far transfer*" by Mestre – that is "*the ability to use what was learned from one setting to a different one as well as the ability to solve novel problems that share a common structure with the knowledge initially acquired*" (Mestre, 2002-3). In order to best facilitate this transfer of learning; the module also drew upon an experiential learning approach. Boud notes that "*Learning builds on and flows from experience: no matter what external prompts to learning there might be – teachers, materials, interesting opportunities – learning can only occur if the experience of the learner is engaged*" (Boud, 1993:8).

Interdisciplinary working

The experience for these learners came in the from of the collaborative working practice which required an interdisciplinary and experiential outlook which, within design research and practice, is recognised within the literature as opening up a designer to a range of ideas and knowledge (Svensson, 2003), the importance of these fuzzy boundaries and the 'unknowing' – being open to letting go of 'what we know' is core to being interdisciplinary (Svensson, 2003). This way of working across and between disciplines is an 'arts endeavor', the coming together of scientific research and practice based 'arts' practitioners (Leach, 2005). This approach is becoming more commonplace within research outputs from research councils (e.g. The Welcome Trust and ESRC/AHRC). The module we developed drew heavily upon these ideas of supporting students to develop the skills and attributes connected to developing an interdsiciplinary outlook.

Collaboration

An additional guiding theme of the module was to expose the students to opportunities and challenges of working in a collaborative environment. Teaching the tools to support collaborative working practices is important within design education (Tovey, 2015) and these are ever more at the forefront of key transferrable skills needed by students. Risk taking is also essential to innovation: Young people entering work in the twenty-first century need to take risks in order to develop a range of appropriate design solutions to a given problem, as well as addressing everyday challenges (Andriopoulos and Lowe, 2000).

In summary, this project was developed with two underpinning themes. It was designed to replicate the scenario of a collaborative arts endeavor, as working alongside industry

professionals like this, students were challenged to apply their spatial design knowledge in a creative yet practical way, and using a range of design and fabrication techniques. Students were encouraged to be experimental in their approach, take risks through the development and creation of their ideas and to work effectively within their teams managing their own project delivery with their client. This method of working and project delivery helped students to develop key skill sets of negotiation, timekeeping, problem solving and the sharing of information and ideas that will contribute to student employability and 'graduateness'. Although students were supported in the project through a series of workshops and tutorials, tutors were aware that the scope of the project required students to cope with a higher level of uncertainty and self-direction than in a more formal studio project setting.

STUDY METHODOLOGY

Module background

The study of the Collaborative Practice module took place in a post-1992 UK University. This module is a 30-credit compulsory 2nd year module, studied over one semester. The module learning outcomes state that students will employ skills of critical awareness, evaluation and self-appraisal to reflect upon their design practice and that of others, producing work that demonstrates and communicates an appreciation of its social, cultural and economic value.

Students are expected to devote approximatly 25 hours of class-based and self-managed time per week to the module. The module permits students to engage with a range of external clients who provide a live client brief. Students are provided with client project titles and then work in groups to determine how the project brief will be met and delivered. The students are required to meet on a regular basis (at least once a week) with the module tutors who provide feedback and support where this is required. The module used blogs to communicate and reflect this was help to develop their understanding of a wide range of professional contexts and will enhance their ability to contribute to them. The assessment of the module was undertaken using both self-assessment and peer assessment with staff acting as moderators.

Study design

This project has been running for the last three years in different iterations. In 2016 students 85 students from levels 4 and 5 worked together over a 3-week period. This paper takes a review of the experiences over the three year period. The student numbers involved over the 3-year period being studied were:

2013/14	41 students	12 experts
2014/15	45 students	16 experts
2015/16	85 students	12 experts

The study undertaken was qualitative, small-scale and exploratory. It attempted to understand how the students involved with the project developed a better understanding of working with a 'live' project with external stakeholders. The key research questions we were concerned with were:

1. What were the experiences and perceptions of the students who took part in the

2. What were the student's perceptions and experiences of working with external stakeholders?

'collaborative exhibition' design project?

To support answering these questions the study design involved three main points of data collection:

1. A digital questionnaire sent to all student, expert and staff participants from the 2015/16-exhibition project. 19 responses (July 2016).
2. One-to-one semi-structured interviews. The sample included 4 students & 1 expert from the 2015/16 & 2013/14 exhibitions (May 2016).
3. In addition to the interviews, the author's analsysed the student feedback on the module over a three-year period from the module evaluation forms. The sample included 158 student responses (evaluations took place during the module – when exhibition had not taken place).

The sample is, as far as possible, representative of the larger student group in terms of age, gender and level of study.

Data

Our data are presented under three headings; Student voice, Expert feedback and staff reflections to offer viewpoints from all stakeholders involved.

Student voice

One of the early challenges for students was their understanding of the relevance of the project to their subject specialism of interior design. When asked to reflect on the project one student commented "don't assume that just because the type [of project] isn't directly linked to interior design that it won't be useful to you or your skill development". Taking them out of the traditional studio learning environment was seen as positive to some, "the freedom of direction was great" commented one student, while another highlighted the difficulties of "working around other team members schedules and making sure that everyone put equal effort in".

The group selection process was also challenging for some students. Working with students they were not familiar with, they were asked to discuss, negotiate and agree upon an allocation of tasks based on individual strengths and weaknesses. One student described "it is alright to let the ropes go and be led, instead of always stepping up to lead the group. I learnt to encourage others for their opinions and improved my workshop abilities and developed my understanding of technical practices".

It is clear from our in module findings that students wanted more guidance from tutors around the development and management of shared ideas. One student was clear that they would like "more guidance and reassurance in how particular tasks can help students, even if indirectly'. While each group was invited to a weekly tutorial with further opportunities to share best practice with the wider student group, the teaching team were keen to act as facilitators and let the group direct itself.

Many students were clear that one of the best things about the project was "working with a real client, with people you wouldn't normally work with". This engagement with industry helped students to focus their ideas and be professional in their approach. Students are also encouraged to communicate with their experts and the wider group through a blog and use this as a tool to record their process and reflect upon it, thus learning valuable

communication skills.

One student commented "In the early stages when we got our expert we said that we didn't want that particular client, but then when you think about it, whoever you have, its similar to real life. You don't choose your client. You learn how to deal with them, and convince them, and from simple ideas you can make a really good project".

In discussion with students two years after they had taken part in the project, one student was keen to highlight that "for me now, after that project, I always think about the experience of the user. …in every project I do I try to explain the experience through materiality".

Expert feedback

The experts we spoke to felt this was a beneficial project to be involved in. The idea that this was an innovative way of working and a new opportunity, both to learn and work in a different manner were reasons given for taking part in the project.

The interdisciplinary way of working was described as a key plus point to taking part in the project – one expert described "the great diversity of projects and approaches from different backgrounds" as a stimulus for their own research work going forward.

Student confidence and professionalism were highlighted as strengths within the project; the standard of the work produced was surprising to many experts.

There was a tension from the experts viewpoint in relation to the timescale of the project and the expectations regarding amount of time needed from them. One expert said "more time needed to be given over to experts to interact and work with the students on the installation". They also stated that in that they felt the students needed more time to spend on the project.

Staff reflections

There were six staff working on this project. From the staff feedback it is suggested that one of the key strengths of this project was the chance to be interdisciplinary. One staff member suggested it was the "mixing together of many profiles, skills and backgrounds" that made it a success. The staff teaching team provides a range of experience working across the disciplines of interior, visual communication, product and fine art.

One of the key challenges faced by all staff was achieving the outcome within the three-week time period set for the project (in 2015/16). It was felt there were tensions for staff between taking risks and letting students "get on with it" and stepping in to make sure the exhibition actually took place. One staff member described the importance of space for "practice based experimentation" and was concerned that this time period did not allow for it.

DISCUSSION

From the results of the study, it appeared that the learners on this module perceived the module as largely worthwhile. We discuss our findings under three themes; '*the importance of employability*'; the '*challenges of collaboration*' and '*time for reflection and autonomy*'.

The importance of employability skills

The importance of working with external stakeholders was clearly valued by students, experts and staff. Students in particular valued the skills that they perceived would support them in employability – working with people external to the university, communicating with clients in a range of different settings and learning to work effectively as a group.

The experience of this module, has, for some students, had long-term impact – the student who described herself as always 'thinking of the user' as a result of doing this project.

There was a high intrinsic value, which extended beyond the module. Students were producing a sizable and self-contained end product in an exhibition setting to a public audience, and many of them felt this was an achievement in its own right. This tangible output was the result of a new and sometimes uncomfortable learning experience for students that went beyond the normal studio practice and extended the module learning outcomes into transferrable, authentic 'employability' skills. The 'authenticity' of the module is in the 'real' outcome as a vehicle for student learning.

The challenges of collaboration

Meeting professionals working across a range of disciplines was the key driver in the design of this module. It was also important for staff to organize the student groups in such a way as to offer cross-fertilization between the different years. This approach provided each cohort with an opportunity to learn with and from each other.

The process of co-design involving negotiation and consultation with both peers and external experts was seen as a challenge that created tensions for both the students and the staff. When working in interdisciplinary teams the idea of 'letting go' what you know or your way of working is key to successful collaborations (Svensson, 2003). From the data, students, experts and staff struggled with being able to do that. One student highlighted that the most challenging aspect was the group dynamic and trying to get everyone to work as a team.

A number of students asked for more guidance within the structure of the project during the on-module evaluation. Expert feedback also showed that they felt they needed more time to effectively work with the students on the project. Staff also shared concerns about their role in facilitating the students to get the work complete within the allotted timescale.

Time for reflection and autonomy

There were inconsistencies in the responses from the students when the data was compared across the on module evaluation and the questionnaire. The staff team commented that the module evaluations took place during the project but before the exhibition opening night. Many of the positive comments from the students were describing the exhibition opening night as a success. 'Our work looked amazing!', said one student, while from another "well guys, we've managed to do a pretty good job, despite some technical errors. Everyone's work looks amazing, and I'm really lucky to be working amongst so many talented, creative and innovative people. I was chuffed to bits with how every group had contributed something fantastic to the CoLab project".

The module required students to reflect on their experiences and to use both reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action. Beard and Wilson have described reflection-in-action occurring during the experience band which involves making sense of the experience while it is happening. Reflection-on-action occurs when the students think about their experiences, analyze them and produce personal theories (Beard and Wilson, 2002-197). This ability to reflection on and in action encourages deep learning (Gibbs, 1992-2).

Many students did not manage to achieve the autonomous 'reflection-on-action' and from our follow up questionnaire and interviews is seems some students needed space and time to see the relevance of the project to their specialism. And for many this reflection did not happen until the students move beyond the university environment.

CONCLUDING REFLECTIONS

The module was designed to offer students the opportunity to develop skills that are appropriate and transferrable to employment. Students were encouraged to make connections between their studio practice and apply this creative design approach of problem solving, to more direct real life issues. This experience would provide them with a range of key employability skills as well as the opportunity to see their ideas and making, put into practice, in a real life setting.

However, the module was also designed to foster deeper learning and encourage students to work with meaning so that their learning was transformed in some way. It was hoped that through reflection, students would apply the knowledge and experiences gained from this real life context, to future contexts, and that it would impact upon their approach to and the outcome of, their design project work. It is evident from our data that some students have been able to transfer their learning in this way, however not all students have the capacity to develop a reflective approach.

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