CREATIVE CAMARADERIE: PROMOTING A SHARED DESIGN CULTURE FOR STAFF AND STUDENTS

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ABSTRACT
One of the changes to University education in recent years has been an increase in learning flexibility for students. Modular programming has allowed students to not only customize their learning, but also to study in a variety of part time patterns. Whilst there have been many positive benefits of this arrangement, one of the negative consequences has been a loss of the camaraderie that students – and staff - benefit from when working with a consistent cohort, on a prescribed programme in a studio engendered design culture. Lecturers have had to become more imaginative in providing opportunities for both students and staff to become engaged with the programme and actively identify with its values. The imperative to foster this loyalty increases as retention becomes more of an issue, programmes compete for students and students become more discerning in directing their educational pathways.
Lecturers need to look to innovative ways to connect with their students irrespective of their fragmented patterns of study, help the students connect with each other – both within the cohort and between years – and encourage the students to see themselves as part of an overall discipline area. Umbrella projects and extra curricular initiatives can sidestep the confines of modularized learning and provide staff and students with a shared design experience. This paper outlines alternative approaches by two University design departments in using the same external event to foster design culture, a sense of identity for students and staff and reinforce the values of their programmes.

Keywords: Extra curricular, engagement, relationships, community, learning through making

1   INTRODUCTION

In business terms, attracting students to enrol onto a particular design degree programme is only half the battle, retaining them over the years until graduation is just as vital. Student attrition undermines budget planning and published grading of student dissatisfaction affects future enrolment figures. Keeping students engaged and positive throughout their programme is more important than ever for Universities in competition with the growing number of private providers. As an applied degree with a direct industry connection, Product Design programmes have more challenges from private providers offering compressed, two-year degrees, than strictly theory based programmes, such as theology, where the student is not focussed on an industrial career.
In addition to student satisfaction, the morale and retention of academics is equally important. This is both due to its impact on teaching quality but also because the business cost of replacing lecturers is high. Review of applications, the interview process, training of new staff in the workings of a particular University and the loss of accumulated knowledge of a long term member of faculty all essentially increase the financial burden on a programme. In addition, dissatisfied staff with a high turnover of academics has a negative effect on morale in the department as a whole. There are many issues that create student and staff dissatisfaction, and they are complex and individual to each situation, but there are approaches that can contribute in part to combating them. Innovative thinking is needed to help faculty retain students and staff in challenging times.

2   SOCIAL LEARNING DISCONNECT

Race, in his book *Making Teaching Work* [1], identifies factors contributing to student attrition that are to do with what he sees as a growing disconnect between students and also between students and lecturers. Even when a lecturer is skilled at learning and teaching for large groups, sitting in a

crowded lecture theatre can be an isolating experience. Where studio culture and project based learning in Product Design education is increasingly replaced with lower cost, theory only courses, delivered in lecture theatres, so the educational experience can become depersonalized for the student. For the lecturer, too, moving from student centred learning to blended learning can distance them from undergraduates. Modularised programmes, allowing students to create their own pathways, bring the advantages of customization but with that comes a lack of cohesive identity for the cohort. Add to that the reduced opportunity for interaction between student and lecturer in lecture theatres, and frequently a booking system that allows no time after the lecture for all concerned to chat, for both the student and the lecturer identifying with the specific programme and a unified cohort is increasingly difficult. This outcome conflicts with the publicized aim of Universities to increase participation by students from disadvantaged backgrounds, as Race's research suggests that these students are particularly sensitive to depersonalization and places emphasis on the importance of creating a shared experience with considerable human contact to support students during their undergraduate study.

Equally, Race observes the importance of establishing and maintaining a rapport between lecturers and students. He highlights the need to 'know students names', 'engage them on an emotional level', and above all 'be human'. Yet programme organization can work against this objective, leaving students vulnerable to dropping out. If a programme is modularized and there is a concern amongst academics that students are not connecting with the discipline or the department, there is a possibility that the same can be said for the lecturers.

In addition, a fragmented programme can lead to a lack of shared vision that prevents all concerned from identifying with each other or the aims of the programme overall. For both students and lecturers the issues identified are:

- Lack of motivation due to a loss of engagement and sense of power.
- Lack of opportunity to establish rapport and for lecturers to be viewed as 'human'.
- Social isolation (students and staff).
- Lack of overtly expressed shared vision that all are committed too, that can be easily understood by everyone, both inside and outside the department.

In addition to the concern over lecturers losing interest and either leaving or simply not engaging with their work. Lack of enthusiasm in lecturers communicates itself quickly to students. Race's research shows that students respond positively to enthusiastic lecturers who demonstrate a passion for their subject and for teaching. "Having a bad day (week, year) when you're not particularly enthusiastic about anything, and this lack of enthusiasm being evident to students in the context of a particular subject they're trying to learn from you." Lecturer morale communicates itself quickly to students: "If you don't come across as enthusiastic about what you are teaching, it's no surprise that students notice this!" Enthusiasm is necessary for good teaching as argued by Ramsden [2] in *Learning to Teach in Higher Education*. Ramsden provides ideals for good teaching that include:

- A desire to share your love of the subject with students;
- An ability to make the material being taught stimulating and interesting.
- Facility for engaging with students at their level of understanding
- Showing concern and respect for students
- Commitment to encouraging student independence
- Using teaching methods for students to learn thoughtfully, responsibly and cooperatively.
- Giving the highest quality feedback on student work.

To combat the growing disconnect of students and lecturers, it is vital to rethink the educational situation as it really is now and innovate practice to support all involved. Whilst there may be a case for challenging issues such as modularisation in the long term, in the short term something needs to be done now, outside the current system if necessary, to ensure that the discipline continues with the same passion that is has always engendered in staff and students.

3   A SHARED VISION

A good starting point in fostering a passionate commitment to a programme is communicating a shared vision. To do this, a vision has to be explored, developed, agreed and defined. This exercise in itself can help bring a team together. Involving students in this discussion can empower the student body and help them to take ownership of that vision. Imposing a vision – particularly one that is rigid and does not evolve – can have the opposite effect, disempowering those it is imposed on. Dee Fink

observes the importance of helping students to see a central focus for each course: "Once the general structure has been created, the teacher needs to find a way to help students clearly see and understand the central focus of the whole course. The simplest way to do this is to find a theme, question or graphic that reflects the main focus of the whole course." [3]

Without contextualizing this within a programme focus, this is superficial. This paper argues that a central focus needs to be developed for the whole programme that overt, identifiable and has a depth to it the students and staff can commit to and communicate clearly to others. Communicating the ethos of the programme, its scope and intent is key for the arguments made in this paper to commit students and academics to a clear, shared vision – a mission statement – that they can identify with. In building a shared vision, discussing it within the stakeholders, communicating its' message to a wider community, opportunities for human contact between students and with academics are created. Race emphasizes the importance of providing opportunities for students to mix, to chat informally and the creation of supplementary support systems. "In curriculum terms means incorporating group tasks and activities that encourage students to mix, and making space in the timetable early in the academic year when students can just sit and chat informally." [4]

4 UMBRELLA PROJECTS

Working on external projects will also support the students in learning interaction with the design community and each other. "When teachers want students to enhance their human interaction capabilities, they have to find ways to help them become more self-aware and other-aware in relation to the subjects being studied." [5] Biggs stresses the importance of providing significant learning opportunities for students to aid deep learning as they change the student's perspective and understanding, rather than proving them with impersonal knowledge [6]. One of the main ways that Product Design educators have created meaningful experiences for students, that motivate and engage them, is by using real world clients. Students respond well to extending their learning outside academia and the status of lecturers tends to be raised because the students see them in action as designers and interacting as design managers in the 'real world'. It also allows for students to see the lecturer as human, and to work with them towards a common goal, not to be working solely in response to assessment directly set by the lecturer.

However, as identified by Ancher and Loy in the 2011 paper 'Bridging the gap between aims and objectives for business clients and academic course planners in 'linked' learning projects' [7], real world projects in a university setting come with challenges that can cause stress for the lecturer, such as meeting external deadlines at odds with the academic calendar, dealing with unrealistic and commercial expectations of clients, rather than student centred and having assessment driven by criteria that are not aligned with those of the educator.

Positives of real world clients for assessed projects:
- Links to design community
- Objective assessment
- Shared experience (both on same side)

Negatives of real world clients for assessed projects:
- Modularisation makes difficult to project manage
- Possibility of wrong learning messages from profession (both in brief and assessment)
- Meeting deadlines means often lecturers are forced to take over projects to meet commercial imperative of the client

Creating extracurricular design based activities in real world contexts can provide students and lecturers with a shared experience (between students, across year groups, with staff), be used to reinforce shared identity, and – if handled correctly – generate enthusiasm and pride without the pressure and potential conflict of assessment. Umbrella projects are projects that work externally to coursework, either building on assessed activities or providing completely separate extra curricular activities. Dee Fink suggests a rethink of approach, such as suggested by the introduction of umbrella projects, is required by faculty in response to the current realities of learning and that it will require considerable effort: "Making holistic, multidimensional changes in the way educational programmes are created and supported, modifying traditional procedures related to faculty work and to the evaluation of teaching, establishing new centres for instructional development, and coordinating student development with faculty development will require time, energy and commitment. " He

argues that the benefits of creating additional and innovative learning opportunities that enhance learning in ways not directly related to particular courses will still be seen within assessed learning [8] "When a teacher finds a way to help students achieve one kind of learning, this can in fact enhance, not decrease, student achievement in the other kinds of learning." The learning may be innovative, and operate differently to conventional assessed learning and that may require the academics to be willing to commit additional time to make them succeed but if designed with the aim to improve the wellbeing of students and lecturers rather than to meet purely academic or research funding aims, lecturers and students can be prepared to make the commitment to make it work as evidenced by the two examples, based in the same external context, given here.

5   PROJECT EXAMPLES

Design Made Trade is a large trade exhibition held in the Royal Exhibition Building in Melbourne, Australia each July. It started as a fringe exhibition for individual designers connected to the established buying exhibition, Furnitex, held in Melbourne Convention Centre at the same time. However, Design Made Trade has grown into a significant exhibition in its own right, with 5,000 people visiting over five days each year. The first three days are trade only, aimed at Interior Designers, Retailers and Architects, the final two days are open to the public for a fee. A number of Universities advertise their Design programmes by taking a stand at the event, but Griffith University and The University of Tasmania both took the opportunity to go beyond a conventional advertising stand, and use the exhibition as a way of bringing staff, students and members of the design community together. Their approaches were different, with different engagement for stakeholders, but shared outcomes in terms of improved morale and shared vision for the respective design departments. Ramsden says that to inspire students it is vital that projects are made that engage and in addition, to inspire lecturers, they need shared experiences with the students that stop any academic strangulation of project work that stop it having any meaning. "Good teaching and good learning are linked through the students' experiences of what we do." [9] Didactic teaching is not appropriate in design; students need to be engaged in ways that empower them in developing their ideas themselves. Both the Griffith and UTAS approaches provide examples of opportunities and challenges.

5.1 Connection to programme (Griffith University)

This umbrella project idea proposed the creation of a structure for an alternative model of work-integrated learning based on the development of entrepreneurial skills within a safe environment. The project was open to all students, though the focus was second year and up, including post graduates and recent graduates. In a two-year pilot study, Design students exhibited their own products to be shown at Design Made Trade in Melbourne, developing a proposed Griffith Technocrafts brand. A starter project was embedded in the second year, based on assessed project work, but the decision making for choosing the designs to be exhibited was not linked to assessment but based on voting by the students and lecturers on the suitability of designs for exhibition with very different criteria. Once the core of designs had been chosen, students in the final year, Masters programme and recent graduates were also invited to submit designs for consideration. A committee of interested students and lecturers met to finalise the designs and plan the stand and project management. Ramsden states, "A focus on collaborative, supportive and purposeful leadership for teaching is associated with a culture of strong teamwork and student-focused approaches."

The overt benefits for the students were the 'real world' experiences of designing and marketing products for real markets and the opportunity to receive external feedback on design innovations that are not restricted by the lecturer's own prejudices nor the preconceptions of clients. The unexpected, and far more significant benefits were in the creation of different relationships for students to their own design work, to each other and to lecturers. Even more unexpectedly were the positive benefits for the lecturers, who found the experience motivating and inspiring. Ramsden's research in education suggests that "an information-transmission, teacher-focused approach to teaching on the part of a teacher is associated with a surface approach to learning on the part of their students, while a conceptual change and development, student-focused approach to teaching is associated with a deep approach to learning." Working together outside the confines of the coursework structure, and opening up involvement across the year groups, including postgraduates and recent graduates, changes the relationships between all involved and creates opportunities to genuinely enhance the "respectful atmosphere." Gardner identifies as essential for learning [10].

Figure 1. Design Made Trade 2012 Griffith student work

5.2 Connection to programme (University of Tasmania)

"There is an island where creativity is treasured. It is not buried or lost. The land helps define it. The schools embrace it. It grows from the past and is not fearful for the future. It is a place where designers flourish. Tasmania. Design Island." (Tasmanian Design Alliance 2012). The basis for the 2012 Design Made Trade Umbrella project that Design Lecturers and students from UTAS were involved in was connecting to a design community. The students worked as a team to develop design proposals for an innovative display stand to showcase Tasmanian design, based on a very specific brief developed by the Tasmanian Design Alliance, led by the Tasmanian Design Centre and based on accumulated understanding within that organization of what Tasmanian design stood for. The students – and exhibiting lecturers – were told to be 'selfless' in their design approach, set aside their design egos and personal aesthetic to support a shared community of designers working within a recognisable design ethos and signature. One of the benefits of this 'selfless design pursuit' was that it assisted the critical analysis of design proposals because of a shared desire to achieve the best possible outcome. This was noticeably contrary – both in the type of criticism offered by students and the way in which feedback was received – to the perceived *personal attack* that can be difficult for students to accept in studio criticisms. A clear sense of pride was generated through the project and acknowledgement of team membership and contribution.

As a design exercise the success of the project hinged on two main threads. The first being a tight and well considered briefing document that offered design opportunities and flare but within strict parameters. Along the ways some of the concepts developed focused on the stand design as being the 'most important item' but gradually students realized that their design ideas and concepts needed to support and celebrate the objects they were displaying not dominate. This was an invaluable lesson to be learned, a moment of realisation for the students and ironically it became the reason the whole 'stand' design was so highly praised, it presented such a thoughtful support act to the objects on display, where everything had its considered place. The second was that the construction methodology was determined. The system was in place and understood. It was a tested method that addressed knock down components, efficiency of material use and ease of construction. Parametric software enabled dimensions of parts to be altered with ease without impacting on workload.

Figure 2. Design Made Trade 2012 Stand UTAS students

Race identifies extra curricular activities as a way of creating a sense of belonging for the students: "Foster extracurricular opportunities so that students feel they are members of an organization rather than just attendees at a place of learning." He suggests "Retention can be fostered by offering sporting, cultural and social opportunities outside the formal experiences where students can engage with staff and one another informally." He recommends lectures make themselves "known and available to students" by "taking part in extra-curricular activities of the kinds you encourage your students to take part in will help" [11]. He argues it allows students to see a lecturer "as a real person".

The 2012 DMT stand by UTAS brought the design community of Tasmania together to make a shared statement on identity outside the State. Designers from across a number of disciplines – furniture,

lighting, jewellery, product, ceramics, interior design, graphic design and architecture took part. UTAS Design students designed the exhibition stand and organized the logistics. It was a challenging task, both from the point of view of agreeing and expressing a shared identity and shared values, and also because of the practical issues of transporting the stand across the Tasman. There had to be true collaboration by all parties involved from the design and installation through to manning the exhibition stand [at DMT] and the de-installation. A professional level of commitment to the task was required from the students, above and beyond the 'university requirements'. It can be argued that the students had to endure an unfair workload, as did the lecturers who were under considerable pressure to produce an outcome that would shed good light on the discipline area. Both lecturers and students were placed under high levels of pressure simply not experienced in projects that remained 'in house'. Whilst this kind of pressure needed to be managed, and without question the 'fear factor' adds stress to both students and lecturers, if planned well and used strategically at critical stages in a designer's education the benefits of a pressure fuelled real life project such as this one, it can be beneficial for both staff and students and the broader design community as bonds are made and strengths discovered that only truly come to the surface under high-pressure situations.

6   CONCLUSION

As blended learning becomes more of the norm, fragmenting design studio culture still further, lecturers will need to look beyond individual projects to umbrella projects that sidestep both students and staff outside the confines of modularized learning and give them a shared design experience.

Competitions and real world clients provide external drivers for students, but often cause problems in meeting the expectations of a commercial project or client sponsored competition and the choice of designs that are applauded through these activities is essentially out of the lecturer's hands and that can conflict with the aims of the programme. Umbrella projects, such as these described here, provide an alternative where design students and staff are engaged in combined efforts to exhibit design outcomes to a wider community without relinquishing control of the process. Extracurricular activities also add to the workload of the academics and students alike and without doubt add to the general stress - though compared to the stress of working with a 'real world' client on a commercial brief it is a stress over which the lecturer has more control – and may, on the face of it seem an unnecessary burden. However, the benefits of inspiring and motivating both students and lecturers, connecting them across the year groups, and to the design community with a shared design vision, far outweigh the negatives, enriching the lives of all concerned and give design in academia a chance for a raison d'être and creative camaraderie that the changing university system has been in danger of squeezing out.

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