

BEYOND THE DIVIDE! FINDING A COMMON LANGUAGE INTEGRATING THE 'TRIBES' OF DESIGN AND BUSINESS

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ABSTRACT

Conley (2007) highlights the value of broadening design management students' learning experience by expanding '... the relevance and use of design beyond the design department, where the primary objectives and outcomes are limited to development' (p. 14). Hull and Sadowska (2008) observe that business schools are still catching up with ways in which they can introduce design thinking and creativity into their curriculum, whereas design schools, through infusing some business education in the design curriculum have initiated the move, but current efforts are not always enough. Thus, a new interconnectedness needs to be fostered between the creative disciplines like design and business. Within traditional educational contexts designers and business people often have difficulties establishing a common communications platform, where both sides could interact. Therefore a question arises whether within the changing market, with growing impetus in supporting designers' input into business ventures, a collaborative design and business education could provide a new platform of communication and expertise? The case of the BA (Hons) in Global Business and Design Management (GBDM) – a degree pathway at Regent's College (RC) – is used to explore this question. The article focuses on curriculum delivery and students learning experience by examining a final year undergraduate elective module 'Managing Strategic Design' (MSD). The paper draws on module teaching materials and interviews with students and teaching team to substantiate the analysis. The paper concludes that tools such as MyStrategy can act as the communication platform between design and business by offering common modeling techniques illuminating the business effects of design. Thus, the teaching and learning approach discussed illuminates a potential role of higher education in developing common platforms where design and business work together better.

Keywords: 'Blue Oceans', Strategy Dynamics, MyStrategy software, design thinking, design, business

1 INTRODUCTION

Conley (2007) highlights the value of broadening design management students' learning experience by expanding '... the relevance and use of design beyond the design department, where the primary objectives and outcomes are limited to development' (p. 14). Hull and Sadowska (2008) observe that business schools are still catching up with ways in which they can introduce design thinking and creativity into their curriculum, whereas design schools, through infusing some business education in the design curriculum have initiated the move, but current efforts are not always enough.

To achieve such competences a new interconnectedness needs to be fostered between design and business. Within traditional educational contexts designers and business people often have difficulties establishing a common communications platform, where both sides could interact. Designers can struggle to express benefits from a business perspective, while business people often view design as a cost to be minimised. Therefore a question arises whether within the changing market, with growing impetus in supporting designers' input into business ventures, a collaborative design and business education could provide a new platform of communication and expertise? The case of the BA (Hons) in Global Business and Design Management (GBDM) – a degree pathway at Regent's Business School (RBS) – is used to explore this question.

The article focuses on curriculum delivery and students learning experience by examining a final year undergraduate elective module 'Managing Strategic Design' (MSD). The module gives business students

an opportunity to model the interactions between design and innovative business propositions. The paper argues that undergraduate students can indeed devise innovative 'Blue Ocean' business propositions and understand the role of design as supporter and driver of those propositions. The use of Strategy Dynamics modelling techniques allows students to model the interactions of design and business, and to experiment with the relative importance of design versus say improved staffing, product range or other business factors. The paper draws on module teaching materials and interviews with students and teaching team to substantiate the analysis.

2 BACKGROUND

RBS is a private sector business school and forms part of the Business and Management Faculty at Regent's College in London, UK. The key to selecting the GBDM degree pathway is that this undergraduate degree makes design management part of its core business curriculum. Along with standard business subjects, students explore principles of design management and its practices; design and innovation; corporate brand management; and strategic design amongst others. Thus, students gain a holistic approach to learning about business and management developing their ability to implement design thinking and process to promote continuous innovation and improve business performance. In particular, the MSD module combines 'Blue Ocean' thinking with design thinking in order to provide students with a bouncing off platform to go beyond the obvious market offering and define new territories of business growth and success. The main aims of the module are to: (1) equip students with an ability to analyse existing market spaces to identify potential 'Blue Ocean' gaps; (2) provide scope for students to respond to these gaps by developing design proposal for future products or/and services; (3) develop students' abilities to defend their design choices through generating compelling business cases in support. In this particular case the 'Blue Ocean' conceptual framework embedded within the module is drawn from seminal work by Kim and Mauborgne (2005).

The concept of 'Blue Oceans' was used by Kim and Mauborgne (2005) to identify newly defined business areas of untapped market space, highly profitable growth, where competition is irrelevant because the rules of the game are waiting to be set. This contrasts with what both scholars identify as 'Red Oceans' with defined and accepted boundaries, known competitive rules of the game, crowded markets, commoditising products and competition turning the metaphorical Red ocean bloody (Kim and Mauborgne, 2005). They contend that most organisations conceive of themselves as locked into 'Red Oceans' and miss the opportunity to compete in Blue ones. Kim and Mauborgne (2005) introduce a practical range of tools and techniques, such as the Strategy Canvas to highlight what is important to current and potential customers; and the Four Actions Framework to help managers identify such opportunities. Of particular relevance to this discussion is Strategy Dynamics approach championed by Warren (2008) concerned with understanding and managing performance through time. It allows the mapping of the interaction of resources, both tangible such as customers and capacity, and intangible such as brands. The use of the associated MyStrategy software allows students to build up models of the resources involved with a business, and show how performance varies over time, for instance by using 'design wow factor' to increase 'word of mouth' for a business.

Conley (2007) argues as long as designers' are primarily associated with the function of development within an organization they cannot affect initiatives outside this area within any given organization. Thus, Conley (2007) maintains design expertise needs to be dispersed across the organization within areas like product management, marketing research, and strategy, which highlights the value of interconnectedness of design thinking and Blue Ocean thinking. However, this view is only now slowly becoming part of design management practice and education, as evidenced by a recent publication of Design Management Institute 'News and Views', where Trombetta (2008) brings to the attention of design management community the concepts of 'Blue Ocean' thinking as an exploration of growing relevance in '... creating buyer value and capturing company value' (p. 12). However, where his discussion falls short is in establishing links with design process, design thinking and value generation. Nonetheless as the investigation into the MSD module demonstrates, there is an inherent value in combining design thinking

and 'Blue Ocean' thinking within a business context as a means of generating competitive advantage.

3 ESTABLISHING A COLLABORATIVE PLATFORM IN AN EDUCATIONAL ENVIRONMENT

Students on the MSD module in Spring 2008 had to complete three projects that combined 'Blue Ocean' thinking, Strategy Dynamics and design thinking to various degrees. At the same time, they were asked to develop a Process Handbook (PH) used as a tool to monitor individual learning development and any creative processes in response to the given projects. Project A asked students to identify a potential 'Blue Ocean' opportunity for an innovative Club in London. In responding to the project students were asked to develop a 'Resource Map' outlining resources associated with this club, as well as design criteria which were carried forward to act as the basis for Project B. Project B asked them to use the already established strategies and design criteria as the testing template in generating their design solution. Project C built on both Project A and Project B, where students had an opportunity to revisit their submissions and feedback in order to build on them, as well as generate a business case for their opportunity and its design outcome. Students had to take on different roles depending on the nature of the challenge - business/design manager for Projects A and C, and design manager for Project B. As one of the students states 'It was very interesting observing people that are not that familiar with design management aspect and see how their attitude to the discipline changed. During the course. Specially in project B' (November, 2008).

When students began to build their business cases relying on the use of MyStrategy software, the need for a common language became most evident between the business 'tribe' and the design 'tribe'. The software offered flexibility as to how each resource could be identified and recorded, leaving room for students to develop their categories and defining hierarchy of importance with regard to business growth. However having a software environment firmly defined by a business metaphor posed its own difficulties to implement characteristics that seemed not easily quantifiable like, design value or brand value or design 'otherness'. This is where the visual mapping of the various 'resources' and their relationships built a bridge and offered new platform of collaborative communication.

The biggest challenge students found on this module was the ability to come up with offerings that were sufficiently 'Blue Ocean'. One student, in their Process Handbook, comments on how 'there is quite a bit to think about ... it seems a bit daunting'. (February, 2008) At the same time, the same student states '... really looking forward to the Blue Ocean stuff. I had my idea right away so just hope I will be able to use it' (February, 2008). However in few weeks they observe '... find it hard to apply the different theories to my idea [Blue Ocean proposal]' (February, 2008). Whereas another student comments '[t]his week has given me a lot of insight of the process of actually trying to create a Blue Ocean business and how it is actually very hard for organisations to differentiate from their competitors but have to survive in the market' (March, 2008).

The need for students to 'think outside the box' proved stretching; as the question would come up how far is too far? Often students would arrive at a particular point in their project, believing all was ok, only to find out upon reflection that things were not as grounded as they initially thought. Students were helped to balance the trade-offs between truly innovative ideas and more solidly grounded business propositions. In a number of cases the identified 'Blue Ocean' niche was clearly spotted, but the design criteria potentially hampered the implementation of that innovative approach. Alternatively where the original proposal was relatively ordinary, the design implementation could bring unexpected results that would lift the proposed solution above its competition.

The biggest stumbling block was that to build a viable business case in Project C, all the preceding elements had to be 'right'. As a student reflects '... I did not have the best review after Project A therefore it left me disappointed, disheartened and confused. I didn't know how to move forward and as one project connects to another I was further worried. Briefing to project B helped since it took the project away from this business aspect and had more fun and creative elements to it' (March, 2008). Again this is where MyStrategy software came to the fore. Through the process of mapping out the different resources and

design factors needed to implement the business concept, students analysed and reflected on their choices and decision making patterns. As the software is capable of demonstrating both aspects, it forced students to review their idea and push it beyond their comfort zone.

However even here there were some problems. Although the progression of the three projects relied on the fact that each student would need to work through the requirements step by step often reflecting on their progress, this was not always the case in practice. Often students did not allocate the time to allow the process to simply happen. They wanted quick and sure answers, where there might have been none. Although happy to allow their creativity to flourish whilst creating their responses to Project B, with regards to Project A and C, students wanted to identify the shortest route to the 'correct' answer. It was as if assumptions around 'doing business' and 'doing design' did not allow them to integrate to a great extent the two in order to generate a synergy of approaches. This is why MyStrategy software was so important through the provision of visual language to portray how business thinking and design thinking can be brought together. As a student reflects '... starting to work more with MyStrategy has made the whole task seem more comprehensible' (April, 2008). By identifying sets of parameters that as a total affect both areas of expertise, students could consciously address proposal value and ensure that they could truly build a business offering that moves beyond its competition. As one of the students remarks '[b]eing forced to consider certain areas/problems was very helpful and made [me] think about some of the aspects that need to be included in the final presentation' (April 2008).

However, there can be a flip side to using the MyStrategy software. If the numbers and parameters do not work out, students can panic as they believe that they have made a glaring mistake and only if they identify it and remove it, it will all work again. The visualisation of the processes with all its positives can also be a limiting factor of the benefits of the MyStrategy software as students can neglect trying things out. They want to get it 'right' first time and worry as they think their proposals are not realistic enough. This could potentially hamper the creative process of developing the 'Blue Ocean' proposal and its implementation through design.

4 INTEGRATING THE 'TRIBES' OF DESIGN AND BUSINESS

The students reactions and feedback on the MSD module have indicated that there is a clear need to develop a common platform, for a collaboration between the two 'tribes' to be most effective. In current higher education there is a tendency to offer the ratio of majority/minority focus depending on the particular know-how. However the MSD module *raison d'être* is precisely the focus of equal balance between the two areas of expertise. As one student comments '[t]his module unlike others has a very clear and direct relation to business and is about how design can be used in a business to differentiate it and advance its worth' (February, 2008). Thus, Strategy Dynamics, MyStrategy, and design-focused creative tasks allowed students to cope with the often abstract aspects of strategic thinking and the development of their proposals. Through the mix of concrete activities as well as theoretical explanations the two perspectives of design and business could be brought together. In addition, the visual language afforded by these tools, allowed for development of the common communication. 'The fact that we had to use both design and strategy (which was very hard) when considering our idea gave us a taste of how the real world will be. I believe it will be a great example to use when trying to convince more business minded people about the impact of design' (November, 2008). In retrospect, students who did best 'got' the business proposition roughly right early on and then proceeded to iterate around it. Moreover, having a common language using approaches such as MyStrategy software helps bridge the 'tribal' divide.

5 FUTURE TRENDS

As companies increasingly struggle to cope with an ever most hostile business environment, the need for approaches like 'Blue Ocean' thinking to create truly innovative propositions will grow. Students who have experience of the difficulties of thinking 'out of the box' combined with the use of MyStrategy software to model the interactions as well as how design can shape the proposition should be at a considerable advantage. In addition, another potential advantage of MyStrategy modelling is for designers

to 'pitch' to clients. Clients can immediately grasp the interactions with resources with which they are familiar (customers, brands etc.) and then be invited to gain ownership of the model by calibrating different variables based on their management judgement, for instance in terms of potential response rates to various approaches. Thus, the model becomes the medium for joint understanding and discussion.

6 CONCLUSION

In the context of the ever growing inter-connectedness and convergence, it is suggested that currently it might be the business schools that will take a lead in driving the changing role of the relationship between design and business, as a growing awareness of design amongst business community demands a common platform. As the undergraduate students demonstrate, tools such as MyStrategy can act as the communication platform between the two disciplines. Such modeling techniques could be of significant benefit in helping design practitioners convince business people as to the business effects of design. Thus, the approach demonstrated by the 'Managing Strategic Design' elective could potentially illuminate the role of higher education in developing common platforms where design and business work together better.

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