MIND THE GAP: A COLLABORATION IN DESIGN TEACHING AND LEARNING BETWEEN UK AND AUSTRALIA

Noemi SADOWSKA[1], Selena GRIFFITH[2] and Tom MORGAN[3]
[1]Regent's Business School, Regent's College, UK
[2]College of Fine Arts, University of New South Wales, Australia
[3]Regent's Business School, Regent's College, UK

ABSTRACT
In April 2008, lecturers from Regent's Business School London, UK and The College of Fine Arts, University of New South Wales, Australia met by chance at a conference dedicated to design management in Paris, France. They discussed the possibility of a cross continental, cross cultural and cross disciplinary teaching collaboration. This paper documents the resulting experimental teaching and learning collaboration and its outcomes. It explores the challenges of facilitating positive, constructive, and meaningful exchanges between a small class of design management students at a British Business School and a large cohort of sustainability students at an Australian Design School with two very different agenda's relating to course outcomes for students. Particular attention is paid to the nature of the collaboration and the student learning experience within such diverse contexts. The paper also discusses methods used to generate collaborative teaching and learning experiences that explore the gaps that could lead to potentially more fulfilling learning opportunities between distinct bodies of students. The paper concludes that this cross-disciplinary teaching collaboration illuminates the need to develop collaborative skills in reconnaissance, ideation and conceptualising across both business and design disciplines, leading to enhancements of educational activities for both the students of business and of design.

Keywords: Collaboration, e-learning, cross cultural, cross disciplinary, international, design management

1 INTRODUCTION

Key words like collaboration, teamwork, interdisciplinary thinking, ideas exchange, and blended learning permeate much of university curricula in the current paradigm of higher education. In addition, the skill sets they represent are highly sought after by employers. In 2007, a Company Survey, conducted by Regent's Business School Careers department, provided an employer's perspective on the range of skills that would enhance a student's employability. It highlighted how important the ability to collaborate is as a skill of today's graduate. As the survey states '... communication skill is ranked by almost 60% of the surveyed employers as *Extremely Important*. Team Work by 40% of the employers … None of the employers rated [either skill] as *Not Very Important* or *Irrelevant*' (Regent's Business School, 2007) As there is no doubt of the value of collaborative teaching and learning, this paper focuses on methods used to generate such experiences to explore the gaps that could lead to potentially more fulfilling learning opportunities between distinct bodies of students.

In April 2008, lecturers from Regent's Business School (RBS), UK and The College of Fine Arts, University of New South Wales, Australia (COFA) met by chance at a conference dedicated to design management in Paris, France. They discussed the possibility of a cross continental, cross cultural and cross disciplinary teaching collaboration. It was considered that this could contribute to a deeper richer learning experience (Gibbs, 1992) for both student cohorts. This paper documents the resulting experimental teaching and learning collaboration and its outcomes. It explores the challenges of facilitating positive, constructive and meaningful exchanges between a small class of design management students at a British Business School, a large cohort of sustainability, and small group final year design students at an Australian Design School with three very different agendas. Particular attention is paid to the nature of the collaboration and the students' learning experience within such diverse

contexts, accompanied by a critical analysis of their effectiveness. Staff and student feedback from the collaboration are used as illuminative lenses to contextualise the scope of this experimental teaching and learning collaboration and its outcomes.

2 BACKGROUND

Communication technologies such as the Internet, e-mail, blogs, discussion forums, wikis, social networking sites like Facebook and MySpace and image/video sharing software such as YouTube, Picasa and Flickr are used on a daily basis in personal, educational, and professional contexts to share ideas and information, hold discussions and communicate across cultures, distance and time zones. Application of these technologies has obvious benefits in education contexts, particularly for designers and design managers (Topalian, 2002), as they contribute to creating more ubiquitous and more engaging student experiences (Koohang and Harman, 2005). Two factors are required for collaborative use of these technologies to occur. The first is the 'motivator' - a need for exchange over a common artefact. The second is the 'conduit' – an appropriate platform for the exchange. In the case of this collaboration, the 'conduit' was an online forum entitled Think Tank (TT). This was developed using Joomla, a freely available, open source, easy to access and use content management system that allowed the facilitators to design, build, populate and manage the forum themselves. This environment was aimed at fostering interaction and exchange where students could dip in and out and use it as a creative jumping off point in order to respond to their particular projects. In this case, the 'motivator', in the form of a very open TT brief, was issued to participating students. It required collaboration in research and learning to aid students in questioning the application of technology, its operation in design and understanding the pleasure principals of its use. The brief had no predetermined solutions or outcomes, nor primary focused agendas. There was no extrinsic reward (such as marks) attached to the use of the forum for either cohort. The primary aim was to explore and undertake a creative learning experience focused on investigating 'What makes technology more pleasurable?' It was hoped that students would be self-determined (Deci and Ryan, 2008), and value the intrinsic rewards this interaction might afford them.

At RBS the TT brief was incorporated into a design project focusing on design processes and technological innovation as a store of opportunities to develop new and unexpected ideas in a particular real-life context. The incorporation of the TT brief with its broader focus allowed for a collaborative exchange with the students in Australia, who were working on a different design brief. At COFA, the Interactive Systems students were a mix of mostly 1st year and some 2nd, 3rd and 4th year students learning about the social, environmental and economic considerations that sustainability implies within the context of design practice. The TT brief asked them to specifically consider the usability, ergonomic, anthropometric, social and environmental ramifications of technology. The 4th year studio students were all studying either an integrated design degree or a double degree in design and education and completing their final design studio. These students, with interest in design and design philosophy and its application to their specific individual projects, were asked to use the TT forum to explore relevant technology issues. Both cohorts worked in their geographical location in teams as well as individually. They engaged with the TT website during class as well as in their self-directed time.

3 COLLABORATION

How successful was this collaborative effort? In what ways did the students believe they benefited from this animated learning experience (Boud and Miller, 1996) and where did they identify gaps that impacted on their ability to produce results for their particular projects? In what way the results students have submitted showed an impact of the engagement with the TT forum?

Think Tank was left very much to the student's directorship in an attempt to create ownership. Students from both cohorts were encouraged to use video and sound clips, media reports, articles and journals, personal statements and observations, books, blogs and WebPages and any other catalyst or evidence in seeking out the discovery and understanding of the topic. The 1st year students, the vast majority of the COFA cohort, had been using a new online blended platform that had many teething problems. This had

impacted on their usual enthusiasm to use new technologies, as they were 'techno tired'. Some voiced their irritations in the TT forum. Some did not participate at all. Those who did participate tended to be the higher performing, more engaged students who generally explore any options that could deliver a richer learning experience for them, as evident from the following comment 'I like the casual feel of the Think-Tank site. It is easy to use and the idea of being able to share ideas with other students in other tutorial groups here and other countries is great' (COFA, November, 2008). TT seemed to encourage students to maximize the amount of research they could produce over a limited time period. The learning cooperation's positive effects were pointed out by a student who declared that TT '… makes the task of researching the same topic easier and arrives at ideas faster' (RBS, October, 2008). This leads to a cooperative process where more contribution equals a greater yield. As students recognized this time efficiency to mass as appealing, they made no further reference to the quality of the output or concepts of discovery. The experience was noted by some participants as positive from a learning outcome relating to on-line collaborative activity. 'This [TT] I think gives the course more substance since it is preparing one for the professional world' (RBS, October, 2008). The student's reflection on TT points to the appreciation regarding the relevance TT has in training for the workplace requiring cross disciplinary communication/ collaboration.

Some COFA students continued to contribute to the forum for over 4 weeks past its prescribed life on a more diverse range of topics from usability through to the impact of the global financial crisis on technology use and consumption; whereas the RBS students saw TT as a macro view of the topic and a potential hindrance in their discovery of the tasks in the overall brief. The relevance of this macro understanding was initially not seen an asset. 'Think Tank by itself is a very good activity. It is a brand new concept at Regent's College but it was difficult to link it to the "more pleasurable London Underground" activity ... Hence the two activities are useful separately but do not go with each other as the same project' (RBS, October, 2008). Another student alludes to the solution to this perception 'I believe the findings and the generation of ideas as a result of using Think Tank could have been optimized if the details of the final task had been briefed at a later stage' (RBS, October, 2008). It appears the marriage of the general use of TT as a discussion tool with a following focused brief created confusion for the RBS students. RBS students are submerged in an environment that is primarily focused on business. The differing reactions point to the diverging learning cultures, where one places an emphasis on extrinsic reward through outcome and points awarded as opposed to a process of discovery in learning (intrinsic reward) which could lead to an equal or better outcome and set of grades. The COFA students were frustrated by the more directed and less exploratory responses from the RBS students. As a result their tutorial activities, which were to utilise the TT discussions, opened debate about technology in society almost solely centred on the use of technology in education. This was a fruitful outcome but differed from the planned result.

4 THE GAP

It is believed that the different responses to TT brief highlight the need of higher exposure to design practitioners and creative industries for students of design management in the context of a business school. This is clearly highlighted by the reaction of the RBS students when encountering the COFA students on TT. 'At times it became slightly de-motivating because of the differences between the students in their level of understanding and knowledge about the topic. And as a result it became uncomfortable for students, who were still in the learning process' (RBS, October, 2008). Interestingly the COFA students saw the forum as a good place to exchange ideas and were in fact not 'de-motivated' by the RBS students but hoping to provide good resources. The most formal responses came from the combined education/design degree candidates which may explain why they were seen as 'intimidating' by RBS students.

TT clearly made the RBS students feel exposed to a new ground outside of their comfort zone. The RBS students seemed to decide that in this context their perspective was potentially not as valuable. There also seemed to be a problem in developing a sense of greater common purpose stemming from

exchange irrespective of geographical location. The need of familiarity seemed to create a commonality amongst RBS students. This is evident in the students favouring to reply to threads that were dominated by those who they knew. This was rather surprising as all students are from the web savvy generation, where communication with unfamiliar people is often a norm. This suggests that collaboration within a closed group of students who don't all know each other could be perceived as intimidating, requiring an element of greater familiarity. This is certainly a retreat to the student's comfort zone. In an interesting juxtaposition another student points out 'If this activity had involved more participants from more than two countries it would provide a broader picture' (RBS, October, 2008). Suggesting if TT were to be open to a wider spectrum and in turn creating greater anonymity for the contributors, the input and influence would increase. The two points of reference, in regards to the two groups of student's academic backgrounds, had the effect of one group (RBS) being discouraged by the contribution of the other resulting in lower self determination and hence lower motivation to collaborate (Anderman & Leake, 2005). The RBS students saw the COFA students who focus primarily on the topic of design as dominant. Therefore a gap was produced around the overall group unity and difference (academic/subject) between participating student bodies, which potentially threatened a more fulfilling learning experience.

However, from the perspective of the lecturers it is thought the TT brief had a strong impact and that it had a very 'uniting' influence on RBS students response to the overall project brief. Rather than fostering individual reaction, it fostered a community, although it seems the students have not thought about it in those terms. The reason for this deduction stems from the very uniform set of student responses to the overall project. This piece of coursework (without the TT brief) has run three times already and each year the responses to it varied substantially between individuals. There was always a certain sense of individuality that stemmed from each student and the very varied social and cultural backgrounds they came from. This time around the nature of the cohort was similar – students came from all over the world – however they all seemed to focus on very similar aspects of the potential solution.

There is no doubt that the overall outcome from TT was positive, conceptual gaps were crucial for the cross-continental, cross-cultural, cross-disciplinary, collaborative learning. This initial endeavour has pointed to positives in cooperative student learning and the reflection has highlighted some key points for enhancements in future projects by creating an in-class structure to overcome the potential barriers and eliminate any negative prejudgments from the participants. Moreover, this experience has highlighted areas for future research in relation to education, learning culture, interdisciplinary collaboration, and communication skills development. In particular, within the area of student ownership and development of creative input and reward. Potentially, the development in replication of organic contribution by students and the move away from obligatory input will enhance the ownership and encourage use, resulting in more fulfilling teaching and learning methods.

5 CONCLUSION

It is a core principal at RBS to educate business students in the development of design collaboration skills in reconnaissance, ideation, and conceptualising. These skill sets are vital in the enhancements of such educational activities for both students of business and of design. The collaboration between the students from RBS and COFA is a fertile platform for future development, where TT offers a great opportunity highlighting differences in learning cultures between these two types of students and the very often-neglected commonality between them, embodied in the sense of entrepreneurship. As a result, cooperation in learning from this cross- continental, cultural, and disciplinary axis placed both cohorts of students in an altogether new realm of discovery. From a professional practice perspective both bodies of students have the potential to learn to better understand how to work with peers from disciplines other than their own through participation in TT.

Virtual Learning Environments (VLE) are becoming common place in the structure and in application of education. In the past several years higher education institutions have initiated the creation of enterprise open source applications such as course management systems and electronic portfolios (Koohang &

Harman, 2005). With such programs as 'Blackboard', 'it's learning', and 'Moodle' already core tools in education and development, the TT cross continental, cultural, disciplinary and collaborative e-learning highlights new directions of development and future methodology in the delivery of education. However, the most meaningful lesson from the collaborative TT experience points to the need for student ownership and self-initiated discovery resulting in an enhancement of skills to achieve greater learning outcomes and experiences via a VLE.

REFERENCES

ANDERMAN, L. and LEAKE, V., 2005. The ABCs of Motivation: An Alternative Framework for Teaching Preservice Teachers about Motivation. The Clearing House, 78(5), 192-196
BOUD, D. and MILLLER, N., 1996. Working with experience, animated learning. Routledge, London.
UNSW ACADEMIC BOARD. 2003. Graduate Attributes. UNSW Academic Board, Sydney, Australia
DECI, E.L. and RYAN, R.M., 2008. Self Determination Theory Overview. [online]. Accessed from: http://www.psych.rochester.edu/SDT/theory.html. [Retrieved 18.09.2008]
GIBBS, G., 1992. Improving the Quality of Student Learning. Technical and Educational Services Ltd, Bristol.
KOOHANG, A. and HARMAN,K., 2005. Open Source: A Metaphor for E-Learning, Informing Science Journal. Vol 8.
REGENT'S BUSINESS SCHOOL, 2007. Regent's College, Regent's Business School London, Company Survey 2007. Careers, Placements and Alumni Department. Regent's College. London
TOPALIAN, A., 2002. Promoting design leadership through design management skills development programs. Design Management Journal, Design Management Institute, Boston; 13(3).

[1] Noemi SADOWSKA
Regent's Business School
Faculty of Business and Management
Regent's College

Inner Circle, Regent's Park
London, NW1 4NS, UK

sadowskan@regents.ac.uk
+44(0)20 7487 7708
www.regents.ac.uk

[2] Selena GRIFFITH
School of Design Studies
College of Fine Arts
University of New South Wales
Sydney, Australia
PO Box 259
Paddington, NSW, 2021
Australia
selena.griffith@unsw.edu.au
+ 61 2 938-50600
www.cofa.unsw.edu.au

[3] Tom MORGAN
morgant@regents.ac.uk