Partnerships with Industry

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> *More than ever, design education must prepare students for change. To this end, it must move from being teaching-centred to a learning-centred environment which enables students to experiment and to develop their own potential in and beyond academic programs. Thus the role of a design educator shifts from that of only knowledge provider to that of a person who inspires and facilitates orientation for a more substantial practice.*
> *– Excerpt from the Icograda Design Education Manifesto*

The 'Partnerships with Industry' project is an attempt to rethink work placements for students in the third year of their study in the Bachelor of Visual Arts (Graphic Design) at the University of Ballarat. This paper outlines the requirements of the project, presents case studies based on follow up interviews with clients and students, and includes visuals from selected projects. A set of conclusions is then drawn regarding the value of continuing the program, together with recommendations for improvement.

Work Placement

Work placement has historically been a staple in graphic design education as a means for undergraduate students to gain real world experience. There is a high recognition of the importance of this hands-on approach to student education by both educational institutions and industry. This is supported by a recent report commissioned by Design Victoria which states: 'interviews with working designers revealed that first hand experience or exposure to industry was one of the key areas lacking in students' (*Designing Our Future*, 2009).

However, there are limitations: studio placements are usually brief and the environments are generally fast paced, and problems can arise with managing the quality of placement. In addition, there are often limited opportunities and the studios themselves can lack the space or staff to manage placements.

In response, the Partnerships initiative builds on this idea of work-integrated learning, but aims to broaden and deepen the student's experience through working on a real

project with a client. It is not designed to replace the student's involvement in work experience in a graphic design studio, but serves to broaden the student's perspective of the design industry.

The general response from students is that both direct client contact and work placement are important aspects of their education. 'It's interesting how you get two different experiences out of it. I think they are both valuable and it is important to have a mix of the two' (Student, University of Ballarat).

Partnerships

Getting the project off the ground required approaching organisations directly. Firstly a letter of introduction was sent to prospective industry and community partners, followed by face-to-face meetings to discuss potential projects in more depth. The response from the community was positive and produced enough projects to run the program.

The teaching staff developed a list of specific requirements which act to underpin the projects these include that:
- projects have a significant research component
- projects can be, and are, clearly defined
- projects are comprehensive enough to require work by the students for approximately one day a week for an overall period of 24 weeks
- clients will be available to students for meetings and feedback
- clients will be willing to participate in formal written feedback on the students
- lecturers would be available to meet once a week with the students
- students will initiate contact with clients and lecturers
- projects constitute a third of the major course within the student's final year of study

Another key aspect of the Partnerships initiative that staff are keen to prioritise wherever possible is to arrange for our students to work with 'Not for Profit' organisations. These organisations provide the scope that we were looking for and have the added benefit of engaging and building relationships with different sectors of the community.

Following are case studies of a selection of projects students were involved in. Projects have been selected to reflect a range of student experiences.

CASE STUDY #1

Client PINARC Speakers Bureau **– Not for Profit** – a provider of services to people with a disability, their parents and carers. Student team of two.

Project Outline – a web-based communication representing six of their members with six individual stories. These individuals are part of the PINARC Speakers Bureau, they present to organisations about their experiences of living in our society with a disability.

Target Group

Potential employees, other services providers, families looking for a service provider, general public of all age groups.

When referring to the PINARC members with disabilities, the term 'individuals' will be used.
The PINARC employee facilitating the project will be referred to as 'Annette'.

A Collaborative Process

This was Annette's first experience of working with design students. At the beginning Annette was unclear about the objectives of the project. She knew they wanted some form of story telling but were uncertain about the process. It helped tremendously that the students were very clear and had questions mapped out for her in their first meeting.

In turn, individuals from PINARC visiting the studio and presenting their stories to the students assisted the students' understanding. As one of the students explains 'it helped us understand who they are, they are just like us but with tremendous physical and mental difficulties, it was a very heart-felt experience' (Student, University of Ballarat). When students met with the individuals, Annette was impressed with the

interactions. She had thought that there may have been barriers, but the students seemed fairly comfortable with the process.

These successful early experiences made way for an enthusiastic engagement with the project on both sides. As has been argued elsewhere, the real benefit of projects that take students outside the norm is the increased awareness of what design can contribute: Ball's study (cited in Corazzo, 2009) emphasises that 'Collaborative culture fosters the continuing professional development of students, academic staff, graduates, employees and employers in creative enterprises'.

This collaboration has also challenged the student's perspective about the scope of graphic design, previously the student thought that graphic designers primarily work for magazines and studios, rather than go out and work with organisations in the community. Annette also had her assumptions about graphic design being synonymous with commercialism challenged by this project. After meeting and working with the students on this project, she felt her perception had broadened. Annette stated in an interview that took place on 25 June 2010:

> I am amazed with these third year students and their capacity to take on our concept of working in the field of someone's disability, the essence of the things that must be captured and done in such a particular way, it's big and to this point they have done really well.

Figure 1: Design of home page, hot spots take users to parts of the house and garden where they meet individuals of the Speakers Bureau.

CASE STUDY #2

Grampians Team Department of Planning and Community Development.

Student team of seven plus industry specialist, payment attached to project.

Project Outline: Young Farmers for the Wimmera Documentary Project – The broad purpose of the documentary is to promote, in a positive manner, agriculture as a career option and rural life more generally. The aim is to portray the lives of farmers holistically. Some of the issues to be explored include: leadership, participation on boards and committees, the impact of a changing climate on agriculture, keeping communities resilient in the face of drought/climate change, the importance of networking with other young farmers and strengthening productivity.

Documentary Duration: 10min

Target Group: those aged between 18 and 30

Building Confidence

This project was selected as a case study because the research component was significant, because of the self-confidence the students gained, and the standard of work they produced by going through this process. David Brown states from an interview conducted on the 18 of June 2010: 'It comes down to the confidence that you gain by going though that process and doing the research, [the students] become more confident to be themselves in that situation and by being themselves that's where they will be the most successful'.

As Michael Eraut has demonstrated, the key for successful workplace learning is to proactively seeking out opportunities to learn, but this requires confidence. Confidence emerges as an important factor in workplace learning. This confidence comes from meeting appropriate challenges successfully. Eraut's study (cited in Corazzo, 2009) The students, after a slow start to the project, found the tuning point for them was

when one student took on a leadership role and helped the team to delegate responsibilities. One of the students stated:

> We might have needed to go away and be in disarray to see the importance of delegating roles and establishing a clear direction, however if we did it over again we would establish roles more quickly but that's only because we have been through the process once (Student, University of Ballarat).

Because of the funding attached to this project, a local documentary filmmaker David Brown was employed to guide the students through the process of filmmaking. Additionally he was responsible for all camera and audio work. The student's responsibilities were research, producing, storyboarding, editing, designing various promotional materials and assisting on the production team. Although film-making is essentially a discipline in its own right, this integration of processes allowed the student to learn a lot about how graphic design relates and contributes to other industries.

David Brown offered his opinion on how design students could benefit from of the practice of documentary filmmaking (interview with David Brown 18 June 2010). He felt that it teaches students to really listen to people, to not push their ideas too much, or to over-produce. Students need to gain a clear understanding of what the client requires, but not let them override the experience – to listen to what is going on and work from that basis. A student indicates the benefit of this perspective:

> It really informs your research process, it is unusual to work on such a big projects, it was good to learn to forget everything and research from start to finish. I also applied it to some of my uni work and researched more thoroughly that perhaps I would have done previously, this gave me new ideas and I went into my project with a much more open mind (Student, University of Ballarat).

Figure 2: On location in the Wimmera David Brown and the students set up a shot

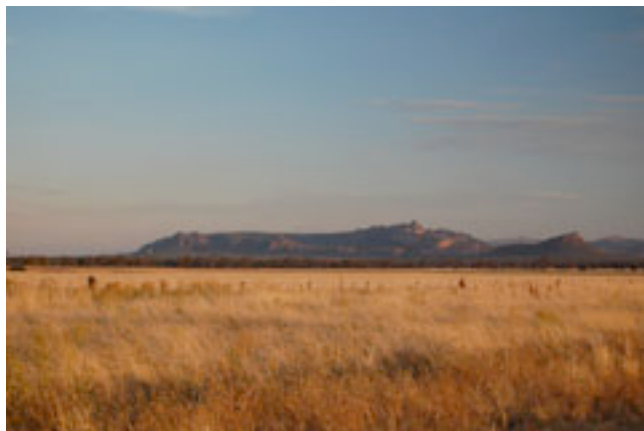Figure 3: On location in the Wimmera David Brown and the students set up a shot

Figure 4: Wimmera landscape - ranges

Figure 5: Wimmera landscape – grain silos

CASE STUDY #3

PINARC – Not for Profit – a provider of services to people with disability.
Student team of two.

Project Outline – Poster Campaign to raise awareness about the range of people who utilize the services of PINARC.

Target Group – General public

Learning From Mistakes

These students also worked with PINARC but with a different point of contact and on a different project. This project was chosen as it provided an object lesson in what can go wrong. This problem was brought to the attention of lecturers during the students project presentations. The standard of work that these students presented was well below the standard required at a third year level. The students' response, when asked to reflect on their presentation, justified their design work by claiming that it was 'what the client wanted'. The client, on the other hand, often felt let down both by the students' seeming lack of commitment to the project and the standard of the work they had produced so far. One of the other partnership projects faced a similar situation; they had initial difficulties engaging with the client and the project but were able to win back the confidence of their client by taking some responsibility for the break down in

communication and produced some excellent design solutions. As indicated by a student: 'You need to prove to client that you are worth sticking with so if you have trouble you really have to put in the extra work to get their confidence back in you and I feel that we really managed that well as a team' (Student, University of Ballarat).

Conclusion

The projects to date are still in progress, but our findings so far indicate a positive response from students and clients. Students reported that the experience of working in collaboration with a client, getting deeply involved in the project and, in some cases, making a significant personal contribution to the community was very worthwhile. Even the parts of projects that fell into disarray and required redirection were considered of value because of the meaningful learning that resulted.

The project has demonstrated a workable method of knowledge exchange, flowing from community institutions and businesses to students. It has also demonstrated that student involvement can enrich and expand the institutional and business communities' understanding and appreciation of the role of design and visual communications.

Throughout the project, students were introduced to the idea of design/visual communication being a strategic business tool, more than just an expression of aesthetics and style. This aspect ties in with recent initiatives of Design Victoria to encourage companies and institutions to integrate design into their business activities.

The project has shown that interaction between students and the working community can serve to broaden both students' and the community's view of the outcomes that graphic design can deliver. In doing so, the programme can help move our institutions to a more contemporary view of what visual communication represents.

Recommendations for Improvement:

- On the whole, in developing this project further a key recommendation is to introduce more opportunities for reflective practice, especially with input from clients

- Explore in more depth the methods students employ to problem solve difficulties with clients and the group work

- Provide clients and students more formal guidelines regarding their roles in working with each other

- Set a recommended optimum size of 2 to 3 students per group, at the most 4 on a large project

- Introduce more structured time for students to seek on-going guidance from lecturers

References:

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