

Dr Cherry Barlowe, Dr Nanette Carter and Dr Simon Jackson
Swinburne University of Technology

Pod Tours: A pilot study that explores audio assisted excursions as a module for an online design unit

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Introduction

The excursion is supported as an effective form of experiential learning. Experiential learning in the field trip setting “increase[s] knowledge, develop[s] skills, clarify[s] values, and develop[s] people’s capacity to contribute to their communities” (Association for Experiential Education, 2012). This paper offers insight into the development and implementation of unsupervised Pod- Tour (audio) excursion in a tertiary design unit. The aim of the excursion is to contextualise theoretical components of a design cultural awareness subject taught to students at the School of Design, Swinburne University of Technology. The idea to introduce audio tours into the delivery mix was based on two factors, firstly, a commitment to advance online delivery modes and secondly as an alternative ‘tour leader’ when tutors (due to illness or living interstate) cannot attend one of the scheduled excursions. This paper will begin with a brief overview of the unit and the excursion module; next the compare and contrast of the values and pitfalls of a tutor-led excursion and an unsupervised Pod-Tour, followed by a case study of the latest 2014 Pod-Tour inclusive of student feedback. Finally, consideration is given to the scope of the Pod-Tour and how it could be incorporated as a learning tool across a diverse range of disciplines.

An online design cultural awareness subject is offered to students at the Swinburne University of Technology. It is an online unit designed ‘to explore key issues in contemporary design and media practice and their relation to social, economic and political contexts’ (Carter, 2014, p.2). The delivery of the unit is a blend of online and conventional pedagogies. The conventional models include live lectures and film screenings, readings, discussions, research tasks, essay and excursion. Convention converges with technology in the form of weekly online synchronous discussions and wiki tasks. The online component provides a ‘communal learning environment’ that motivates and facilitates the student to reflect, research, answer questions and share

knowledge and views about the lectures and readings (Holmes & Gardner, 2006, p.76).

The objectives of the excursion are to balance an online curriculum that is grounded in key generic skills, including: analysis skills (visual and textual), problem solving skills (evaluating, comparing, reflecting, interpreting and applying); communication skills (reading, writing, and listening); ability to work independently (meeting deadlines, research) with experiential learning in the form of an excursion (Bowman, 2010; Forster, 2004; Bloom, 1984). The excursion not only supports key generic skills of communication, teamwork, responsibility and time management, it also provides socialisation among students and the opportunity to build rapport between students and tutor. Moreover, the excursion offers a contextualised experience that engages the student to recognise the links between the design issues discussed in the subject, and the application in the urban landscape (Breunig, 2005; Claiborne et al., 2014; Jakubowski, 2003).

Tutor-led excursion

The tutor-led excursion incorporates permanent locations (studios, shops, galleries) and temporary opportunities (exhibitions, pop-up galleries). The permanent locations have included, but are not limited to; The Sticky Institute, Aesop Shop by March Studios, Craft Victoria, Hosier Lane, Council House, Silo 'no waste' café to name a few. The temporary exhibitions have included the City Gallery, NGV Studio, and Australian Centre for the Moving Image (AMCI) and the RMIT Gallery.

The organisation of the tutor-led excursion involves the tutor preparing the itinerary, which can range from a walk-tour of Melbourne's laneways or visiting one or two current design exhibitions. On the day of the excursion the students meet at a designated time and location. Once everyone has arrived, the tutor directs students to introduce themselves and then the tour commences. Each time the group stops at the preplanned location the tutor provides insights, facts and stories. If the excursion is in an exhibition space, then the tutor plans a task for the students to achieve while viewing the exhibition. For example, a recent excursion was to the 'Melbourne Now' exhibition at the NGV to view the work of Jon Campbell, who 'explored vernacular language and popular culture through paintings and installations which adopt the graphic conventions of commercial art and design to explore Australian identity and humour' (Campbell, 2014). Prior to entering the exhibition the tutor arranged the

group into small teams to analyse the work and determine two ideas that were effective and two that were not and then explain to the rest of the class their choices.

The tutor-led excursions have benefits and pitfalls. The benefits include firstly, socialisation, where the students and tutor meet face-to-face in a relaxed setting. Secondly, the content of the tour establishes appropriate connections with the theory presented in the subject. However, the pitfall of a tutor-led walk through the laneways renders the student's participation as 'passive'. In other words, the student's role is to follow and listen while the tutor articulates the connections between what is presented (building, sculpture, art work) with the content in the unit (Herr, n.d.; Muhammad et.al, 2011). Also, after the initial introductions, apart from the few students who already know each other, the majorities of students do not socialise throughout the excursion but rather walk alone. In comparison, the tutor-led tour of a temporary exhibition supports the students to be 'active' participants in the excursion (Herr, n.d.). For example, they are required to work in pairs, which involves socialisation. Also, the student is provided the framework to engage in a combination of key generic skills including listening, negotiation, critique and analysis and the application of his or her understanding of the exhibition is used to formulate a verbal critique, which calls upon recall and performance (Bowman, 2010; Bloom, 1984; Meyer, 2003).

Pod-Tour excursion

The Pod-Tour follows the same aim as the tutor-led excursion, but without the tutor being present on the day of the excursion. The Pod-Tour supports the 'active' learning experience as the students have an active role to play. In order for the student to understand his or her role in the excursion, a clear framework that guides the student's participation is necessary (Herr, n.d.; Jakubowski, 2003). With that in mind, a prescriptive itinerary for the module was established in order for the students to focus on the experience rather than administration. Specifically, the organisation of the students into sub groups of three or four, followed by instructions for the time and place to meet, how to access the audio files and where to download the itinerary and map. In addition, a succession of tasks was formulated. First, the students gather as a group and elect one person to take a group photo. Second, to locate the members in their sub group. Once the sub groups are established then each group elects one person to play the audio through their smart phone or tablet speakers and another to be responsible for taking a succession of photos: one of the sub group and then images to capture highlights during the excursion. The photographer/s are also

responsible for emailing the group photos to the tutor. Finally, a review of the excursion is carried out as a discussion thread in the next online forum, which includes the group photos and students sharing highlights of the excursion.

Pod-tour Case Study One

The first series of Pod-Tours were chosen from a variety of already established free Pod Tours of Melbourne including: The ABC Melbourne Pod-Tours that were developed in conjunction with Melbourne University entitled: *Death, Dirt and Disease; Showbiz, Sexy Spectacles and Sideshows* (abc.net.au); and *Melbourne Lane ways Audio guide* (Talk-n-tours.com). In addition, the *Arcades and Lane ways* (Visit Melbourne.com) was also tested. The reason for using established Pod-Tours rather than developing a Swinburne-specific audio tour was to test the effectiveness of an unsupervised audio tour. Over the past two years one tutor, Dr Cherry Barlowe, has received anecdotal feedback from students on the Pod-Tour excursion and the feedback has been positive. However, in order to gain constructive feedback it was important to ask specific questions (Solomonides & Swannell, 1996). The procedure used to gain feedback was based on a Harvard model for early feedback for University courses (Bok, 2010). The questions included: What are the positive aspects of the Pod-Tour excursion? What is happening in the excursion that you would like to see changed? What would you like to see happen that isn't happening?

The feedback from thirty students was mixed and included comments, here presented in a generalised form:

Twenty-eight students commented that it was 'great to meet people from my group.' Twenty-nine students said that they enjoyed the excursion. One student fervently insisted that they did not enjoy the excursion and wanted it removed from the curriculum. Five students would prefer the tutor to guide them. Twenty-six students enjoyed learning more about Melbourne and comments along the lines of: 'I was born in Melbourne and the Pod-Tour opened my eyes to sculptures and buildings that I had not noticed before.' Finally, eighteen students agreed that the excursion was fun and informative but would prefer content specific information.

The conclusions drawn from the feedback are foremost that the students enjoy participating in an excursion so that they can meet others from the class. They are also interested to learn something new and want the content to be related directly to

the unit. Finally, if they had the choice between an audio tour and a tutor-led excursion some would choose the tutor-led excursion.

The preference for the tutor-led excursion did not deter the tutors because; in a world that is embracing online learning 'new ways of teaching and learning that address the creation of learning environments' is essential (Holmes & Gardner, 2006, p.76).

Moreover, the e-tutor is not necessarily located in the same geographical location as the student and illness can also prevent a tutor from undertaking a walking tour.

While the established Pod-Tours produced by the ABC and other sources met the socialisation and active learning objectives required by this subject, greater specificity with the content of this particular design theory subject was required. Subsequently, one tutor, Dr Cherry Barlowe, began the process towards the creation of a content-specific pod tour. The next component of this paper will outline the process involved to create this pod tour and the feedback from students who have participated in the experience.

Pod-tour Case Study Two

The design awareness subject covers numerous issues faced by designers throughout the world, for example, sustainable design; cradle-to-cradle philosophy; design for development; design activism; data visualisation; design for emotion to name a few. However, prior to selecting the content for this Pod-Tour it was more important to determine the location. Location was a priority to support travel within a time frame of half an hour after the class starting time so that they could engage in the one-hour excursion and get back in time for their next class. A prominent landmark within the Melbourne CBD was therefore selected. The next step involved canvassing the location looking for content related examples within the urban landscape. It became clear that examples of sustainability, design for emotion, design activism, DIY aesthetic and storytelling were readily accessible within the CBD. Specifically, *Council House CH2* and the *Silo Café* by Joost are examples of sustainable design and practices. Next the *Beyond the Ocean of Existence* sculpture, the *Weathervanes*, the *Time and Tide* and the *Public Purse* sculptures are examples of DIY aesthetic, storytelling and design for emotion. To follow is a brief background on each pod tour stop.

Council House CH2 is an example of sustainable design in Architectural construction as well as sustainable practices in the daily internal function of the building

(Melbourne.vic.gov.au). The Silo Café focuses on demonstrating sustainable practices in the management of waste. Next, the series of sculptures along Swanston and the Bourke Street Mall provide 'source material' to 'actively engage with and interpret' (Knight, 2008, p.9). In this case the sculptures provide contextual objects to discuss the theories and practices of story telling, design for emotion, design activism and the DIY aesthetic.

With the excursion highlights, or 'stops' established, the next stage involved taking photos of the stops, researching background information on each stop, writing the script, designing a map, designing the itinerary and finally producing the audio files. Adobe Audition software was used to create the recordings because it provides the options to pause in mid audio and it is easy to edit vocal errors and then record back into the audio track when needed. Rather than creating one very long audio file individual audios for each stop were set up. This decision was based on removing the need to pause the file at each stop, which reduces the risk of accidentally going back to the beginning of the audio file. Once the audio files were complete they were labeled with the name of the stop for example, Stop One: Beyond the Ocean Of Existence and then uploaded to 'DropBox'.

Leading up to the excursion the students were informed that they would be engaged in a Pod-Tour excursion and that a Blackboard Forum would be created specifically for the excursion with links to the audio files emailed. Finally, students were notified that although the tutor would not be attending the excursion, s/he would be available by email during the time of the excursion.

When the student enters the Excursion Forum they discover a series of threads, one that provides the aims, objectives and structure of the excursion as well as a downloadable version of the map and itinerary. The next few threads are dedicated to each subgroup. The students find their name and reply to the thread, firstly to introduce themselves to the sub group and if they deem appropriate to share contact details. On the day of the excursion the students were expected to arrive on time with a hardcopy of the itinerary and map as well as carrying a device with the audio files ready to play.

As mentioned earlier, a component of the pod tour involved the students taking a series of photos and then emailing them to the tutor. In this instance the tutor was not specific with the timeframe for emailing the photos and assumed that emails would

be sent after the event. However, while dutifully sitting in front of the computer prepared to respond to student inquiries she began to receive a sequence of images of the tour in 'real time'. It was one of those 'delightful moments' because although she was sitting in Perth and the excursion was in Melbourne she felt part of the experience. Not only were the students listening to her recorded voice they were also interacting with her across time and space. In that moment it became clear that although the tutor is pivotal to the success of online learning environments their need for connection with the students is often left out of the discourse. Current literature defines the e-tutor's role to promote effective learning through acting as 'organizer, designer, consulter, manager, and evaluator' (Wang & Qiao, 2011, para.4; Holmes & Gardner, 2006). Although the description is accurate at a facilitation level it does not address the basic human need for connection. In this instance, the space between the students and tutor dissolved and became part of the excursion experience.

In order to gain feedback from students on the content specific Pod-Tour a Harvard-model feedback survey was undertaken (President and Fellows of Harvard College, 2010). Thirteen students participated in the pod tour and all thirteen supported the continuance of pod tour excursions. No student names were recorded, and all feedback was generalised. To follow are comments associated to each survey question.

a) What were the most positive aspects of the excursion?

Nine students reported that getting away from the computer and meeting classmates was positive. Twelve students enjoyed learning more about Melbourne and in particular they took pleasure in learning about the sculptures and buildings that they had walked past for years and never noticed.

b) What is happening in the excursion that you would like to see changed?

Three students agreed that nothing should be changed. Six students commented that the audio needed to be recorded louder. Three students would like it to be longer and cover more area. One student suggested that the excursion could be carried out alone and without the group because they believe it would make a pleasant one-on-one experience. Two students would like the tutor to be present. One student would like more Pod-Tour excursions included in the unit.

c) What would you like to see included in the excursion?

Two students were content with scope of the excursion. Four students supported the idea of the excursion including the interior of buildings along with the exterior. Two students proposed the addition of museums and galleries. Two students would like the excursion expanded to include more content specific examples. One student suggested the addition of historical information about the buildings would be interesting. One student was not sure what else to include. Finally, one student would like a discussion thread set up in the next online discussion forum to reflect on and re-enforce the content of the excursion.

The feedback from students supports the inclusion of content specific Pod-Tour excursions into the delivery mix. In addition, student feedback reinforces the potential of Pod-Tours for any course where students are required to contextualise theory and evaluate things in the real world. For example, art and design courses could create gallery pod tours that include questions and discussions tailored to explore issues discussed in the unit. Architecture faculties could use the pod tour to explore building design and materials in the urban landscape. Horticulture, Zoology, Ornithology, Surveying, Geology could take students into the field with pod tours that are designed to convey knowledge from the expert to the novice.

This paper supports unsupervised and content specific Pod-Tour excursions as an experiential model for online learning. Four case studies are discussed; two traditional tutor-led excursions and two technology enhanced Pod-Tour excursions. The results reveal that both the traditional tutor-led and the unsupervised Pod-Tour promote 'active' learning and engage higher-order thinking skills when content specific tasks are included. In addition, results support the value of un-supervised Pod-Tour as an alternative 'tour leader' when tutors live interstate or are unable to attend due to illness. Finally, the Pod-Tour described in this paper could help educators to consider how they might incorporate unsupervised Pod-tours into their curriculum.

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