

Title

Not just for show: identity, engagement, and work integrated learning through design graduation exhibitions

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Abstract

The end of year 'grad show' is a significant milestone in visual communication degrees in Australia. Graduate exhibitions are a celebration of the university experience, an important landmark on the student journey, and represent the culmination of a creative degree. As an outcome, grad shows enable students to learn from, contribute to and profile themselves and their peers through exhibition practice, and as a platform, they showcase the cultural and creative diversity of student achievement in design. In capturing the attention of preferred industry guests and future employers, the grad show's identity also extends beyond the student cohort to reflect the calibre of the work and teaching embedded within each design degree program.

The motivation for this reflective paper comes from shared staff experience in facilitating grad shows across multiple institutions. We have become increasingly aware of reframing the role these exhibitions play in contributing to work-integrated and situated learning through connecting our student's existing knowledge with active, authentic, contextual learning. Their conceptualisation, development and delivery play a significant role in bridging the participant identity from 'student' to 'professional'; scaffolding professional confidence and the application of existing skills to real-world tasks and problems. In this paper, we will discuss insights gleaned from examining the grad show process at two institutions – The University of Newcastle and Western Sydney University. In doing so, we will critically reflect on our teaching approaches and outcomes as responsive structures for positioning graduate exhibitions as sites of active engagement and learning.

N.B. work integrated learning will be shortened to WIL where appropriate.

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Keywords: Graduate Exhibition, Grad Show, Situated Learning, Work Integrated Learning (WIL), Design Pedagogy, Engagement, Reflexive Practice, Visual Communication Design

Introduction

As design educators, we have become increasingly aware of the need to more effectively articulate the key learning outcomes embodied as part of our graduate exhibition processes in visual communication design. In this paper, we discuss students' graduating exhibitions (grad shows) at two separate institutions, the University of Newcastle and Western Sydney University. This discussion critically reflects on the nature of grad shows as student milestones and industry engagement activities, at the same time recognising the reflexive need for a re-evaluation and re-communication of the graduate exhibition process for multiple audiences. We describe the themes identified through this collective reflection that capture the goals and benefits of grad shows, as well as proposing the constructive re-framing of graduate exhibition processes as vital situated learning and on-campus work integrated learning opportunities.

Reflecting on graduate exhibitions in Visual Communication Design

The end of year grad show is a significant milestone in many visual communication degrees in Australia. Graduate exhibitions are a celebration of the university experience, an important landmark on the student journey, and represent the culmination of a creative degree. As an outcome, grad shows enable students to learn from, contribute to and profile themselves and their peers through exhibition practice, and as a platform, they showcase the cultural and creative diversity of student achievement in design. In capturing the attention of preferred industry guests and future employers, the grad show's identity also extends beyond the student cohort to reflect the calibre of the work and teaching embedded within each design degree program.

The motivation for this reflective paper comes from shared staff experience in managing end-of-year grad shows in visual communication design across two institutions, The University of Newcastle and Western Sydney University. As facilitators, we have become increasingly aware of the role these exhibitions play in contributing to learning through connecting our students' existing knowledge with active, authentic, contextual learning, (Janesick, 2006; Zilvinskis, 2015), as well as supporting industry engagement, and contributing to a sense of graduate identity for our students.

This increased awareness has grown from a dedicated period and process of professional reflection – something we ask of our students, allow for as studio practitioners, and incorporate as part of our design pedagogy (Schön, 1984, 1985; Cross, 2007) – but that we had not extended explicitly to our own teaching practice with regard to graduate exhibition development. The time for reflection that engendered this paper was instigated and made possible through opportunity and support from the Centre for Excellence and Equity in Higher Education (CEEHE) at The University of Newcastle. who encouraged and facilitated these preliminary reflective research methods, particularly in connection to education practice (Boud & Walker, 1998; Fook et al., 2006).

This process of reflection between colleagues across our two institutions, has confirmed our existing appreciation of the value of our graduate exhibitions, as well as directly led to new understandings and a re-evaluation of key aspects of the graduate exhibition development as examples of situated and on-campus work-integrated learning facilitated for our students. Previously these missing reflections were lost in the semester timeframes of the end of the year, the demands of grading deadlines, the contracted nature of key staff involved and the disappearance of the students in question leaving the important outcomes for students gained through participation in grad show, as well as the staff facilitation within the curriculum, relatively unaccounted for. Emslie (2011) acknowledges this apparent invisibility of WIL facilitation in descriptions of academic activities, and Billett and Henderson (2011) underscore the importance of articulating and integrating practice-based WIL into the formal curriculum. This paper frames the early stages of a nascent and multi-faceted research project that is an attempt to rectify that situation and formally capture and evaluate dimensions of the on-campus situated learning and WIL role of grad shows for students in visual communication design degrees.

Bringing design practices and identities together in capstone courses

Final year courses in visual communication design degrees are where student's undergraduate experiences of internal project-driven processes (such as the sharing, display, and critique of their creative work) become more directly aligned with real-world personal and professional outcomes that help support the formation of graduate identities. Working towards the graduate exhibition is an important part of that shift in focus for capstone courses.

It is recurrent in visual communication pedagogical practice, that students showcase or exhibit creative outputs at various milestones and deadlines throughout their degree. Design educators encourage students to become comfortable with showing, critiquing and talking about their work. This is considered an integral and valuable skill for the graduate visual communication designer, indeed an integral part of the habitus of a designer (Bourdieu, 1977; Gray, 2013). In the formative years of a design degree, the (primarily inward facing) 'showings' that occur at UON and WSU contribute to increasing student agency and independent operation within structures of learning, as well as building a 'community of practice' (Wenger, 1998; Lave & Wenger, 1991).

Alongside this, the sharing of aesthetic appreciation and knowledge transference through peer review primes students to understand the importance of professionally displaying their work. Embedded within their capstone year (year three for UON and year four for WSU), students complete both self-directed and client driven projects. The premise of these graduate projects is made clear from the onset, as students are briefed with the knowledge that these projects may have real world implications (if successful) and will be showcased publicly and on a professional scale at each cohort's end of year grad show. Students respond to this opportunity with a sense of purpose as they seem to understand the gravitas of their major work being more than another university assessment item. Observationally, as a result, we often see students thriving and developing their own sense of style and designerly identity at an exponential rate in their final year.

Embedding a professional output in a capstone year is consistent with more successful transitions from student to practitioner across many fields (Gardner & van der Veer, 1998, Fleischmann & Hutchison, 2010). Gardner and van der Veer (1998), acknowledge the personal and professional transition that graduating students are experiencing at the end of their study, their sense of accomplishment, celebration

and the corresponding need to make sense and rationalise their experience of the degree they have invested time, financial, emotional and creative resources in. At this point in their journey, student focus is often on future employment and the working phase of their lives. This time and process of reflection for students is characteristic of the capstone course moment. It is also a point of consideration for the identity built over the previous years in the degree, its relationship to their individual personal attributes and skills, and their burgeoning sense of professional identity as they prepare to engage with the field and industry beyond the structures of the degree and institution. This student perception of the significance of their graduating exhibitions also aligns with the importance and timing of capstone courses for scaffolding the transition between an undergraduate student identity and a postgraduate student or practitioner identity.

Graduate exhibitions as authentic, situated and work-integrated learning

Multiple stakeholders suggest that authentic learning experiences supporting the work-readiness of graduates should be included in the tertiary curriculum (Cooper et al., 2006), and the value of work-integrated learning as an example of authentic learning for students has been well documented overall, (e.g. Scheuer & Mills, 2015; Janesick, 2006; Mueller, 2005; Rowe, 2017). Several approaches to work-integrated-learning noted by Patrick, et al. (2008) include placement, project work, simulating the work environment and virtual WIL. While the literature tends to separate WIL into placement and non-placement (or simulated) models, it also recognises that positive aspects of the WIL experience for learning can be shared between each mode (Smith, Ferns, & Russell, 2014).

This acknowledgment is significant for our collective consideration of the role of graduate exhibition processes in our curriculums and the responsive positioning of our graduate exhibition processes as unique forms of on-campus WIL with many of the significant confidence-building and work-readiness advantages offered by this form of learning (Jollands, 2015). We argue that the grad show combines the authenticity of the goals, expectations, outcomes, audiences and consequences of a real-world project, with the situated learning environment of the studio and campus functioning as a hybrid educational and professional place of work. Because the graduate exhibition is a genuine public-facing project, with the attendant concept, visual identity, content, collateral, promotion, installation, and documentation demands, the extensive development process in an on-campus opportunity that embodies many of the benefits of a traditional WIL off-campus placement.

In this sense, both Western Sydney and Newcastle's grad shows are not delivered on-campus. This was not always the case, and dependent on University direction, funding and cohorts, there have, at times, been subsequent and connected exhibition events happening at non-campus spaces. However, this current on-campus delivery of grad shows aligns with Marsden and Luczkowski's argument that on-campus compulsory activities that can directly connect graduates with industry are important complements to more traditional off-campus industry placements, and an ideal approach to support the development of graduate employability (Marsden & Luczkowski, 2005). More specifically on-campus WIL can reduce the employability confidence gap between non-placement and placement students (Jollands, 2015) and support student confidence in their own work readiness.

Cooper, et al. (2010) suggest that WIL is a "deliberate educational program where learning is *situated* within the act of working" (p.1, emphasis in the original). In connecting the situatedness of the ongoing project-based work that is part of a persistent pedagogical approach in visual communication design, with the on-campus, but authentic work requirements of delivering the graduate exhibition, we argue that graduate exhibitions function in multiple ways as an authentic, situated, work-integrated learning experience for graduating student cohorts. Staff work consciously to deliver authentic approaches to learning and assessment situated in these real work tasks that are meaningful and transformative (Greeno, 1997; Moon et al, 2005), and effectively "showcase student ability" (Janesick, 2006, p. 1).

An important aspect of engaging students in real design tasks for the application of their skills and demonstration of their abilities, is participant responsibility. At both institutions, the students are culpable for all aspects of the grad show process; developing the theme, brand identity, communication design, promotion, website, and exhibition set-up/design/documentation. Tutors/lecturers act as creative directors, and co-curators, working alongside the students, allowing them to explore and further develop their own creative processes. What this means is that the grad show is not just another university assignment. There are real world implications for grad shows across both institutions, with iterative milestones, budgets to manage, professional relationships to cultivate, and very clear deadlines that must be met. This process allows participants to experience mutual accountability in a format that is not just dependent on grades, but on real-world consequences that overlap boundaries into the world and incorporate responsibility to their peers.

In providing students with the agency to bring their grad show to life, it brings the previous skills learnt throughout multiple university assignments in alignment with a very real sense of responsibility and consequence. In this way, the conceptualisation, development and delivery of each event plays a significant role in bridging the participant identity from 'student' to 'professional'; scaffolding professional confidence and the application of existing skills to real-world tasks and problems. Not only does scaffolding professional identities support what Freudenberg, Brimble, and Cameron would describe as 'self-efficacy' (2010), but it also allows students to assert their individual, and collective identity as designers, entering the real world.

The projects they develop and showcase demonstrate what they are passionate about, their individual loves and interests, their lives and commitments outside design. An experiential and acknowledged sense of grad show as a connected activity to graduation and an important student milestone is expressed by students in many ways: grad show catalogue messages; student representative speeches on opening night; the language, processes, and goals of visual identity development for grad shows; and the celebratory nature of the connected social events. Each expression demonstrates the sense of importance attached to the graduate exhibition as one of the final departure points in the student journey timeline.

Beyond a prescribed engagement model

In recent years, within Australia, the academy's vested interest in social and cultural impact factors has been on the rise. However, standards and processes for measuring impact are underdeveloped, both empirically and theoretically (Rawhouser et. al, 2019). One of the key insights stemming from the reflective process described in this paper, has been that current quantitative methods of capture surrounding grad shows do not adequately reflect the multifaceted types of impact and engagement that we, as educators know these events encompass. While both WSU and UON, work actively to engage representatives from the design industry and develop their alumni networks to cultivate ongoing connections between industry, graduates, current academic staff and students, these expected practices of professional engagement are not the only forms of engagement fostered by graduate exhibition participation. We argue that it is worthwhile to think of the results of graduate exhibitions for visual communication design engagement in much broader ways – in everyday, personal, generational, reputational, and future senses.

If we consider the possible truth of Walter Gropius' perspective on the necessity and everyday nature of design (Gropius, 1962) alongside the engagement and impact rhetoric of academia, we may find a juxtaposition that touches on an important understanding of design pedagogy – that the work of our graduates (by its very nature) will operate and engage in the world beyond higher education, professional designers, and academia (Tonkinwise, 2017). Design is for users, and with increasingly research-driven and socially developed and enacted design methodologies (Yeo, 2013), design practice, design pedagogy and design research reflect significant social, economic, environmental and cultural factors that have impact through everyday design encounters.

Alongside this, the students' work reflects a very personal place in the world, and a culmination of their engagement with their own practice. This is made public through the exhibition and portfolio, and for many students it is the first public presentation of their work for scrutiny beyond the institution. For a number of students, completing their major project and/or portfolio for the grad show, entails their first engagement with the aligned industries that traditionally service design, such as printers, paper suppliers, binders, domain registrars, hosting services, suppliers and sign-shops. The relationships formed in this process can become fruitful working relationships (or not) for graduates as they embark on professional careers. Overlapping personal and professional relationships with their community of practice are also fostered in the form of intensified engagement with their creative peers (who may be current students or alumni in design or other creative industries), as well as the design-aligned professionals, and staff as co-creators and future colleagues. Most productively, the graduate exhibitions and capstone course experience facilitates students to actively engage with their own careers, skills, identities and future trajectories in a considered reflection of how they want to engage creatively with the world.

The bodies of work created by each cohort at any given institution is also collectively reflective of a specific place and moment in time and an indicator for current and emerging design themes and trends. As the next generation of design professionals and university alumni, the influence of graduates at this point in their student journey is recognised by Gardner & van der Veer (1998). They refer to the understanding that graduates reflect the quality and nature of their parent institution's programs, both in their performance as graduate designers, and in the views that they hold and express about their institution and their own identity as they become professionals. Their

exhibited skills, creative choices, and thematic concerns offer an insight into what graduate cohorts are personally and collectively engaged with. For example, grad show design outputs have become increasingly interdisciplinary, more digital, more sustainable, aware, social, and more bespoke. This shift in mediums and content suggests a particular type of generational engagement with what their field currently looks like and perhaps addresses a growing sense of social and cultural agency. The range of student responses, projects created, and their consequential themes and impacts is beyond the scope of this research paper but is an ongoing conversation between the researchers.

Notably, grad show design outcomes have another potential reputational and future-facing role beyond their production and presentation as exhibition collateral and documentary or promotional objects (Tonkinwise & Lorber-Kasunic, 2006; Ewenstein & Whyte, 2009). Through the facilitated submission of these outcomes in design industry awards and competitions, the students responsible are also engaging in a significant aspect of industry practice and opening up their design practices to industry scrutiny and critique through processes of professional evaluation. The artefacts generated by both institutions through their grad shows have been finalists and award winners in design competitions nationally and internationally, affirming present and future graduate confidence, cultural capital, and the reputation of UON and WSU courses both within and beyond their institutions.

Conclusion

Through conscious reflection and re-framing, this paper has explored and presented some of the key aspects of graduate design exhibition contributions to engagement, student identity, and both situated and work integrated learning at two institutions. Not just for show, and much more than just a feel-good exhibition opportunity to showcase student work – our enquiry has sought to reflect on and articulate the complex and vitally important role of graduating exhibitions for capstone learning and engagement in visual communication design.

Observationally, we have noted that there is often a moment at the grad show where you see different attendees 'get it', and the grad show crystallizes for them just what our students actually 'know', 'do' and 'make'. In this sense, if good design (as some say) is actually invisible, then one of the great successes of visual communication design graduate exhibitions is their ability to make the invisible, visible for audiences.

Moving forward with this investigation, we would like to have the opportunity to better understand and document how other tertiary institutions with visual communication design degrees approach their graduate exhibitions. Future research is also underway to report on capstone course experiences from graduate perspectives through surveying alumni insights. Areas for further development include how teaching and facilitation teams can more readily and effectively embed the principles of reflection, identity, engagement, work integrated learning and authentic assessment within the proposed capstone course at UON and ongoing studio-learning environment at WSU.

The ways in which students understand and develop a sense of professional confidence in harnessing their design skills and aligned capabilities for a public-facing project, frame the grad show experience as an important capstone engagement and learning outcome, that facilitates multiple personal and professional benefits for graduating designers. We hope that visual communication design grad shows will remain as part of the fabric of our degrees to encourage the development of more confident, responsible, accomplished, collaborative and work-ready designers, and support their professional contributions to, and beyond the field.

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