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The effectiveness of Design Thinking techniques to enhance undergraduate student learning

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The workshops were conducted with successive cohorts of final year fashion business students. Formulation and development of their ideas for case studies, dissertations and major projects. Methodology, workshops were developed to encourage and support the students in the problem solving that is a collaborative, iterative and reflexive process (Brown 2008), and the learning of creative industries undergraduate students. Design thinking is an approach to problem solving when students engage with collaborative tools and techniques of design thinking, drawing from their prior knowledge and experiences of work and placements to contribute to the development of each other's ideas and concepts. The paper documents the outcomes of the workshops, how the group discussion and subsequent reflective activities, with peers and individually, motivated and supported students in the development of their individual projects. The iterative process of presenting their ideas and how this supported the development of communication skills will also be discussed. This study has demonstrated the importance of action learning in a collaborative context to the development of student learning and metacognition. The collaborative tools of design thinking, reflective, drawing from their prior knowledge and experiences, to demonstrate the benefits of collaboration and to build students’ communication skills. The development of these abilities and skills is fundamental to the readiness of students to engagement in the workplace, to demonstrate the benefits of collaboration and to build students’ communication skills. The development of these abilities and skills is fundamental to the readiness of students to engagement in the workplace, to contribute to the management of information. However, the tutorials lacked consistency in their effectiveness and appropriateness for some fashion management students. This has prompted the search for a more effective learning strategy to support the management of information. Knowledge management for researchers consists of making connections among ideas, integrating new information into what we already know, developing new ideas, and bringing knowledge from the depths towards the surface, where it’s ready to be transformed into information (Orna & Stevens 2009: 14).

The development of these skills can be directly linked to graduate employability. According to the Department for Business Innovation & Skills (BIS) (2013), important benefit is gained from increased employability and skills development. Employers value graduates because they:

- Challenge how things are done and come up with ideas from a different perspective
- Use their initiative and act without waiting for instruction
- Problem solving and operate with flexibility
- Accumulate knowledge quickly and bring new ideas and energy (BIS 2013: 49)

These skills are embodied in the concept of design thinking.
The concept of learning has evolved during the 20th century from the work of Piaget (1952) which has led to a focus on the active role of the learner as a sense-maker. This constructivist view has been further developed to highlight the role of context in which cognition and learning take place (de Corte 2010: 41). Dreyfus (1994, cited in Downing et al. 2007, Downing et al. 2009) identifies three basic principles on which cognitive theorists generally agree:

1. The learning environment should support the activity of the learner (i.e. an active, discovery-oriented environment);
2. The learner's interactions with peers are an important source of cognitive development (i.e. peer learning and social negotiation);
3. Instructional strategies that make learners aware of conflicts and inconsistencies in their thinking promote cognitive development (i.e. problem-solving and Socratic dialogue).

Further to this McWilliam (2009: 291) states that Active engagement reflects the learning preferences of the current student (McWilliam, 2009). It can therefore be proposed that a learner-centred approach that is active, inclusive of social interaction and focused on problem solving, offers a valuable learning model.

Within education design thinking is most frequently observed as a progressive, stepped process with the opportunity to cycle backwards as well as forwards through the steps. Different competencies are developed throughout the steps such as communication skills, analytical skills, capability of adopting perspectives and empathy. The collaborative nature of design thinking develops cognition by building on ‘...the shared cognitive processes, appropriating what was carried out in collaboration to extend existing knowledge and skills’ (Rogoff 1990: 141). Dewey (1916) advocates activity-guided problem solving to facilitate education, the context of real-world problem solving in a project based approach. Design thinking not only addresses these needs but also enriches the experience through social interaction. The iterative and reflective nature of this interaction offers opportunities for more experimental ‘ideation’ (Brown 2008, Brown & Katz 2009) and more error-tolerant modes of engagement.

Active engagement is identified as learning suited to the preferences of the current student. Therefore the ‘real-life’ problem-solving context of design thinking combined with active engagement provides an effective active learning opportunity. Design thinking additionally facilitates the opportunity for utilising and building on experience, learning through social interaction and reflection within an iterative, and consequently less risk-averse process, with the aim to build creative confidence. Students’ conceptions of their learning are an essential element of effective learning.

The reflective and iterative nature of design thinking provides this opportunity to students.

**METHODS**

Within a framework of action research, an action learning approach was taken. There are clear parallels between the processes of action research, action learning and design thinking in that they are participatory, iterative and reflexive. Action learning as a continuous process of learning and reflection is facilitated through the iterative steps of the design thinking process. The collaborative context of action research is equally fundamental to design thinking.

Purpose sampling identified the population for the study. The participants were the research; a fellow tutor and final year students from cohorts in two successive academic years. The majority of each cohort had previously undertaken a placement year before the final year of the course.

...the challenge for teachers is to help undergraduate students develop skills that will not become obsolete. As such, metacognitive strategies are essential for the twenty-first century because they will enable students to successfully cope with new situations, and the challenges of lifelong learning. (Downing et al. 2007: 11)

The reflective and iterative nature of design thinking provides this opportunity to students.
Designing for Growth: A Design Thinking Toolkit for Managers (Liedtka and Ogilvie 2011). Four themes emerged: generating ideas, synthesis, enhancing research and reflection. From these themes appropriate tools and techniques were selected, the following criteria were used to make the selection:

- That the techniques be appropriate to the stage the students were at in the development of their research projects;

- That the techniques provided an opportunity for students to 'build' ideas and subsequently develop their individual subject.

The techniques that resulted from this process were:

- Storytell;
- Brainstorm;
- Voting;
- Feedback & Capture.

The selection of modules in which to situate the workshops was based on those in which the assessment required students to self-select their own topic and to plan, execute and report their research findings on an individual basic: case study, dissertation and major project. The workshops were situated in three action cycles. The participants in the first and second cycle were the first action set of students, in the third cycle the second action set of students participated. Each set had the opportunity to repeat the design thinking techniques for each individual assessment. Within the workshops the process followed four sequential steps: storytell, brainstorm, voting, concluding with feedback and capture.

**Storytell** – students were asked to individually describe the key focus of their research on large post-it notes. Participants were then divided into groups of approximately six to eight students. Students placed their ‘storytell’ post-it note in the centre of a large sheet of paper then briefly described, verbally, the focus of their research (figure 2).

**Brainstorm** – this element required the student participants of the group to contribute thoughts and ideas on the subject of the ‘storytell’. The ideas contributed were recorded informally on post-it notes positioned on the A1 sheets of paper (figure 3).

**Voting** – on completion of each storytell and collaborative brainstorm the large sheets with post-it notes were laid out across the tables. All the participants were then offered the opportunity to ‘vote’ for three ideas, per sheet, voting for ideas that they judged to contribute most to the topic (figure 4).

**Feedback & Capture** – this was a systematic tool for reflection on feedback and what had been learned from the collaborative discussion and voting exercises. Students were provided with a template and asked to construct their own grids and to use these to reflect on the feedback contributed (figures 5 and 6).

DESIGN THINKING WORKSHOPS – METHODS OF EVALUATION

Observation notes were made by the researcher and the fellow tutor / observer. Immediately on conclusion of the sessions students were invited to give feedback on their experience of the workshops. Large post-it notes were supplied to the students for them to record individual, reflective commentary on the practice and experience of participating in the workshop. These were used to reflect the open-ended, un-restricted approach of the workshop, and therefore to encourage and capture a broad spectrum of responses.

**FINDINGS**

Positive student responses indicated that the design thinking workshops and the tools employed proved to be a helpful experience, and one that they wished to repeat to support further projects. This was exemplified by the student comment ‘Really helpful exercise, I think it would be useful for dissertation and major project early on’. Other students noted the potential benefits of using the tools during projects as well as at the beginning; ‘Could be done a couple of times to help at different stages of the project’. A considerable majority of respondents found the techniques beneficial for the case study, for the dissertation this increased slightly for the first action set and for the major project a more notable increase was recorded for both sets (figure 7).

**DESIGN THINKING TOOLS**

Evaluation of the design thinking tools was overall positive. A considerable majority of respondents viewed the design thinking tools as being beneficial for all three assignments. The tools of ‘storytell’ and in particular ‘brainstorm’ were identified as being the most helpful for projects. The majority of respondents regarded the ‘voting’ tool as ‘neutral’. ‘Feedback & Capture’ received the greatest range of responses but the majority regarded this as helpful overall.
**REFLECTION, ENCOURAGE COMMUNICATION SKILLS.** Offers a strategy for students to integrate collaboration and their students in their knowledge and experience, design thinking.

In comparison the voting tool was used 82.3% of the time.

**FIRST ACTION SET**

| CASE STUDY | 82.3% | 75% |
| DISCUSSION | 88.2% | 75% |
| MAJOR PROJECT | 94.1% | 100% |

**SECOND ACTION SET**

**COLLABORATION**

Students perceived the articulation of their ideas to others to be helpful, prompting the formulation and development of their ideas: ‘Encouraged to think in terms of a viable idea’, ‘Helps to structure the idea in your head by explaining it aloud’.

**STORYTELL**

Students were observed to be very engaged during this activity, making full and effective use of the tools throughout.

** BRAINSTORM**

Students were observed to be very engaged during this activity, making full and effective use of the tools throughout.

**FEEDBACK & CAPTURE**

Although ‘Feedback & Capture’ was positively regarded by most, some students would have preferred to develop their own categories for the quadrants: “It was sometimes hard to categorize ideas in these four areas”. However, a number of benefits were noted: “See common themes and areas that need further development”, “Develop[s] triangulation”, “Feedback capture grid – very easy way to show new results and to put points in categories and relevance”, “Excellent. Allowed ideas to be organised from the beginning”, “Gave my idea structure.”

**GENERATING IDEAS**

Student responses indicated that the activities were beneficial in respect of the quantity and the quality of ideas generated. Also noted was the positive impact of the speed by which this was accomplished. Comments demonstrated that not only were ideas generated but limitations were also considered: ‘Very helpful in generating a lot of initial ideas as well as (identifying) problems’, ‘Really helpful, I came away with lots of new ideas’, and ‘Gives new directions and focus points’, ‘…best idea generating tool I’ve ever used’. In particular, the expansion of ideas was commented on: ‘it all helped me think of alternative ideas and not have tunnel vision’, ‘Great to get ideas from people with different experiences in the industry’.

A caveat is noted in one comment: ‘With dissertation I found it slightly confusing and overwhelming having so much input’.

**FEEDBACK & CAPTURE**

Some students found that they were more open in their perspective: ‘I am much more creative, open to think outside of box…’, ‘I am more open to more ideas now, before if I had an idea I would stick with it and not consider better ideas’.

**DEVELOPMENT AND MANAGEMENT OF IDEAS**

Student comments related to the development and management of their ideas and information were positive, one student offered a clearly considered view: ‘A mechanism to strategically organise all your thoughts that are circulating and manage your progression’. Viability was an objective indicated by a further comment: ‘My ideas were very broad before these but it helped me see which looked best and most viable’.

An interesting comment saw the value in varied feedback: ‘Negative feedback was the most helpful to see what I should avoid’.

**MANAGING INFORMATION**

A significant number of students identified that the activities were beneficial to their organisation and management of information: ‘Very useful organisational tool… ‘Really helped to organise information in the way that we did: Slightly fewer students perceived benefit to the quality of information gathered. The majority perceived the workshops to have expanded their sources of information. The development of organisational skills was noted: ‘I feel more organized after the sessions, it gets you off to a good start…’, ‘I’m much more organised - I do more planning…’, ‘the course of final year my planning has improved loads’.

**COLLABORATION**

The aspect of collaboration gained more feedback than any other aspect.

For some there was initial difficulty and apprehension with the idea of collaborating: ‘I thought I wouldn’t like it, but I found it really helpful and enabled me to grow my projects in ways I didn’t expect…’, ‘I was unsure at first but now that I see the benefits I think it is a great thing to do’. In particular students valued contributions that expanded and developed their work: ‘Extremely beneficial to gain alternative views and ideas on your subject’, ‘It has helped me realise how important it is to ask other people’s opinions at the ideas stage and not just at the end of the project’.

One comment captured the breadth of application: ‘Talking through ideas with peers helps anticipate limitations / areas to focus on’, ‘I think the design thinking has opened up more research methods and community thinking’. However, one comment was cautious: ‘It was really helpful at the initial point of thinking, but less towards the end as people concentrate on tangents that are not the main point of projects’.

Students related the importance and value of collaboration to the work place and their future working practice: ‘Collaboration is the most important aspect of project management…’, ‘I will definitely ask for other people’s contributions in future as I feel this has helped develop my project’, ‘Love it! Going to continue this in my work life’. Students noted the impact on their confidence: ‘Very good, helpful, confidence boosting, interesting to hear other’s ideas - very good’, ‘Very helpful and positive - gives a confidence boost’.

The democratic nature of the activities was observed: ‘This should be used in team projects as an effective way for everyone’s ideas to be heard’. Working with different people to gain new perspectives was valued; one
I have learned to take a step back and have become very analytical of my ideas. I enabled me to think more critically.

One respondent identified opportunity for development: ‘Take too much on initially (1) need to be more specific’.

**PRESENTATION AND COMMUNICATION SKILLS:** ‘It has improved my presentation skills.’

‘It’s given me more confidence in presenting and change my openness about sharing ideas.’

**CONFIDENCE:** ‘My confidence in the ability to develop ideas has improved, this is a great confidence builder!’

**RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE DEVELOPMENT OF WORKSHOPS**

Demonstrating active participation in the action research process, the students included a number of recommendations for the development of the workshops:

- Group sizes were recommended to be no larger than six
- Groups were encouraged to include new members
- Students were given the option to add to / amend their original ‘storyboard’ between the ‘brainstorm’ and ‘voting’
- In the introductory talk students were made aware of the feedback capture quadrants so that they could, if appropriate consider them during ‘brainstorm’
- Participants were advised to use orange post-its for notes added during voting stage to identify them separately from those contributed during the brainstorm.

**PEER OBSERVER / FELLOW TUTOR OBSERVATION**

Reflecting on the impact on student work, the tutor observed that ‘the activities have empowered the students, they have grown in confidence and therefore delivered some outstanding projects’. She believes that the students are happy to work collaboratively on each other’s individual projects, ‘as long as it is reciprocal’. Although the students are ‘...competitive, benchmarking themselves against one another’, they ‘...share their resources and pool resources really successfully’. They gain the benefits of being a mentor, ‘...growing in their own confidence [by] being generous with their resources. The student engagement in this reflection was observed: ‘This type of mentoring process is reflective in nature, a positive process for the students’. The effect of placement and workplace experience on students contribution was noted: ‘You can see the impact of the resources that they have, they filter it, drawing on this wealth of resources, sieving out the best bits to contribute’. The tutor observed that the students ‘talk freely, building on their own and others ideas. Also, the impact of the activities on students’ ability to manage information was enhanced. The tutor has found evidence of this impact on subsequent project management sessions that she delivers to these groups of students. Increasingly she needs to ‘...less on project management, the development of the student’s idea is further on.’ Before this project (the activities) started there were a number of students who underperformed in both the description of their idea and their project management. She observed that they have now developed tangible skills in project management, not only in managing their resources.

**DISCUSSION**

The close alignment of the common characteristics of collaboration, reflection, reflexivity and a concern for change, between action research, action learning, and design thinking have been of benefit to this research project. Levin’s (2003), cited in Coghlan & Brannick 2014: 167) framework, devised to explore quality in action research has equal application to the evaluation of quality in design thinking. This framework identifies four criteria for evaluation: participation, real-life problems, joint-meaning construction and workable outcomes (Levin 2003).

The participants engaged constructively in both the action research process, the design thinking activities. For example, the request for individual reflection at the end of each activity is a natural extension of the design thinking process. The willingness of students and fellow tutors to share their reflections and experience has been beneficial to the learning of all participants. The tutor’s finding has evidence of this impact on subsequent project management sessions that she delivers to these groups of students. Increasingly she needs to ‘...less on project management, the development of the student’s idea is further on.’ Before this project (the activities) started there were a number of students who underperformed in both the description of their idea and their project management. She observes that they have now developed tangible skills in project management, not only in managing their resources.

**STUDENT REFLECTION**

Themes were identified in the student reflection on their self-learning:

**COLLABORATION:**

‘I believe I really enjoy helping others with their projects and believe with the useful help I have given I have got it back from them in return.’

‘I can take feedback well and I am often able to respond accordingly.’

‘I realise I handle criticism well, I appreciate the opinions of others to improve my work.’

**PREPARATION AND PLANNING:**

‘I work best under pressure the design thinking activities have empowered the students to reflect and draw from their reflections and experience to reach a positive conclusion.’

‘Students enjoyed the activities, their commitment to contribute and in turn gain benefit was evident to those observing. The opportunity for students to reflect and draw from their experience in the workplace and during work placement provided a wider view of current industry practice for all participants. The benefits extended beyond those intended, to develop confidence, motivation and communication skills, all equally valuable for subsequent employment.

The number of comments received in relation to repetition support the view that the design thinking workshops are sustainable. The students themselves identified opportunities for further development, both incrementally to the tools and more fundamentally to introduce other courses to become multi-disciplinary, aligned with the traditions of design thinking.

**CONCLUSION**

This study has demonstrated the importance of action learning in a collaborative context to the development of student learning and metacognition. The collaborative tools of design thinking have the potential for application not only to collective projects, but can also be used for the benefit of individual student projects. Design thinking offers a strategy for tutors to: engage their students in reflection, encourage students to integrate their knowledge and experience, demonstrate the benefits of collaboration and build students’ communication skills. Through the application of design thinking, students have the opportunities to develop a skill set beyond those in traditional settings. The development of these creative abilities and skills is fundamental to the readiness of students for employment on graduation.
REFERENCES

FIGURE CAPTIONS AND CREDITS
Figure 1: Design Thinking Process – adapted from d.school Stanford University Institute for Design.
Figure 2: Storytell.
Figure 3: Brainstorm.
Figure 4: Voting.
Figure 5: Feedback & Capture.
Figure 6: Feedback & Capture.
Figure 7: Number of respondents who found the techniques helpful or very helpful by assignment.

ABSTRACT
THIS PAPER PORTRAYS THE JOURNEY OF A COLLABORATIVE RESEARCH PROJECT BETWEEN THE AUTHORS REBECCA HOYES AND ANNE MARR, BOTH EDUCATORS AND RESEARCHERS ON THE BA (HONS) TEXTILE DESIGN AT CENTRAL SAINT MARTINS (CSM).

The project started as an open-ended research investigation exploring existing material boundaries in the hope to develop new hybrid ceramic – textile materials. The Material Boundaries project was designed to explore first steps into these new territories, to consciously experiment beyond the unknown, generate a deeper understanding of future craft processes and open up further opportunities for co-design with other disciplines. The paper outlines an investigation into where ceramic begins and textiles end and the transitional space in between them. The findings of this paper identify risk-taking and co-design as essential strategies to invite valuable setbacks and disasters, as well as happy accidents. The key stages of an open-ended research process are outlined: Mapping New Terrain, Material Investigation, Trans-disciplinary Feedback and Systematic Reflection. The project took risk-taking to the extreme by firing material hybrids in a kiln, often ‘producing’ not even a trace of dust. This paper presents a visual journey of the reflective mapping process, illustrating the key stages of the research. Transdisciplinary feedback from colleagues supported the progression of the project applying ceramic and textile thinking to the journey.