A Design Agency Goes Back to College

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Abstract
The Thoughtful Six Project was an attempt to rethink the work placement for graphic design students. The idea we came up with was simple – rather than the students trying to find a work placement in lots of different design agencies, the agency would do a placement within the college. The Greater Manchester Strategic Alliance (GMSA) funded project ran from September 2008 until June 2009 and was developed for the BA (Hons) Graphic Design course at Stockport College in collaboration with design practice Thoughtful (whose clients include Tate, British Council, Howies, Innocent and Royal Mail). This article presents some preliminary findings from the Thoughtful Six Project.

Background Tensions
Many institutions use the work placement to provide a means for design undergraduates to gain valuable real world experience. But developing a coherent programme of placements can be difficult as a result of many factors; the resources needed in placing students, territorial competition between institutions, managing the quality of placement, and the limited opportunities for placements (enterprises often that lack the space or staff to manage placements). A Design Council Survey (2005) revealed 88% of design businesses think that all design students should complete extensive work experience, but only 54% of design businesses are willing to provide work experience for students.

While these statistics provide evidence of the value employers assign to placements (and the difficulty in getting them) there lurks an implication perhaps, that a design education does not prepare graduates adequately for industry: ‘There is no question that a large number of creative industries professionals believe education is not properly equipping graduates with the skills necessary to enable them to work effectively in industries’ (Clews, 2007, p.82)

Further tension exists within academia, put simply, that higher education should be a space to explore creative practice as an end in itself and should resist the explicit preparation of graduates for work. This view is being challenged by a growing body of research across academic disciplines, showing that work-based learning, practice-based learning, employability learning and entrepreneurial learning can offer rich and transformative learning experiences.

‘(An alternative model for higher education) is based on the view that the role of entrepreneurship in society is that it provides an opportunity for individuals and organisations of all kinds and in all walks of life to cope with, provoke, and perhaps enjoy, an increasingly complex and uncertain world. (Gibb, quoted in Ball, 2008, p.12)

The Thoughtful Six Project
It was with these issues in mind that we created the Thoughtful Six project and in September 2008 a design agency went back to college. Initially the three members of Thoughtful began working with a cohort of second year graphic design students for one day a week – the selection phase – by December they had chosen six students to join them on a full time basis. In January 2009 Thoughtful closed down their studio, packed up their whole outfit and moved into a dedicated space within the design department at Stockport College. The six students exchanged their studies to join Thoughtful full-time for six months and work across a full range of commercial projects including Colour Chart for Tate Liverpool, Teepay, a new brand for Howies, Make It, a guide to the creative industries, as well as work for Innocent and the British Council – but uniquely from within the walls of the college.

A Theatre Set
Thoughtful and the students were given an equipped studio space (one floor above the graphic design studios). At the outset the driving ethos behind the project was to bring the ‘real world’ into the college in a way that circumnavigated some of the traditional obstacles to
placing students. However, we had not anticipated the space would be an important factor that might influence learning.

The real significance of locating the project within college first surfaced in the interim interviews (three months into the project) where the students remarked on the benefits: “here I still feel connected – it’s like having a little safety net and having Thoughtful move into our college, the studio feels like it belongs to all of us – not just Thoughtful.” The students also discussed the idea of being able to tap into the College’s resources – photography studios, screen printing, large format printing – “we could contribute more because we knew more about things [resources], we were more at ease because we felt that we were helping.”

But Thoughtful’s view about the space was somewhat different: “it’s a theatre set of a studio, it isn’t the real deal…their head hasn’t shifted into a workplace. I guess they are still at college…geographically it is too close to other students, their friends, the normal environment…”

Despite the project going well the ‘real world’ scenario that Thoughtful had envisaged had not materialised: “I think the students are very safe and protected and there ain’t much of a fear factor, which I think helps – it gives you the reason to be first in and last out…it’s a comfort zone, they feel safe…this is a bubble to them, we’ve always liked the idea of it being a real world experience”.

However, whilst the students were careful not to describe it as ‘real world’, they clearly differentiated the space and the activities from college: “we have separated this room from the rest of college, this room isn’t really college, it’s the studio, the workplace” and “At first we thought it was professional because of the way it looked, but after a while we realised you can’t just act as you normally act and we had to separate the studio from college life, so it was more like we were at work not in college”.

Later in the project Thoughtful reflected on their own comments: “the real world is so extreme, the law wouldn’t allow us to give them the real world experience…it’s as real as you can make it, they would have turned against us and design if we’d made it that real.” The equation, in a simplified form, appeared to be that the real world was characterised by extreme pressure. The work of Eraut et al (2000), on factors influencing learning in the workplace, goes some way to helping us understand these issues: “Placement learning is most likely to occur from appropriately challenging work, because this develops confidence and proactive behaviours” (Eraut, 2009, p.8)

For Eraut the key is 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 and having the confidence to take these challenges on requires a supportive work environment. Thoughtful, in providing a supportive and measured set of challenges, compromised in delivering a ‘real world’ experience, and this may have been key in making the learning meaningful as student responses indicate:

‘I’ve got a lot more confidence in doing this project, being able to say what I think about things… doing things without having to ask, just doing it, more confidence to be able to do what I think is right without having to check first and [I’ve learnt] how a studio works, how to interact, how I have to be self-initiated, go and ask for things, pushing to get more things, the more I do, the more I get out, a self-propellingness [sic].’

‘I have got so much more confident in myself, I don’t feel I have to go up to anyone anymore and say am I doing this right? I can take my own initiative’ (Thoughtful Six student).

Designing Relationships
Eraut’s work demonstrates the central importance of relationships for this kind of learning. The workspace afforded a mode of learning that is important for acquiring the tacit knowledge that underpins the routines and intuitive decision making that surrounds professional roles.
Tacit knowledge happens and is exchanged when you’re working alongside people (Eraut). The importance of these relationships for learning also extended beyond the space:

‘something Thoughtful have really been trying to get through to us is that our job as a designer is not 9 till 5 and not just about sitting in a studio ’designing’ – it’s much more than that. I’m realising that to do better work for a client you have to get off your a**e and get involved with a client.’ (Thoughtful Six student)

**Learning for the Unknown**

If Eraut’s work helped identify the importance of cultivating confidence and appropriate challenges, the work of Marton & Booth (1997) and Marton & Bowden (1998) offers a way of understanding how we learn in order to handle unknown situations. It is particularly useful in this context because the project represented an unknown situation to students, staff, the college and Thoughtful, and one could further characterise the running of a (relatively young) design studio as a series of unknown situations.

Learning through problem solving (fundamental to design education) involves students practicing a solution until they become ‘expert’ and then moving on to the next problem, however issues can occur when a problem arises that has not been practiced and the ability to identify the specifics of a given problem is lacking.

Marton and Bowden propose that by exposing students to novel situations and different problems they learn to identify what the problem is in each particular situation and can see, through variations, the relationships between different situations and problems:

‘There have been more new situations and challenges and I’ve had to deal with them, …each day we do something different, at first, if you’ve never done it, it’s very frightening, now when new things happen it’s okay and the structure didn’t happen, because it couldn’t, we didn’t have the routine of college, things throw spanners into the works all the time and made it interesting, I liked having lots to do at the same time.’ (Thoughtful Six student)

**Space is Reflection**

A consistent issue in many work-based learning situations is that the learning is not recognised as such – for many students learning is linked to the classroom (Eraut). By having a workspace within the college it may have foregrounded the notion of learning, and heightened awareness of their dual roles as students and employees:

I class myself as a student because I’m still learning, but the way we’re working at the moment is in the mind frame of how designers work, I class myself as a student because we’re learning everyday’ and, ‘It made me think more about everything I did and how that was going to be seen by them, and in turn the clients.’

This in turn may have been a catalyst in generating a culture of reflection among the six students that is present in the use of language during interviews and online journals. It was also present in the working processes of Thoughtful: “I think it’s a consequence of running your own business, because we run our own business its so focused on moments and they’re right there seeing it all…if we were just jobbing designers I think it would be a very different experience, but here they are in our space hearing and listening to everything that goes on”.

In addition to this, Thoughtful used tactics to get the students to reflect. This is apparent in this student’s description of one particular incident with a client presentation:

we [students] might have felt too comfortable and weren’t acting as professionally as we should have been they [Thoughtful] showed us videos, and we realised how the client saw us – as students’. It would prove an important realisation: ‘you can’t just sit there and act like yourself.’

As Ball notes, this reflective component is important because “the transfer of the creative process does not automatically occur, unless reflection on the experience takes place, preferably shared in a critical context (staff/student and peer/employer/external professional) so that personal and creative learning can be articulated, and related to future progression,” (2009, p.20)
Conclusion: Don’t Tell Me the Door is Locked

Much of this article has focused on the students learning but the Thoughtful Six Project was also conceived as an attempt to develop a dialogue – both formal and informal – with industry that in turn could inform curricula. Moving Thoughtful into the college gave us the proximity and the time to understand the particulars of each other's situations. Unlike nearly every other debate I have experienced with design industry professionals it did not result in the rhetoric of developing a curriculum predicated on the ‘needs of industry’, if anything it enabled all of us to take a broader view. It has fore fronted the need to develop a curriculum that fosters a culture of agility, unexpectedness, problem seeking, rapid testing, shifting the focus a little from outcomes to process and placing an emphasis on relationships and responsibility. And for Thoughtful:

We realised that perhaps it’s okay that design education isn’t some boot camp for the industry where every student is drilled into preparation for a job. Because, guess what? We’ve learnt not every single design student really, really wants to be a successful designer and it's us industry types who wrongly assume this. A vast majority of students find themselves drawn to areas where creative thinking isn’t confined to visual communication and their design degree is just the first step.

This doesn’t end the dialogue, creating the right ecology for collaboration enriches the possibilities: “Collaborative culture fosters the continuing professional development of students, academic staff, graduates, employees and employers in creative enterprises” (Ball 2003, p.26).

It might be said a locked door is both a real and metaphorical defining characteristic of an educational institution. Thoughtful developed a rallying cry “Don’t tell me the door is locked – find a way to open it” and for one student it became a way to understand what the experience gave them:

We’ve all been given jobs to do where we’ve found ourselves wondering what to do next. And at some point we’ve all walked back into the room, sat at our desks and said “the door’s locked”. Does that mean the problem no longer needs solving? I’ve learnt that taking ownership of a task builds trust, respect and confidence but more importantly, if I don’t solve the problem it simply becomes someone else’s problem – which in a small (but perfectly formed) design practice can become a real problem.’

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Further information about the project can be found at:www.thethoughtfulsix.squarespace.com/

Further information about Thoughtful can be found at www.wearethoughtful.com/

Biography
James Corazzo is a lecturer in Graphic Design on the BA (Hons) Design and Visual Arts course at Stockport College. He has recently accepted an external fellowship with the University of Surrey 2009–2010 that will provide the opportunity to further research the efficacies of collaborative projects with the creative industries. Stockport College are currently applying for funding in order to explore new collaborative opportunities with Thoughtful.

References


