From trainee graduates to graduate trainees: towards an illumination of the teaching of professional practice on design degrees

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From trainee graduates to graduate trainees: towards an illumination of the teaching of professional practice on design degrees

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Abstract

The central aim of this paper is to explore the mechanisms that teachers of professional practice use with their students to ease them into employment. In particular, it will concentrate on how teachers help students to prepare their CVs and portfolios in the subject of design. The methodological approach will be qualitative rather than quantitative. In addition to an analysis of appropriate literature on the CV and the current practice of portfolio preparation, this paper will employ evidence gathered from interviews with a number of individuals who teach professional practice to design students, but who also have a role in independently running their own design companies. Using a semi-structured format, interviews will be conducted with the design companies El Ultimo Grito and Design Direction, both of whose directors are also involved in the teaching of professional practice to students. The evidence from these interviews will be collected and used to suggest and consider developments in the teaching materials currently used to guide students on the production and design of their CVs and portfolios. The aim is to guarantee that students are then better able to project their skills to employers, and hence to ensure that the teaching of professional practice in design may help ease a greater number of design students into employment.

Keywords: professional practice, normative curricula, mental models, semiotic formatting

Introduction

This paper is concerned with the teaching of professional practice on design degrees and the effect this has on employment of design graduates. In the last few years there has been significant growth in university design courses to the point that there are now more than 62,000 students on 900 design courses in 190 British universities (Design Council, 1998). However, in spite of this growth, design studies was shown in a recent survey to be the subject most likely to leave a student unemployed (The Observer, 28 January 2001: 18). Given this situation, students need a good understanding of the skills and capabilities that they have to sell, and a real sense of the tenaciousness and versatility they require to market themselves. As the employment process is increasingly competitive, the teaching of professional practice must come under closer scrutiny.

Given that finding employment in design is increasingly problematic, teachers of professional practice need to continually reflect on the principal tools that students use to convey information about themselves across the graduate/employer interface. The two key communication tools are currently the CV and the portfolio. For the design student the CV can be used for careers fairs, speculative applications, interviews where the employer has not already seen the details of the potential employee, and on more general occasions where it is simply deemed acceptable (Hughes, Martin, McLoughlin, Nicholles, 2000: 3), whilst the portfolio can be used when interviews have already been secured or (if the portfolio is in digital form) for speculative applications. To make it easier for students to find suitable employment, then, it is necessary to investigate both how teachers of design advise students to present themselves via the CV and the portfolio and to examine how employers receive and understand these presentations.
The vast majority of students interviewed aspire to practice as designers in their chosen field, and that remains the rationale behind their choice of programme (Temple and Morris, 1995: 51).

In spite of this evident aspiration, questions arise about whether there exists the scale of employment opportunities in the design industry (in the UK, Europe, or worldwide). For example, a recent MORI survey has shown that design graduates are unaware of the probability of actually obtaining employment in the profession.

Our findings show that design students are optimistic about obtaining a career in design, but not realistic. (MORI, 1998: 12)

Evidence of the conservatism just described can be seen from a sample of the speculative student applications to the design company El Ultimo Grito. Of a sample of 40 CVs sent as speculative applications to the company between 1998 and 2000, only two students chose to present a resume of their skills in a way that challenged the standard A4 format described above. In the first case the student chose to present in an A2 poster format with a perfunctory list at the top of educational and employment qualifications. In the second case, the student chose to give a rather more comprehensive list of qualifications and achievements but this time used a series of cards on an A6 format to convey the information. Of the 40...
The directors’ responses to this sample of CVs suggests that teachers of design might need to make some changes to the way in which they advise students on speculative applications. One of the key changes might be that teachers help students construct CVs via the exemplar model (Hughes et al., 2000: 38–47). This model for the CV, which can be viewed as consistent with certain current work in cognitive psychology on the theory of conceptualisation (Roth and Bruce, 1986 [1995] 2nd edition), starts not with idealised abstractions, but with ‘real’ examples that have actually been used to secure design employment. The idea here is that a CV that has been successful in the market place will be more likely to give the student a better sense of the true objectives of the CV, the audience that it is intended to reach and the often very specific message that it is required to deliver to a given employer. In other words, rather than just trying to get the chronology or the function of the CV right, students should also be asked by teachers of professional practice to think more carefully about creative formatting.

Whilst there are obvious technological changes that will continue to influence CV production and dissemination (e.g. via e-mail, video, diskette, web site), the response of the directors of El Ultimo Grito to recent speculative student applications suggests that there is also an important space for a more radicalised semiotic format. One suggestion is that the design CV could use formats drawn from other areas. With this in mind, a pilot study with 50 first-year BA design students at Goldsmiths, University of London was conducted on strategies of resume differentiation via a radical transformation of the format of the CV. One of the devices used was to borrow from certain ‘foreign’ formats. The idea was that students should make their CVs look like (say) a TV schedule, like the details of a property specification that an Estate Agent might carry in a window display, a personal diary, a prospectus, a women’s magazine, exhibition literature, and so on. This study resulted in two key conclusions for the teaching of professional practice as regards the CV. First, that by introducing ‘foreign’ formats, students quickly changed the standard mental model they had of the CV. They realised that the CV need not conform to the standard A4 format described earlier. And second, by pointing out that CVs might use a ‘foreign’ format, students were encouraged to think more about how they brand themselves by finding more of a unique selling point.

The design and use of the student portfolio

Although the teaching of portfolio preparation is a vital part of certain courses at further education level (e.g. the Advanced GNVQ in art and design) the role that it has at undergraduate level is altogether different. For the need at undergraduate level is based on teachers concentrating on:

the essential skills which will equip and prepare students for continuing personal development and professional practice (Davies, 2001: 7)

The aim of this emphasis on practical achievement is supposed to result in:

the assembling of a body of work (for example, a portfolio, CD, show-reel, or web site) which demonstrates the students’ ability to engage at a professional level (Davies, 2001: 12)

Yet whilst there may be advice available for individual students on professional portfolio preparation, there are no normative curricula in the sense that there are agreed national standards of portfolio presentation in terms of content and assessment at undergraduate level. What tends to happen instead is that students are given some idea of professional working procedures and norms of commercial conduct (often on an ad hoc basis), whilst being encouraged to constantly manoeuvre...
to differentiate themselves from each other. However, given that the traditional mental model for the portfolio in the minds of many students has already been set by the conditions made available for its preparation and dissemination for use at further education and foundation level, one of the key objectives at undergraduate level is (where appropriate) to challenge and change this model so that it fits better with the aims and objectives of professional practice.

With this problem in mind, one central aim of the teaching of professional practice to undergraduate designers is to challenge the traditional A1 portfolio format of the sort that is standardly used to secure a place on a Foundation course or BA design degree. The teaching materials devised by Charlotte Grinling from the company Design Direction (and used for third-year students at Goldsmiths) deal with some of these issues. Grinling challenges the traditional mental model of the A1 portfolio by trying to persuade students that the portfolio itself is not something that is posterior to the work that is often assembled within it. The idea of the professional portfolio, for Grinling, is that it is a design brief in its own right. This means that it needs to be a unique piece of work in itself and not just a repository for work already made.

The pedagogical brief devised by Grinling works by asking students to consider in detail the designer’s relationship with various audiences, clients, markets, users and consumers and from there to find and format a portfolio that might itself become an extension of the working personality of the student (i.e. of the individual student as a working designer) and of the personality of the work itself. Here, as with the CV, the semiotic formatting of the portfolio (via a non-traditional non-standard format) is the thing that can help make the work and personality of each student seem particular. For this reason, one of Grinling’s suggestions in the portfolio brief, she has devised is that the portfolio itself could take on a personality and become ‘a tiny scale hand bound book, a concertina poster, a cardboard tube, a book of postcards, a second-hand suitcase, a storage box, a photo album, or even a rubber studded erotic case!’

Given the increasing competition in the area of design, Grinling believes that the student without a personality profile that is clearly branded may find it increasingly difficult to secure the employment they evidently desire. When it comes to portfolio production and consumption, individual differentiation will continue to be the key to success in the world of design employment.

Conclusion

It has been argued that there are three central things we should learn about the role that an enhanced professional practice module could make to the teaching on design degrees. The conclusions that suggested themselves, given the evidence gathered from designers practicing in the field, are that teachers of design need:

1 to challenge the traditionally received mental models of the CV and the portfolio
2 to encourage the semantic formatting of CVs and portfolios so as to create more personalised forms of meaning for each student and for each kind of student work
3 to use more professional expertise in the design of educational materials for professional practice elements of BA design programmes.

Taking into account these three factors in professional practice modules in BA design degrees may not guarantee that appropriate work for every student is forthcoming. However, a consideration of these factors may go some way to easing a greater number of design students into design employment.

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