Amplifying learner’s voices through the global studio

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Amplifying Learners’ Voices Through the Global Studio

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Abstract

Constructing autobiographical practices aids individuals gain and maintain employability status in the professional working environment. Learning how to tell appropriate stories about oneself is central in advancing such presentations of self. Consequently, the authors argue design students should learn to tell their own stories to aid their transition into professional practice.

Though it has tangible and important benefits for students in terms of aspects such as the acquisition of practical skills, this chapter argues that the commonly utilised master-apprentice model may not be optimally effective in aiding students to tell their own stories. Consequently, it may not be optimally attuned to enabling future design graduates the necessary reflexivity to be able to negotiate the increasingly complex world of the contemporary knowledge economy.

The Global Studio aims to propagate a student-led pedagogic model in which tutors purposefully try to remain relatively distant in teaching & learning activities and students construct conversations and outcomes primarily via interaction with peers. Qualitative student feedback suggests that this model has enabled learners to tell their own stories. However, feedback also suggests that many learners are not comfortable with the fact that tutors remain relatively distant in the Global Studio system. Notes from the Global Studio suggest that there is still much work to do in achieving an optimally balanced design education model.

The Master-Apprentice Model

An approach to design education which perceives the tutor as master and the student as his or her apprentice can be traced at least as far back as the staatliches Bauhaus. In the Bauhaus Manifesto and Program, the educational institution’s founder Walter Gropius (1919: 1) decreed:

“...there will be no teachers or pupils in the Bauhaus but masters, journeymen, and apprentices”.

Gropius’ vision of the ideal educational scenario meant that the Bauhaus program would consist of a tiered pedagogical model, the final stage being that for aspiring junior masters,

“The training is divided into three courses of instruction:
I. course for apprentices,
II. course for journeymen,
III. course for junior masters”.

Gropius (ibid: 2),
Though the rigidity of Gropius’ tiered system seems inappropriate in the contemporary era, the top-down master-apprentice model remains extremely influential in design education (e.g. Tonkinwise, 2011). Reflecting on this established pedagogical system is not a straightforward matter as the discussion is multifaceted. This chapter will discuss positive points as well as criticism aimed at this educational schema. The discourse begins by examining some of the pressures which may be placed on contemporary design students.

**Pressures on Design Students**

When one takes into account tuition fees, the price of course materials, accommodation and the cost of living, the university experience for today’s higher education students is likely to be an expensive one (see, e.g. Paton, 2013). Design students are of course not immune from experiencing financial difficulties associating with studying for a tertiary qualification. Their plight may be exacerbated by the existence of internship programs which help to make up sandwich programmes of study. Dick Powell (Dezeen, 2013) – a founder of the world-renowned industrial design consultancy Seymourpowell and chairman of the design charity D&AD – underscores the conundrum faced by design agencies when employing interns,

"We always try to pay a basic wage but it would clearly be better for [students] if we took on six that are unpaid than two that are paid, but we choose to pay them."

For design students, financial strains may remain a feature of life beyond their time at university. The authors are privileged to have gained experience teaching both Transport Design and Industrial Design at H.E. level. In our experience, students’ passion for these areas is a major contributor in steering an overwhelming majority of learners towards embarking upon their degree programme. This fervour for the subject does not necessarily translate into well-paid graduate employment (Ball, Pollard, and Stanley, 2010). Dick Powell (ibid) highlights the unenviable position occupied by contemporary design graduates,

“Sadly, these days, it is harder than ever for graduates to find work; the jobs don’t come to them - many don’t realise that their graduation is the start of a lengthy, often soul destroying process that is as much work as work itself”.

Powell’s words may come as little consolation for students attempting to unleash their creative potential whilst studying for a design degree. Creativity is a hot topic: in recent times it has become a much-celebrated quality. Creativity is viewed to be beneficial to society (Boden, 1999; Sosa and Gero, 2005) and the economy (Ball, et al., 2010; Blair, 1998; Sands and Worthington, 2007) as well being good for personal wellbeing (B. J. Fisher and Specht, 1999). However, researchers question whether enrolling on a creative subject at H.E. level aids graduates find meaningful employment. Design graduates belong to a group of individuals Roberta Comunian, Alessandra Faggian and Qian Li (2010) term “Bohemian Graduates”: such scholars have been awarded tertiary qualifications in subjects such as creative arts, mass communications and music recording. The employment prospects for Bohemian graduates are less promising than those for their non-Bohemian counterparts (Comunian, et al., ibid). Many find themselves in low paid, mundane roles which are not suited to the qualification they have been awarded (Aston, 1999). Moreover, when Bohemian
graduates are employed in creative occupations, their starting salary is lower than that of non-
Bohemian graduates employed in creative roles by an average of almost £4000 (Comunian, et al.,
ibid: 400). Research also suggests that the medium term fate for graduates from creative subject
areas presents a palpable level of concern. Hamish Coates and Daniel Edwards (2009: 15) claim that
graduates in subject areas which include “the creative arts”...“reported the lowest rates of full-time
employment”.

Let us suppose that a particular undergraduate design student is aware of at least some of the
arguments noted above. If so, it is sensible to suggest that she may worry about her employment
and earning prospects. Consequently, it is understandable that she should expect to be taught the
necessary skills that will enable her to gain an advantage over her competitors in the design world.
In the authors’ experience, design students expect (at least during the first half of their degree) that
their tutor contact time at university should consist of experts in the field teaching them 2D
visualisation skills (utilising both manual and digital tools) and 3D prototyping skills (physical & CAD
modelling). In other words, in order to help them gain access to internships and future employment,
students expect the master-apprentice model to be propagated. If tutors are trained, passionate,
experienced and proficient, what may be the harm in propagating this system in the contemporary
era when students are eager to learn design skills? This chapter moves on to reflect on points of
criticism aimed at this model of teaching.

**Criticism of the Master-Apprentice Model.**

In Walter Gropius’ time, the master-apprentice system was characterised by the notion that it was
tutor-led. Gropius (ibid: 1) underscores its linear, top-down nature by pointing out that the master
“instruct[s]” the novice. Moreover, Gropius (ibid: 3) highlights the causality of the model by stating,
“the instruction of the individual is left to the discretion of each master”.

Though Gropius’ description is nearly a century old, the master-apprentice model is still considered
to be tutor – rather than student – led. The layout of the design teaching studio provides evidence
for this position. The arrangement of design studio teaching spaces are consistent with that of more
generic teaching areas (JISC, 2006). According to JISC (2006: 10) the latter are traditionally “tutor-
focused, one-way facing and presentational, with seating arranged in either a U shape or in straight
rows”. It is possible to suggest this tutor-focussed layout may affect the continued development of
voice in learners – for researchers have argued that whilst conducting studio teaching sessions,
design educators both talk more than their students and are at the centre of learning activities (see
Davies and Reid, 2000). Furthermore, the design teaching model is argued not to provide optimal
conditions for creating mature relationships between students and tutors in the classroom (Baxter
Magolda, 2009). For Jorge Frascara (2007) this approach curtails students’ development evidenced
through their delivery of unimaginative forms. A perspectivist model is argued to be the best
approach in art and design education (Danvers, 2003). In what appears to be the antithesis of
perspectivism, Frascara (2007: 64) reflects on the notion that design educators can dictate the
aesthetic language used by students,
“I have seen instructors judge the quality of their students’ work by saying: “This one is too busy” or “This is better, it is simpler.” They suggest that “busy” is bad and “simpler” is better in every situation.”

Over and above providing prescription on form, the master-apprentice model may necessitate the need to question the authenticity of design decisions made by students. On this subject, Cameron Tonskiniwise (2011: 452) argues “design education is exemplarily Bourdieusian” in that tutors’ values dictate outcomes delivered by students.

Researchers question whether the master-apprentice model prepares graduates for life as a professional designer. It can be argued that the purpose of design education is to provide a passport for entry to the community of professional practice (Tovey, 2012). However, the dominant model of design education has been criticised for not being optimally suited to preparing students for tackling design problems. Problem solving through linear, causal means remains the most widely utilised method of processing seen in design teaching (Findeli, 2001). However, rather than being easily definable, design problems are claimed to be complex (Lawson, 2006). Such problems are claimed to require a non-linear approach to tackle them (Buchanan, 1992). Alain Findeli (ibid: 16) claims the traditional and dominant design teaching method has become obsolete, stating,

“...the canonical, linear, causal, and instrumental model is no longer adequate to describe the complexity of the design process...”

Designers are argued to be able to work at high strategic levels in their practice (e.g. Brown, 2009; Martin, 2009; Bevan, Robert, Bate, Maher, and Wells, 2007). Brigitte Borja de Mozota (2010, p.98) disputes whether design education enables designers to operate optimally in tough professional climates. For Borja de Mozota the problem lies in the notion that even though designers “have this potential to work at higher strategic levels... they are not trained to do so”. This, she claims, “is a challenge for design education” (Borja de Mozota, ibid: 98).

Beyond criticism of its ability to prepare students for the world of professional design practice, negative appraisal of the master-apprentice system is also linked to the matter of graduate employment in the wider knowledge economy. Walter Powell and Kaisa Snellman (2004: 199) define the knowledge economy as,

“production and services based on knowledge-intensive activities that contribute to an accelerated pace of technical and scientific advance, as well as rapid obsolescence”.

Trade in knowledge is increasingly important to the global economy (Lüthi, Thierstein, and Goebel, 2010). In developed capitalist economies, the production of knowledge is argued to be more important than any physical commodity (Drucker, 1993; Powell and Snellman, 2004). The knowledge economy is of relevance to design graduates as individuals in receipt of a university degree are,

“purported to be the ‘knowledge workers’ of the future and are expected to command high levels of general and specialist knowledge” (Brown, Hesketh, and Williams, 2003: 109).
The ability to problem-solve is important for such individuals (Brown, Hesketh and Williams, 2002). Indeed, as opposed to workers who are not part of this club, graduates are given “permission to think” in their professional life (Brown, et al., 2003: 110). As the knowledge economy implies an accelerated rate of advancement as well as prompt obsolescence, it is sensible to suggest that graduates who are successful in it will have to adapt and tackle problems in spaces that are forever shifting. The idea that graduates must be prepared for a rapidly changing professional climate is supported by the educational theorist Ronald Barnett (2000) who proposes that these individuals are entering a “supercomplex” (p. 257) environment – a world that,

“exhibits global features of challenge, uncertainty, turbulence, unquantifiable risk, contestability and unpredictability”. (p. 262)

Arguably, amongst other points, this unpredictability presents itself in the notion that contemporary graduates may find themselves in occupations which they did not directly train for at university. As a result, Bohemian graduates (a club which includes design graduates) can find themselves in what might be termed a broad church of creative industries, for example in media, advertising as well as in design (Comunian, et al., 2010). It is arguably questionable how appropriately a master-apprentice based teaching model in a subject such as industrial design might prepare graduates who (either through choice or necessity) broaden their horizons in the search for graduate employment. Consequently, Ghassan and Bohemia (2013) argue that the tutor-led master-apprentice model may not serve to optimally aid design students negotiate the complexity of the contemporary graduate working environment.

At this point, it is important to note that the authors do not advocate the removal of the master-apprentice model in design education. As well as benefitting greatly from tutors’ accounts of industrial practice, learners have the opportunity to gain from them knowledge of a myriad of practical skills intrinsic to the design process. Versed, experienced and passionate educators play a vital role in helping students understand, for example, the techniques of perspective drawing, the importance of achieving a sound quality of drawn line and the necessity of realising tension in curves and surfaces. Indeed, the acquisition of such skills seems difficult to imagine without the continued propagation of the master-apprentice system. In providing advice to graduates wishing to enter the profession, Dick Powell (ibid, 2013) emphasises the importance of skills acquisition in design practice,

“Be really, really good at one thing. Be a star at one thing. Be an expert at one thing…every business needs dedicated skills of different kinds - skills with tools, like Alias or Pro-Engineer, or skills at drawing, research, film editing, animating, budgeting, selling or whatever. Being a star at one thing can get you in, maybe not in the role you want, but at least you will be in and learning - after that, it’s up to you.”

Some of the skills Powell (ibid) mentions (e.g. drawing; CAD) are those that are traditionally passed on via the master-apprentice system. Given the standing of Powell in the design community, perhaps there can be no more legitimate advocate of the already noted Bauhausian quest to create junior masters from novice individuals? However, objection to the master-apprentice system should be raised when design educators’ involvement in teaching dictates students’ outcomes. The authors argue that in such situations, students – via creating design proposals – are telling educators’ stories.
Instead, the authors argue for a balanced educational model where students are able to tell their own stories. This ability may be crucial in differentiating would-be design graduates from their competitors in the field. Hinting at the importance of this quality, Dick Powell (ibid, 2013) argues design education, “makes [graduates] all more the same than different, so it’s hard to stand out.”

This chapter moves on to discuss the relevance of storytelling to the fate of contemporary design graduates.

**Storytelling and the Design Graduate**

Humans traditionally use a host of tools as vehicles to aid narration. Poetry, for example, is argued to be one such method. For centuries it has been utilised to disseminate complex notions, convey knowledge and precipitate emotions (Grisham, 2006). The ability to tell stories is not just important for budding crafters of verse; it is significant in the quest for graduate employment.

Art and design graduates have stated that attaining a degree award alone was not enough in aiding them to gain entry into the professional workplace (Aston, 1999). The situation for these creative graduates is by no means unique. It seems to reflect a wider trend which positions a university degree as a “given” perquisite of entering the professional employment market (Brown et al., 2002:28). Consequentially, the quest for professional employability status in the knowledge economy relies on individuals entering into what Phillip Brown, Anthony Hesketh and Sara Williams (2002: 20) term a “competition for credentials”. Over and above a degree classification, such credentials can include those gained through undertaking recognised training courses, the development of a pertinent network of professional contacts and the demonstration of desirable personal qualities. Amassing these credentials is not a guaranteed route to employment, but without them a would-be professional is not allowed to enter the race to gain graduate employment (Brown, et al., 2003). Ghassan and Bohemia (2011) argue that such credential-accruing actions belong to a set of activities Nod Miller and David Morgan (1993) term autobiographical practices. This term signifies the development of a personal identity which presents an individual in a manner deemed appropriate to a given circumstance. Pertinent to this chapter, autobiographical practices can be deployed when a protagonist is required to “tell a story about themselves” (Miller and Morgan, ibid: 133).

As well as allowing valuable insight into an individual’s take on self-presentation, Miller and Morgan argue (ibid: 133) autobiographical practices are important in informing observers “about the circumstances under which such practices were deployed”. When it comes to searching for professional employment, practices adopted by the candidate may provide a great deal of information about the culture of industry and of a particular company located within it. Brown et al. (2002: 28) argue that in order to increase their chances, graduates should be aware of their prospective “cultural capital” in relation to the culture of the profession and/or organisation they wish to enter and should translate that in to “personal capital”. As such, graduates should be versed in constructing appropriate autobiographical practices. Given the fact that employment rates and earnings for design graduates can be low, acquisition of such skills could be especially useful to
design students (Ghassan and Bohemia, 2011). Given the importance of the notion of self-presentation, it is perhaps surprising that little research exists on this area within the field of design. Tom Fisher (1997) stands out as an exception to this observation.

In order to tell effective stories about oneself, a protagonist must acquire a sense of personal reflection. For Darren Cambridge (2008: 251) this process requires an individual to develop an “individualized, reflexive identity”. Similarly, John Coldron and Robin Smith (1999: 714) argue that an aspect of being a professional is the “construct[ion] of a suitable identity”. Its formation is inextricably associated with one’s community of practice (Lave and Wenger, 1991) for a protagonist constructs an identity via “negotiating a position” (Blåka and Filstad, 2007: 62) with her community. Within a workplace, various factors facilitate this identity-building activity. These include the utilisation of dress (Pratt and Rafaeli, 1997), the tone of voice one employs, mannerisms such as gestures and facial expressions as well as the posture one adopts (see Ashforth and Humphrey, 1993). Social scientists term the above to be signs (see Ashforth and Humphrey, ibid). Identity constructs can be utilised to differentiate a professional in one field from those not employed in that arena and can be deployed to relate one’s status within one’s community of practice (Coldron and Smith, ibid). Such signs are therefore assessed in relation to the cultural values and norms of a particular profession.

Designers are involved in the creation of suitable professional identities (T. Fisher, 1997). Within the world of design, certain signs may be used to narrate particular points about a protagonist to fellow practitioners. Such signs include: accreditation from professional bodies such as the Chartered Society of Designers or the Industrial Design Society of America; an individual’s affiliation with cultural design icons and/or sources of influence (Rodgers and Strickfaden, 2003); a person’s style of sketching (Tovey, Porter and Newman, 2003); their portfolio (e.g. Best, 2009; Coroflot, n.d.; Goldsworthy, 2009). These signs may be used to convey a designer’s accreditation, what Ghassan and Bohemia (2011: 4) term a practitioner’s “design political persuasions” as well as their experience, skills, flair and contemporaneousness. Designers who successfully employ such signs can be thought of as individuals who make efficacious use of autobiographical practices (Ghassan and Bohemia, 2011).

Rather than being fixed, professional identities are in perpetual flux (Coldron and Smith, ibid). Thus, whilst constructing appropriate identities, a protagonist must be aware of contemporary prerogatives, trends and signs. As professional identities are in a constant state of emergence, the accumulation of credentials is not an activity practiced solely by those on the hunt for employment or promotion. It is instead vital in “keeping fit” and in “maintaining one’s employability” (Brown, et al., 2002: 24). Consequently, this chapter argues that an understanding of autobiographical practices may be important in helping design graduates maintain their longevity as professionals within the knowledge economy.

The authors argue that through possessing the capability of dictating students’ design outcomes, the master-apprentice model does not best prepare individuals for telling their own stories to the design world. These stories have the potential of helping individual students to stand out amongst the design crowd. Furthermore, the notion that professional identities are forever in flux (Coldron and Smith, ibid) serves to underscore the argument that design students’ identities (and consequently
the tools which help construct them – for example their drawing styles or portfolios) should be viewed as being in a constant state of emergence rather than being constructed through a top-down linear system. Through their experience as practitioners and educators, tutors can play a vital role in aiding students understand the necessity to grow their prospective cultural capital and how they may translate that into personal capital in the design world. Consequently, design educators can play a central role in helping students to tell fabulous stories about themselves to a wider community of practice.

The remainder of this chapter discusses an educational initiative which differs from the tutor-led model commonly utilised in design pedagogy. Named the Global Studio, this model attempts to propagate a system in which lecturers purposefully try to remain relatively distant in teaching & learning activities and students construct conversations and outcomes primarily via interaction with peers. Through providing limited tutor involvement, the Global Studio model aims to limit the possibility of students telling tutors’ stories. Instead, it hopes to facilitate students in telling their own stories. The authors move on to outline key features central to the Global Studio and to discuss successes and challenges related to running projects through it.

**The Global Studio**

The Global Studio utilises a blended learning approach – a combination of face-to-face teaching and online learning – to enable cross-institutional collaboration between universities located in international locations. Though hundreds of students around the world take part in a Global Studio project, at a microscopic scale assignments are conducted in the following manner: a small group of students in one institution utilises web 2.0 technologies to collaborate with a small group of peers at a partner university.

Responding to the existence of globally networked organisations and the resultant shift in methods of working (e.g. Hoppe 2005; Horváth, Duhoznik, and Xirouchakis 2003; Asokan and Payne 2008), the Global Studio enables small teams of design students to work with peers around the globe. Following in the tradition of the Design Studio, the Global Studio concentrates on project-based learning which is accomplished whilst and through doing (Schön, 1985). This emphasis on project-based knowledge acquisition is argued to help embed established design practices into the repertoires of students (Bohemia and Harman, 2008).

In the Global Studio, face-to-face teaching takes place though two different avenues. In the first phase, the layout of the design teaching room adheres to what JICS (ibid) refers to as a traditional educational arrangement. Consequently, tutors stand at the front of the room and present information to home students who are seated in front of them. Tutors use this time to narrate schedules and logistical issues. They (and invited guests) also give talks related to the project theme as well as presentation techniques. Though students are given opportunities to ask questions, this period falls into the remit of being tutor-led. The second aspect of the face-to-face sessions involves tutors conducting group tutorials. In these, students have the opportunity to discuss project-related successes and challenges with tutors.
The online aspect of the Global Studio makes use of Web 2.0 technologies. A Global Studio WordPress site is created for each project. This features a homepage containing logistical information such as project themes, schedules and announcements. The homepage also relates information about the collaborating universities and participating tutors. Digital postcards from tutors and students are posted on this page. Within the Global Studio site, each pair of collaborating peers is provided with their own WordPress project sites through which they are able to communicate. Students are also free to choose to communicate via other Web 2.0 technologies such as Skype or Facebook. Tutors, other participating learners and industrial collaborators are encouraged to provide feedback to students via the WordPress project sites.

Tutors do not set briefs for Global Studio projects. Instead they develop project themes (please see below). The Global Studio attempts to deliver student-led projects which aim to prepare students for life as a professional designer. As in professional design practice, a student client team delivers a brief and a set of parameters for their collaborators, the student design team. Furthermore, as in professional practice, ultimately, the designers’ task is to respond with an appropriate design intervention. In the Global Studio, client briefs and eventual design outcomes must exist within an overarching project theme provided by the academic project coordinators. This theme contains a set of deliverables as well as deadlines. In order to maximise the experience for students, each team of learners within a pairing performs both the client role and the designer role. Thus, Team A is the client for Team B. At the same time, Team B must write a brief and expects appropriate design interventions from Team A. It is important to note that when Team A acts as “client”, their brief contains instructions to design products or services that are to be relevant to an aspect of the culture in which they are “home students”.

Global Studio Project Themes

Together, the authors have co-conceived and collaborated on two Global Studio projects.

Over 250 students collaborated on the first project. Named ‘The Gift’, this project was inspired by the eminent anthropologist Marcel Mauss’ seminal book of the same name (Mauss 1950, 1990). In an argument which has become a cornerstone of the social sciences, Mauss claims that giving, receiving and reciprocation are the central tenets of human interaction. The cultural theorist Stuart Hall (1997: 3) argues these interactions “carry meaning[s] and value[s] for us, which need to be meaningfully interpreted by others.” The Gift project aimed to give students an appreciation of interpreting cultural practices intrinsic to the lives of their collaborator. Accordingly, it encouraged learners to explore the following aspects of communication and design:

- How do relationships form between people?
- How do bonds form between people of different cultures?
- Should cultural differences be bridged or should they be celebrated?
- What strategies might be employed in order to encourage relationships?
- What are the material effects of Design?

(Ghassan and Bohemia, 2011: 5)
The second project entitled ‘Festivals Fairytales and Myths’ enabled over 200 students to experience working through the Global Studio. This project reflected the trend for authenticity in developed market economies (Arnould and Price, 1993). Facets of this trend include the development of the Slow Movement (Pietrykowski, 2004) and the growth of music festivals (Stone, 2009). The project presented an opportunity to highlight the significance of “context” and “meaning” to learners – for it is vital that practitioners are able to place designed artefacts and services in cultural and historical contexts. Peter Lloyd and Dirk Snelders (2003: 250) underscore this notion by stating that an object “expresses or embodies ideas” in society. Paul du Gay et al. (1997) allude to the role of design practitioners in mediating cultural practices in arguing professionals “play a pivotal role in articulating production with consumption by attempting to associate goods and services with particular cultural meanings” (p.5) and are pivotal in presenting “these values to prospective buyers”. Consequently, du Gay et al. (ibid: 62) term designers as “cultural intermediaries.”

As participating tutors, the authors’ contribution to students’ WordPress sites consisted of posting encouraging remarks, positing questions about certain details learners had posted and reminding participating scholars of upcoming hard points in the schedule. Though informative and structured, to address the criticism of tutor-centred learning in design education, feedback provided by the above academics remained purposefully quite minimal in nature. Through creating an environment which centred on collaborative peer learning, both Ghassan and Bohemia wished to limit the overarching influence of tutors in this design teaching & learning environment. Through this, these academics aimed to limit the likelihood of students telling tutors’ stories. Instead, through utilising Web 2.0 enabled cross-cultural peer collaboration, it was hoped that they would construct and narrate their own.

**Students’ Reflections and Discussion**

Students were asked to provide feedback at both the mid-point and at the end of each of the two Global Studio projects. The following qualitative reflection pertains to end-of-project feedback kindly provided by home students based at the UK institution. This data is pertinent as it allows insight into the whole of the Global Studio learning experience. Though this data has been conveyed in a previous publication (Ghassan and Bohemia, 2013), it is worth repeating students’ observations here as they are pertinent to the discussion in this chapter.

As noted, the Global Studio aims to provide an opportunity for learners to appreciate that understanding cultures different from their own is important in contemporary design practice. Many students appeared to have gained insight into the relevance of this skill:

“This festival is closely linked to Valentines Day, so it was important not just to skim over it and assume it as a western celebration but look for the unique differences this day holds in China... To have a successful project I learned that it is highly important to spend time trying to empathize, understand and respect other people’s cultures, and breaking through this barrier will ease communications and enhance productivity”.

“...we had missed the point that in China cupcakes are not popular and don’t hold the same meaning as in our Western culture”.
“...doing this project it has made me learn about other countries festivals and how they celebrate it”.

“It is important to understand cross culture differences. And the differences should not be underestimated either”.

Collaborating successfully with globally networked teams of professionals is an important feature of the contemporary knowledge economy. This involves a level of appreciation for how colleagues in other cultures see the world. Feedback suggested that for the majority of students, working with peers from cultures different to their own helped develop their intercultural sensitivity:

“Learning to work with a design team from a different cultural background was challenging and interesting; it was all about learning about a new culture, having to both understand and respond to new, and different cultural cues”.

Developing sensitivity for difference necessitates the critical evaluation of cultural stereotypes. Student feedback suggested that the Global Studio has helped learners critically evaluate cultural stereotypes:

“Seeing/observing what the overseas team had found on our own culture (or my own) demonstrating what the cultural stereotypes were. What the overseas team found was not necessarily appropriate to our culture or reflected our culture, but based on these cultural stereotypes and clichés”.

“[I gained an appreciation of] the opinion of people so far away from the U.K. and Europe considering those places and how wrong are some stereotypes from both parties”.

In the Global Studio, collaborating small teams must rely on a teaching approach that is not tutor-centred. Instead, collaborating students are co-dependent on one another’s inputs. Individuals who felt they had benefitted from this learning experience noted they had learnt to rely on developing their own problem solving strategies. Going beyond normal confines, self-evaluating design work, and feeling a greater level of control about their work’s direction is suggested by students’ quotes below:

“I had to go outside and experience [the] world. Get out of the shell that is the [class] room 103”.

“We then had to go ahead and use our own judgment, as designers to decide as to what concept would work the best”.

 “[The project] created several challenges that needed to be addressed without input from lecturers. This definitely formed an environment that felt greatly independent of University even though the project was undergone there”.
Bereft of the level of tutor-led teaching that is associated with the master-apprentice model, the feedback above suggests that many learners were able to construct and effectively narrate their own stories. However, paralleling this reflection upon the positive effect on learning, many students conveyed their struggle with making decisions without tutor-led involvement from educators. For example:

“It would have been beneficial to the process if we could have had some input from the lecturers with regards to the actual designs too, perhaps resulting in some less dubious outcomes or smoother transitions between iterations”.

It is possible that feedback like this is related to the dominance of the master-apprentice model in design education. Below, feedback from a learner articulates how the normal way of working is administered by tutors – and how this affects the route a project may follow.

“I have learnt an incredible amount from this project and they are things that I would never have experienced from the in-house projects at university, the projects we get from the university are regulated often by your tutors but it is so different when it is done by fellow students. Evidently our tutors are our clients and it’s so easy to gain feedback and direction as they are there with you in your classroom however when working with international ‘clients’ it is clear to me how important communication is, how important leadership is and how communication your ideas in the right way can stop allot of confusion and misunderstanding”.

A student who provided his feedback whilst conducting an internship with a manufacturer of high-end motor cars reflected the need for an approach to design education which is less dictated by tutors:

“I feel I can understand this [Global Studio project] more so, as I’ve just spent my first week at the […] Design Studio, where its extremely fast paced and not everything goes to plan when there are many things going at once.”

**Conclusion**

Individuals benefit from understanding the importance of autobiographical practices in both acquiring and maintaining employability status in the contemporary graduate working environment. Design students are it seems always a blink of an eye away from becoming fully fledged graduates. To improve their chances of gaining meaningful graduate employment, students must learn how to translate cultural capital into personal capital. To do this, design students need to learn how to tell their own stories to prospective employers.

Though it has tangible and important benefits for students in terms of aspects such as skills acquisition, this chapter has argued that the master-apprentice model may not be optimally effective in aiding students to tell their own stories. As the credentials for gaining and retaining employment are in a constant state of emergence, this model – which arguably can ask students to tell tutors’ stories – may not be optimally attuned to enable future design graduates the necessary
reflexivity to be able to negotiate the increasingly complex world of the contemporary knowledge economy.

This chapter has argued for a balance between master-apprentice style teaching and a student-led approach to design education. Qualitative feedback has demonstrated that the student-led Global Studio has enabled learners to tell their own stories. However, student feedback has also suggested that many learners are not comfortable with the notion that tutors remain relatively distant in the Global Studio system. Notes from the Global Studio suggest that there is still much work to do in achieving an optimally balanced design education model.

The approached outlined in this chapter is one of many ways the authors envisage student-led learning can potentially be conducted. The authors hope this chapter will further stimulate discussion amongst design educators into how design education can best contribute to the student learning experience.

References


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