CLIP CETL Fellowship Report

Mentorship Scheme;
extending work related learning

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extending work related learning**

Introduction

Aims
The aims of this fellowship project were to develop a mentorship scheme that:

• Enabled students to build long-term relationships with the design industry and increase employment potential

• Extend industry's involvement with the FdA programme, which will in turn help shape the future of the course and inform re-validation discussions

• Promote extensive alumni involvement, strengthening student, staff, alumni and industry links

• Enhance the learning experience, achievement, progression and career prospects of the students

• Build student confidence

The University's Vision, Values and Aims (specifically: Academic, Our Students, Research) have been directly engaged with in the construction of this Fellowship project, with particular reference to The Strategic Aim: Achieve an integrated and collaborative University community as experienced by students, staff and the outside world. And also within The Student Experience: The University will extend and develop employability skills within the curriculum in a way that ensures our students are better prepared for the challenges of finding employment, as well as generating employment opportunities, within the creative industries.

Context

The FdA Design for Graphic Communication at the London College of Communication (LCC) is a large course with approximately 100 students in each year group. There are 16 nationalities represented with 80% Home/EU and 20% International students. It has a firm commitment to delivering a quality learning experience in Work Related Learning (WRL) and College Based Learning (CBL), the two central components of the course. This project is concerned with Work Related Learning for second year students.

Previous research project

In 2005 I was awarded CLIP CETL funding for a pedagogic action research project titled; *Can group based projects enhance the work-based learning aspect of an FdA course?* This project was presented with Darren Raven at the CLTAD Enhancing Curricula conference in Lisbon, April 2006 and was also presented at the UAL Learning and Teaching conference in May 2006.

This previous CLIP CETL funded project with Darren Raven, worked with students, staff and industry professionals and explored preconceptions that each group held of the other and examined ways in which knowledge and skills could be shared to improve student understanding of the world of work. The results from this research are due for publication in a forthcoming book by Rosemary Sassoon.

Issues

Building on the experience from the previous action research project I identified several WRL issues that required investigation and development. These issues have direct implications on 2nd(final) year student achievement and employment possibilities.

• Current WRL is focussed around individual student work placement and live industry briefs, there is no opportunity for students to build up long term associations with industry professionals to supplement their college based learning activities.

• Many industry professionals are eager to become involved with education, but are unable to realise their potential beyond a one off lecture or live brief and follow up critique as they are often hampered by time constraints.

• Many students are forced to undertake full time placements after graduation in order to gain enough experience in the professional design field before being offered full time employment.

• The FdA course would benefit from building closer links with alumni from FdA and the previous HND, which together represent a wealth of untapped industrial knowledge.

Setting up the mentorship scheme

This project worked with four parties; current second year students, alumni within the design industry, design professionals and PPD staff at LCC in a two stage process; setting up the requirements for a mentorship scheme and then investigating the outcomes.

The requirements
As this was a pilot project, it was not feasible to run the scheme for all of the 90 or so students in the year group, it would have been too time consuming to try and gather enough mentors to support that number of students. Instead, thirty student places were made available on the scheme, as this was a manageable number in terms of students and also finding an appropriate number of mentors, somewhere between ten and thirty, which meant mentors would take on between one and three students each.

It was paramount that the students had as rich an experience as possible and by working 1:1 with a mentor, students would be able to maximise this opportunity, which is in stark contrast to their college experience which is predominately based around group activities, where staff to student ratios are often greater than twenty to one.

By giving the mentors a very small number of students to work with it would not place excess demands on their time and also make the experience a very personal one for both parties. The scheme ran with twenty-four students and fifteen mentors, with an average mentor student ratio of 1:1.6.

The mentors
The mentors came from several sources

• Designers that were already well associated and familiar with the FdA course

• Alumni from the FdA and the previous HND course, now working in industry

• The Personal & Professional Development (PPD) staff team from within the FdA course supplied contacts from their extensive database of design companies

• The D&AD New Blood end of year student exhibition
Several designers showed an interest in the quality of the work shown by the FdA students and they were keen to get involved with the scheme. This was a very encouraging and exciting step, especially as it was the first year we had exhibited
at the D&AD exhibition.

Not only was it important to have designers from a wide pool of sources, but that the design backgrounds were diverse too. Virtually every aspect of the graphic design community was represented: from small, two-designer companies specialising in ethical issues, to large multi-disciplinary companies with offices in several countries. The range of design specialisms was also diverse, ranging from typography and book design, to website design and branding, from experience and retail design, to animation and moving graphics, with illustration and advertising also represented. It was important for the students to realise, first hand, the incredibly diverse nature of the graphic design industry.

Establishing expectations
In order to find out what sort of mentorship scheme the students required and what their expectations would be, a questionnaire was devised. This was initially tested on the outgoing year group of

students (who would not be taking part) and then revised over the summer and presented to the returning second year group who did take part in the project.

There was a parallel questionnaire devised for the mentors, which was circulated amongst a large pool of potential mentors over the summer break, which allowed time for mentors to respond and for personal follow up consultations to take place, so that mentors were comfortable with the project and felt included in setting the parameters. I felt this was important because I didn't want the mentors to become burdened by student demands and also felt it important that ground rules for the project could be established for both parties, mentors and students, so everyone knew what was expected of them if they took part in
the scheme.

Devising the questionnaires
The questionnaires were devised to manage the expectations of both parties involved with the mentorship scheme.

The questionnaires were divided into four main topics:

• Areas of work that students request help with
(folio presentation, specific projects, design issues, general industry issues)

• Meetings with mentors (appropriate frequency and duration)

• Forms of communication for meetings and feedback
(face-to-face, email, telephone, web camera)

• Categories of specialist design advice
(typography, illustration, information design, packaging, branding, advertising,
moving image, web design, photography)

The first topic, areas of work, also included a rating scale of 1 to 4 from very important to unimportant. All other questions were straightforward multiple choice.

See appendix A Student Questionnaire & appendix B Mentor Questionnaire.

The student questionnaire results
The two areas that the students felt most important to receive feedback in were their overall folio presentation and preparation; 66% put this as very important, with general industry information about jobs and placements a close second with 63% putting it as very important. There was a close spread of results in two categories, specific design issues and specific projects. The design issues results ranged from 42% very important to 12% not important and the specific project results polled 38% for both very important and important, while the other two categories showed clear favourites as indicated above.

For meetings with mentors, students were happiest to meet at any mutually convenient time (33%) followed by twice a month (25%) and once a month (21%). The length of time that students felt most appropriate for a mentor meeting was half an hour (50%), followed by one hour (42%). Students were twice as keen to meet their mentors face to face (43%) compared to the nearest other form of

communication, which was email (21%), with the possibility of being involved in a video conference session scoring only 7% as a preference. The students were happy to receive Feedback from their mentors in a variety of ways, again face to being the most popular (36%), followed by email with (28%). The students were not interested in small group sessions only 5% listed this as a preference within the scheme.

The types of specialist design advice that the students most wanted access to were publicity and promotion; 58% included this in their selection, closely followed by typography 54%, information design and illustration both at 50%. There were no surprises in this top four as these are the main areas within the current FdA course. However not far off these were branding and web design each with a 38% preference. This reflects the students' awareness of branding as a usefull form of communication within the design industry and also the importance of web design. It may also be influenced by their realisation that graphic design is delivered equally via screen as it is via print media and in order to be effective in the work environment, the students need to be competent and confident in the world of screen based design and especially that of web design.

The mentor questionnaire results
The mentors were in agreement with the students' preferences, as they too felt it most important for students to receive feedback in their overall folio; 71% put this as very important, with general industry information about jobs and placements a close second with 68% putting it as very important. There was again a close spread of results in two categories, specific design issues and specific projects. The design issues results ranged from 25% very important to 32% not important and the specific project results polled 25% for both very important and important, while the other two categories showed clear favourites as
indicated above.

For meetings with their mentees, mentors were happiest to meet once a month (66%) followed by any mutually convenient time (25%) and once a term (12%). The difference in the mentors' favourite choice of once a month, compared to that of the students' any convenient time, was driven by the structure of the working week. By booking in regular monthly meeting with their mentees, the mentors would be less likely to have to cancel at the last minute because of work pressures. The length of time that mentors felt most appropriate for a meeting was equally split between half an hour (43%), and by one hour (42%). Mentors were really only interested in meeting their mentees face to face and in using email to communicate with them; 60% put this as a preference. Again the possibility of being involved in a video conference session scored only 12% as a preference. The mentors were happy to give feedback in a variety of ways, again face to being the most popular (51%), followed by email with (36%). The mentors were a little more interested in small group sessions than the students, but still only 9% listed this as a preference within the scheme.

The types of specialist design advice that the mentors could offer most readily were typography; 37% and information design; 35% These were closely followed by publicity (28%), web design (22%) and branding (24%). There was clearly a good fit between student expectations and mentor's specialist skills.

The selection process
The mentorship scheme was open to all second year students, however, because of the limited number of places on the scheme, there was a simple selection task that students needed to

undertake in order to qualify for the scheme. Out of the sixty students who registered an interest in the scheme, twenty-four completed the selection task and were subsequently accepted on to the scheme.

When the second year FdA students returned from their summer break they were supplied with a mentorship scheme brief and questionnaire. It was an optional part of the course and was not formally assessed. Those interested were asked to hand in a designed document that included a CV with work samples and detailed their aims, goals and reasons for being involved in the mentorship scheme.

Those students who were successful had their questionnaires matched as closely as possible to a mentor. The matchmaking process between student and mentor was crucial to the success of the scheme. The mentors involved in the scheme were selected because they represented a wide range of design specialities. The student's style of work, and aspirations where possible, were matched to the mentor's speciality.

The Launch evening
Mentors and students met up at an informal launch evening at LCC, where each mentor gave a presentation about their company and expressed their reasons for becoming involved in the scheme. This was a great opportunity for students to see professional designers presenting their credentials and also a chance for the mentors to meet each other and discuss relative work issues on an informal basis, something that usually only happens at design conferences. By the end of the evening, all of the students had met and had informal discussions with their mentors and had confirmed how and when to set up their first meetings.

The Handbook
Handbooks for each student and mentor were given out at the launch evening. Included in the students' handbooks were their mentor's name and contact information as a sticker attached to their handbook. *See appendix C for mentoring scheme handbook.*

The handbook also contained a contract that the mentors and students were asked to adhere to. This included guidelines for setting up or changing meetings and how to post feedback on the website. The handbook also set out the parameters for the whole scheme and included the brief for the students, the mentors requirements and lots of space to write meeting notes, from which the website postings could be made.

In addition to a handbook with their student's contact details, mentors were given a copy of the task that each of their mentees had completed, which detailed the students' CVs and their hopes and expectations from the scheme. This enabled the mentors to be as fully informed as possible about the students they would be mentoring, both in terms of background and ability.

The website
In addition to the handbook, which contained the project overview, we also launched the website: www.fdamentorship.co.uk, onto which mentors and students were asked to post feedback from their meetings. The website feedback form was designed around a system called "Thinking Tools" that was devised by Edward de Bono and has been in use on the FdA course for the past couple of years, which meant all students were familiar with it. It was introduced into the FdA programme via a previous CLIP CETL project undertaken by Catherine Smith and Darren Raven and has proved very beneficial in improving students' critical thinking. The premise is that people are asked to give

feedback in the form of positive observations (Plus), areas to improve (Minus) and interesting aspects (Interesting). At the launch evening, this was explained to the mentors, as they were unlikely to have used this particular form of feedback with students.

From an educational perspective, seeing all of the comments from mentors and students on the website gives an overview of the process and makes monitoring the scheme much easier. It also means patterns that emerge from mentor feedback can be noted and fed back into the course delivery. For example, the appropriateness of projects in the portfolios and the level of professional presentation that the students have up till now achieved.

The website's main purposes were:

• To make the mentoring process interactive

• To build a sense of community

• To give students support from within their network of peers.
It can be overwhelming for students to spend time with a professional designer in a professional design environment. This gave students the chance to share their thoughts and feelings about the mentoring meetings with each other.

• To monitor progress & keep the process alive.
It was also a good way to see what other mentors and students have said about their meetings and gave an opportunity to be something of a voyeur, which appealed to some of the mentors. It was also a reminder to students and mentors to post their thoughts and comments, so that for every meeting there was a self-reflective student comment and mentor feedback.

Investigating the outcomes

Posting website feedback
Overall the feedback from students and mentors was very positive about the act of posting feedback on to the website. Students were keen for people to post up images of the work being discussed, and there was the facility to do this, although it is more time consuming for those taking part and to date no one has done so. Anecdotal evidence suggests that students also felt that that viewing other's comments would give ideas for topics to cover within their own subsequent mentor meetings.

There were a couple of concerns from mentors regarding the use of student's names when issuing feedback. Mentors were unsure if information from the site was available in the public domain and were keen to maintain anonymity wherever possible. The site uses only numbers, rather than names to identify the students, so that the site can be re-used in subsequent years, once the content has been archived. *Feedback can be viewed at www.fdamentorship.co.uk*

Video interviews
A series of video interviews were conducted with a sample group of mentors and students over a three-month period. Mentors and students were interviewed at various stages of the project. All of those interviewed had met at least once and in addition to this, some students had also undertaken

placements or special projects with their mentors by the time interviews took place. All participants however, were asked the same set of questions.

Below are the questions and some of the responses.
Please see appendix D, DVD for the complete video (20mins approx).

Interview Questions

1. Why did you decide to get involved with the mentorship scheme?

Mentors
"We felt it was a really good opportunity to help bring students on board and give them a chance to hone their skills and give them a feel for working in a real live environment."

"I believe it's very beneficial for students to get an outside view of life in the professional world and to actually spend some time with them on an individual basis because I think they will learn a lot more from that experience."

"…Thinking back to what I did at that time, I think I would love to have had a mentor, had I had the opportunity or even the initiative to gain one."

"When we first set up the company, it was something we were really keen on doing was to get involved with colleges and universities in a kind of mutually beneficial way, that we want to give something back at the same time we feel we can really learn from what's going on out there."

Students
"I thought it was a good idea, because I am going to be done in six months and it was a good way to prepare my professional life."

"I just saw it as a good opportunity to start making connections in a real world basis and to get some advice outside the course and from professionals."

"It's a rare networking opportunity, I think you would not have this chance to be in contact with design organisations. You might be at the bottom of a pile of CVs but this was a fantastic chance to bridge the gap between college and industry and find out really what's required of you."

2. How do you feel you can best help the students?

Mentors
"I think first and foremost it's some of those practical things that are perhaps outside of purist design considerations . . . it's stuff about, it's deadlines, it's the practicality of managing yourself, managing clients, communicating all kinds of stuff like that that just seemed to go under the radar until you get sat in a seat as someone's employee."

"I think it's about providing for them that big mysterious and spooky link between kind of education and the professional environment . . . it's always a mystery and quite scary but actually if they know

about it, they've seen how people work, they actually realise that it's not very different from what they have been learning and have been taught, so it's passing that information on to them, just making them feel at home and familiar with that new environment."

" . . . We can obviously be very helpful with contacts, links for them on how they can get jobs and things like that, so that would be both within large branding agencies and people that we've met that are in other agencies, things like that and also information design, user focussed and experience design, because that's what we're working with."

3. What do you gain by being a mentor? What can the mentors gain from you?

Mentors
" I get, I guess the enjoyment of passing it on actually, you know over time you just gain a lot of experience a lot of information a lot of advice that you've picked up from other people passing it on and it's enjoyable to actually give that out and to perhaps see the little light bulb going on . . . I enjoy young people, I enjoy their ideas and you know there is a tremendous almost refreshing naivety in the questions they ask, which sometimes can be quite challenging to you, because you have to justify why you've done things for as long as you've done them for and why you've done them like that."

"Having the time to talk about not just the design tasks that are in hand . . . I think we're lucky that we do get the time to talk about those bigger issues, that's partly because of the kind of design we do that we have to think about who we're designing for . . . it's really refreshing to give us the time to step back and talk with another set of people who have come from a different background."

"It gives us an opportunity to basically keep our nose to the ground and find new talent and hopefully nurture it, it's just a great way to stay in contact with colleges and it's really satisfying . . . and it's good to find out what projects, what briefs are being set in colleges and universities now and the direction that students are going in and also they come in here full of enthusiasm and it's a real injection of young blood into the office and we really buzz off that, we really enjoy that, it's been good fun."

Students
" Having spoken to a few of the mentors themselves, they found that it was really nice to see again the sort of work they used to do and loved doing when they had more freedom and time and I think its for them its good to see what's coming out of our colleges and what the next generation of designers are producing."

"They get to see students work that are coming into the industry, people they might eventually hire."

"I suppose they'll get a maybe fresh new look on ideas they probably didn't think of doing themselves."

4. Have you met your mentee/mentor yet? Describe the meeting.

Mentors
"At the moment we've met them twice and we've done it on a very informal basis, so they've come over here, I mean we're quite a large design consultancy, so that is quite a different environment to what they are used to, so the first meeting, we had a little bit of lunch in the canteen, had a chat,

caught up with where they are, learnt a bit about their personality, they had a wander around, so that was a gentle introduction."

" . . . Showed her what we do, sort of talked her through some of the bits of work we're working on at the moment and then looked through her portfolio, gave her a critique and you know told her how she could organise it a bit better and just asked her what she really wanted to get out of it and she gave us quite a few good pointers, what she was a little bit confused about at college, if there was anything she wasn't quite sure about."

"We actually worked through a couple of her projects with her, did a bit of a brainstorm, that worked really well and we've got a few other little things in the pipeline we're going to do with her. We're going to help her put together an online portfolio, which is one thing she's quite keen on doing."

Students
"We had a very nice, very informal meeting . . . I saw their offices and we had a chat about the sort of things they do and the sort of things I am interested in and how that will work together."

"We'd just finished the term's work and I brought along everything . . . and he paid real attention to spending time going through the portfolio, not just a quick flick, he read stuff that had been written in the book and asked lots of questions."

"He told me OK to prepare the second meeting, I would like you to write down all the points you want to talk about, so we had like four different points and we talked maybe like fifteen minutes, its very organised with my mentor."

5. What are the benefits of a mentoring scheme?

Mentors
"One of the main benefits really is for students to get some real world experience."

"I think to have someone that's been there and can advise on things like your portfolio, to help with interview technique and things like that would be a big benefit, definitely, it helped me when I was at college, so it is good to give something back."

"From our point of view its just great to have young blood coming in and being able to talk through their projects, it's a really good thing and it's a good way for us to spot talent as well."

Students
"I think it is a fantastic idea, with any luck, some of us, might get a job out of it."

"Experiencing something that may be applicable to how you want to work in the future, so when you're on a course like this you've got so many choices to you that actually how you might work in the real world seems very distanced and when you're put in a situation with people who are working in a way that perhaps you'd like to work when you graduate, you can really get a feel of what's sort of expected of you, what sort of things you'd like to do and whether or not its actually appropriate for you."

" It's made me realise more than ever the importance of work experience."

6. How did you feel about posting feedback on the website?

Mentors
"Yes, I've posted on it, it was a really easy process actually, quick, simple to use."

"Of course you go onto the website and read other people's comments, it's hugely interesting."

"I quite like the way you can actually go and see how other students are faring in other agencies and what they're doing."

"I think it also keeps the process alive a bit as well, that you've really got to make sure that from our point of view we're doing our bit and from her point of view she's coming in and staying in contact."

Students
"It was interesting reading comments of other people both students and mentors obviously I know what I think and I feel I know how our meeting went but it was interesting to see some of the feedback that other students had got which was relevant to everyone."

"It's good for me to look at that, whether its about my work or other people's because it means you can pay attention to those things as you progress through the year."

Conclusions

Evidence collected from interview feedback suggests that the scheme has been acknowledged as a very good initiative, but it does need someone to manage it, to oversee it and put it all together in a way that is accessible to busy designers and students. It creates a very positive situation for students to grow in confidence, in terms of their portfolio presentation and in discussing their work with other designers. Mentors seem very happy to devote generous quantities of their time, on a regular basis to helping bring on the next generation of designers, supporting them in a way that is not possible in a college based environment. Once the mentors are involved in the scheme, they do however, expect the students to drive the project, to chase them, rather than have students assume that the mentor sets the agenda and level of engagement. It would suggest, that the students who take part in a scheme of this nature, in order to gain the most from it, require a degree of proactivity.

A very positive investment in our students' futures, would be to appoint a mentorship coordinator from within the FdA programme, who could continue to enhance the links and grow the associations with industry and alumni, so that every second year student that wants one, could have access to a mentor throughout their final year of study. The students need designers that they can work with, share ideas and learn from in a way that directly relates to the student's aspirations and that provides direct professional input into their work while they are still at college.

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