­­Cumulus Rovaniemi Conference The Global Design Studio (GDS): Playing with Trans-National Digital Design Education

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# Abstract

The Global Design Studio (GDS) is an online intensive project that introduces students and staff to transnational and transdisciplinary practices and collaboration situated in pluralistic and global ways of designing together whilst exploring subject-driven opportunities for online learning. The project grew out of INTERACT, an academic and student exchange project between four major institutions in Europe and Australia that explored the futures of design in a global context.

The GDS distils the key benefits of INTERACT into a formula that could be scaled to include a greater number of students without the monetary and environmental expense of a physical exchange, making the learning experience more inclusive and accessible. Simultaneously, GDS exposes new, subject-driven opportunities in building global networks for online learning beyond the usual rationale of resource expediency.

The GDS is run in partnership with designer and educator Fred Deakin and Modual (http://www.modual.org) to deliver a transnational immersive learning experience, building on Modual’s track record of delivering learning projects that cross time-zones and national boundaries. The project utilises digital platforms like FUZE and Slack to synchronously and asynchronously connect the sixty students from three participating institutions. The students build relationships, share skills, exercise critical judgement and resource management, and develop a design project together from inception to outcome over the 10-day period of the intensive co-design workshop.

The first iteration, which took taking place from the 3rd of December to the 11th of December 2018, was based on Playable City, an international creative project putting “people and play at the heart of the future city, re-using city infrastructure and re-appropriating smart city technologies to create connections – person to person, person to city” (http://www.playablecity.com). Outcomes took the form of interactive installations and aimed to bring citizens together in specific urban locations. The project brief therefore presented a fruitful counterpoint to the global aspect of the GDS, and participating students had to work both globally and locally.

This all takes place against the backdrop of increased nationalism and protectionism as a response to globalisation and increasing inequality in the countries of the participating institutions. Additionally, it is a response to changing production, dissemination and consumption of designed artefacts when “participating in distributed working has become commonplace for many {…] designers” (Wodehouse, A., et al, 2008). The GDS is an attempt at a subject-driven, modular, agile and digitally-constructed project in which teaching is constructed around contemporary issues rather than traditional disciplinary boundaries or institutional targets to prepare students better for a reality of transdisciplinary and transnational practice. The GDS also wrests control of the online learning discourse from reductive arguments of ‘efficiency’ and place it in terms of experience and opportunity.

This paper will report on the first iteration of the GDS project and propose valuable next steps. Furthermore, the structure of GDS is flexible and adaptable and can be re-created across different institutions, times and contexts – and we would value the opportunity to create further connections around a campfire in Rovaniemi!

# Author keywords

Global Design Studio; subject driven; transnational; distributed working.

# Introduction

The first iteration of the Global Design Studio (GDS) was a ten-day intensive co-design workshop involving undergraduate design students from three major institutions: The Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology (RMIT), the Danish School of Media and Journalism (DMJX) and the London College of Communication, University Arts London (LCC). Twenty students from each institution participated in a brief based around notions of ‘Playable Cities’ explored later.

The project evolved from a four-year European funded exchange program between the institutions called INTERACT (full title: INTERACTive Studios & Innovative Networks for Future Design Careers) which had proven to be a productive catalyst for each institution to challenge its approaches to the design subject and teaching methods as well as exposing participants to broader global contexts for design. During these four years, forty student and twenty staff exchanges were made between the European and Australian institutions, the student exchange usually lasting 10 weeks. However, the prohibitive cost and logistics excluded many from participation. (Revell & Verhoeven, 2018)

INTERACT was also conceived of in a climate of increased emphasis on online and/or blended learning approaches from the institutions involved, largely justified as an economic expediency.  The Global Design Studio was therefore an opportunity to explore a subject-driven approach to online learning that continued the objectives of INTERACT to provide students with a cross-cultural learning experience.

GDS proved a great success at sustaining a global community of practice around interaction design between the three institutions founded in the INTERACT project. In this paper we analyse first the context and rationale for the project. Secondly, the preparation and strategic decisions made regarding delivery methods with the constraints of online learning and thirdly the actual delivery and feedback from the process. Much of this feedback is a reflection on extensive student feedback gathered at the end of the project. The hope is that this provides a model for future projects of a similar nature and provides rationale for further subject-driven collaborative online projects that cross boundaries and time zones.

# Context

INTERACT was a unique project in its scale, scope and ambition. The objectives of the program were to ‘link coursework, studio practice and work integrated learning (in a cross-cultural setting) to develop better graduate outcomes for future practitioners in the field of Interaction Design.’ (Interact Mobility Project, n.d.) It was rooted in the belief that intercultural exchanges and experiences have a clear benefit to students ‘as it prepares them to live and work in the global businesses and the highly mobile social groups that are emerging.’ (Beetham, H. et al, 2013, 266).

In the current global context of growing anti-globalism and anti-intellectualism as well as changing work and living patterns, INTERACT became an experiment to see if a common language of design could be used as a platform for the resilience of design through emerging platforms and forms of digital practice. When it ended in 2017, it became even more important to maintain aspects of global and transnational education.

INTERACT experimented with how ‘the growth of digital tools for collaboration are enabled by and enable globalised design practice and more precarious working habits.’ (Revell & Verhoeven, 2018) Participants organised through platforms like Trello, communicated through Slack and Skype and posted their experiences to Google groups and blogs. However, these were only pursued as methods of enhancing and supporting physical exchange rather than standalone tools for practice and learning.

The Global Design Studio also sought to address a second ambition beyond a more affordable model of international collaboration; demonstrating a subject-orientated approach to online learning. It is obvious that with deepening geo-political divides, particularly in the UK, and the increasing cost of education to students that there is an operational drive toward online delivery as an economic expedient to cover costs. However, online delivery has proven divisive and difficult to educators sometimes due to technical and resourcing issues but also because ‘large number of faculty and staff think that online courses are less prestigious than face-to-face ones.’ (Moreira, 2016)

Though online delivery is common in some subject areas, the move to online or distance learning in design education is particularly harsh as the value of the studio run parallel to the nature of the subject (Crowther, 2013). The challenge of Global Design Studio was to experiment in a model of online learning that actively enhanced the subject of design and the studio model from a subject perspective and provided added intellectual and creative value to academics and students instead of simply presenting an economic imperative. In this way, online learning was used to promote the experience of activity between ‘the mix of individuals in… social networks, such as chat rooms, digital cafés, blogs, and discussions groups, broadening the range of new social mixtures and cyber-experience into different groups in relation to education, culture, rationality, learning styles, age, races, nationalities, expectations, and demands.’ (Moreira, 2016) As identified in our previous paper (Revell & Verhoeven, 2018), this broad experience of different working patterns, ideas, individuals and approaches is difficult for students to experience from the studio without the prohibitive expense of exchange or time in industry. As such, GDS is a synthesis of the initial brief of INTERACT to broaden the cultural, professional and global experience of design students and to explore how this particular online collaboration might be used as a model of how online activities can be used to enhance and add to the experience of contemporary design education rather than a reductive measure of efficiency.

Overall, the studio had the following objectives:

1. Trial a globally collaborative brief between design students across the world.
2. Develop ways of allowing students and staff to experience the practice of their subject in a global context without the prohibitive cost of physical exchange.
3. Demonstrate and experiment in a subject-driven approach to online learning that enhances the quality of the student experience and subject.
4. Build students and staff digital skill set, using tools that are commonly used for distributed working in design focused workplaces beyond the university context.

# Preparation & Delivery

The idea of an online collaborative brief was stipulated early in the evaluative period of the INTERACT programme but took a long time to organise between the stakeholders. During initial meetings about the online collaboration we agreed on specific parameters within which the project was going to take place: We agreed on one joint design project brief which would be delivered synchronously and asynchronously to give students and staff from the different institutions a common goal. We also agreed that any online learning experience in a design context required an approach to *learning by doing* (Schön, 1985) and a focus on the process of making and thinking through design in a collaborative context (following recommendation for effective online design studios by Ouita Broadfoot and Rick Bennett).

## Working with the Curriculum

There were significant logistical curricular challenges that had to be overcome without the support of existing frameworks for this type of activity. In this process there were institutional differences exposed such as how a project like the Global Design Studio is articulated to students in their learning. At the London College of Communication which, as previously identified (Revell & Verhoeven, 2018), favours a student-driven atelier-style model at a large scale, students undertake regular extra-curricular projects so there was no need to make it fit the curriculum or course structure to encourage participation. The Danish School of Media and Journalism, with a much smaller student body found it easy to manoeuvre the project into coursework while the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology had to write a specific unit option integrating the project. Finding good timing in the rhythm of the curriculum and acknowledging how student expectations change between institutions provided further points of discussion between academic teams about the value of these projects.

We therefore purposefully kept the framework flexible and open so that the different institutions could approach this in ways that suited their curriculum design and course culture.

## Working with ModUAL and Playable City

At the stakeholder meeting it became clear that none of the courses involved had any experience with this kind of ambitious, subject-driven transnational project delivery, while ModUAL had ample experience in running digital collaborative workshops. ModUAL is a UAL initiative led by Fred Deakin with the aim ‘to find new ways of prepar[ing] students for a meaningful career in today’s creative industries.’ (Deakin, 2016) It responds to ‘ongoing disruption’ as a condition of our ‘post-digital culture’ (ibid) and uses iterative and agile working practices from industry and applies these in an HE context.

For the GDS this involved a limited and well-structured timeframe into which synchronous and asynchronous moments of working together in different groups sizes were scheduled. Meetings took place using Fuze, a platform for digital collaboration that connects voice, video, messaging and content sharing and Slack a cloud-based messaging platform. Synchronous workshops using Fuze ran every day for three hours at different times to adjust to the different time zones. Slack was used for the asynchronous moments when smaller teams were working together remotely on the same project.

For the Global Design Studio, we also involved Playable City, an international creative project putting ‘people and play at the heart of the future city, re-using city infrastructure and re-appropriating smart city technologies to create connections.’ (playablecity.com) This became the joint brief. Students were sub grouped across the three institutions and worked towards creating: ‘interaction[s] and creative installations... to unlock a social dialogue... – one which will vary in each location’ (playablecity.com), collaboratively exploring intellectual ideas around the city in a global context and designing urban experiences in the form of video prototypes together.

From the 3rd of December to the 11th of December 2018, 60 students from three different institutions met daily between 9am - 12pm London time (UCT) to run through short design exercises by the ModUAL team, discussion and feedback. These were hosted by ‘pod leaders’ who steered the sessions to productive ends so that the participants could drive the project forward asynchronously in the remaining time. In the final few days, the participants focussed on the development and delivery of their video prototype for the final crit.

# Evaluation

Our evaluation is drawn largely from the thorough student feedback gathered throughout the project. These have been broken into sections reflecting the questions asked; engagement and participation and online productivity. There is some obvious cross-over between these but this breakdown provides a useful framework for assessing this and future projects. Finally, we offer reflections on the original aims from the perspective of the authors.

For most students involved this was a first experience in online collaborative working. The project received overwhelmingly positive feedback in line with studies that have ‘found that the majority of students irrespectively of their residence feel that learning alongside students from other countries has a positive influence.’ (Kayumova & Sadykova, 2016) However, here we have chosen to analyse specific criticisms that provide insight into the problems and opportunities of this kind of project.

## Engagement and Participation

Students were positive about the exposure to new tutors from other institutions and the opportunity to discover new methods, techniques and disciplinary definitions. This fits neatly with a pedagogic approach the values student’s self-direction in seeking feedback, evaluating in relation to their aims and then responding. As we identified in the previous paper (Revell & Verhoeven, 2018) working with the same cohort and group of tutors can stifle the development of a subject as well as individual students. Exposure to a greater range of peers and collaborators is an obvious incentive for this kind of work and reflects the experience of contemporary practice.

However, unexpected feedback included difficulty in stimulating consistent engagement in online sessions. Students admitted to being easily distracted or struggling to concentrate ‘due to the fact that you are looking at a screen, and listening to a screen - there's less personal involvement to keep you hooked on whoever's talking.’ During the initial briefing session, the video was ‘choppy’ and the images ‘low quality’ and a lot of students admitted losing interest: ‘Something about the way [the lecturer] presented… made the experience seem a little frustrating at times.’ It’s clear that tutors will need to consider visual engagement and stimulation when working exclusively with the screen.

As the brief progressed, attendance and participation began to lag and this had a detrimental effect on the remaining students: ‘There weren't enough consequences for the students who chose not to show up or participate in the work.’ This comment rings true of all extra-curricular projects but students also suggested how this absence was more notable in an online context when working with new collaborators.

Following this problem, a surprising response was a frustration with online etiquette where students bring their own expectations and experience of online behaviour which resulted in a handful of clashes when online behavioural etiquette failed to match:

*It might be useful to set a tone for how and when we use the camera. and why. I don't think the people, turning it off, gets why it's nice to look at who you are communicating with. most people got it down, but definately [sic] not all.*

A team learning together would quickly establish an etiquette as most GDS participants did. However, when a group is pulled together for a pop-up event like this it may be useful for organisers to lay down behavioural ground rules. Many students fed back that the use of Pecha Kucha style introductions was a very effective way of getting participants comfortable to speaking with each other. This could also be used for laying out expected behaviours.

Working globally also introduced some other forms of culture clash. For example, students from one of the institutions were very vocal about the fact that ‘we had to work through the weekend as well.’ This stands in contrast to the expectations of students at other institutions, used to working flexibly: ‘The fact that you expected us to work during the weekend I find disrespectful.’ This has implications for how regional differences in design culture have an impact on the operation of these kind of global projects.

## Online Productivity

The expected complaint about the lack of physical presence when doing group work forms a consistent bed of critique with the online delivery of creative subjects: ‘I was missing … the immediacy of sketching out ideas and bringing everything to paper straight away. Working exclusively online took away a lot of that.’ Some read this as a stimulating challenge while some found it to have a negative impact: ‘Working exclusively online has unfortunately taken away a lot of positive experiences that I have encountered before, doing other creative workshops. Being together with people in the same space, you get to know them a lot better.’ This response is unavoidable so it’s important to counterbalance with the positive aspects of this kind of work. However, the vast majority of responses point to having these expectations defied; ‘I didn't expect a fully digital workshop to work nearly as well as it did!’ And many celebrated the enhanced opportunity provided; ‘The fact that we were able to make such incredible concepts and products, across the globe using webcams, microphones and screen-sharing is amazing.’

Many positively connected the experience with expectations of their own practice: ‘[T]his has given me the confidence to pursue more of this in the form of personal projects’ and suggesting that ‘learn[ing] about [and] finding [the] most fun and efficient way of working in this remote worldwide creative collaboration that could be applied here or anywhere else life’ was valuable. Organisers should make sure to highlight that this is a different type of experience to classroom learning which provides a new set of skills and methods for working in a different way and augments, rather than replaces, studio work.

The project also brought new challenges around building strong working partnerships. This was the result of a combination of distance learning and the short time span with many commenting that they would have ‘prefer[ed] being in the same room for most parts of the project.’ ‘I really missed … all the physical things. That for me is a large part of coming to a great idea and helps to stay on the same page with the rest of the team.’ Here students identified some aspects of online working as a block to productive collaboration: ‘A bit hard to brainstorm online vs. together in a room.’

However, some highlighted how the constraints of time and online learning brought new focus to a project and consequently encouraged them to work at a different rhythm and ‘really improved the focus of our end product - and it cut our long-winded discussions to a snappy close in minutes.’ Some disagreed and somewhat predictably expressed concern that the tight timing of the project was counter-productive: ‘It seemed like it was not enough time to discover the ideas in the groups, and that the time given to introduction didn't make sense in relation to the time given to execution.’ Although this is to be expected of any short project, there is a particular missed opportunity highlighted by another comment: ‘[With more time it] would’ve just been great to see the ideas of other pods, maybe share the overall ideas in one document of the info channel.’ Time was built in to share the outcomes but not until the end of the project. A slower pace might allow more time for periodic sharing, socialising and critique which is one of the key value propositions of a global project.

# Author’s reflection

A core ambition of INTERACT and Global Design Studio was to give the opportunity for students and staff to explore global design cultures. Barring the handful of examples suggested above, working between the UK, Australia and Denmark is a relatively limited frame of reference for design cultures. With the success of this project we will be engaged in exploring similar models for collaboration with much more diverse cultures in emerging global design scenes. This responds to a deeper practitioner and institutional responsibility to connect and provide opportunities for emerging design scenes in parts of the world so far excluded from the global design network.

Many of the comments from students draw on a struggle to contextualise the project with the rest of their studies. Though for the majority it was enjoyable and productive it remains unclear how they will assimilate it into their sense of practice. In future work we would do more to embed this type of project in the learning journey and curriculum so that ‘online international learning is successful when activities are carefully designed in alignment with precise internationalized learning outcomes.’ (Kayumova & Sadykova, 2016)

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