

University Fellowship 2007/08
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Combining student, staff, industry skills and experiences, to facilitate a commercial venture.

Final Report – July 2008

Introduction

Having visited a number of international trade fairs for fashion and homeware, staff and students involved with Surface Design courses at LCC had begun to realise the importance for our students and emerging young designers to be represented at such occasions. Encouraged by students' enthusiasm, we decided to exhibit at Indigo, part of Premier Vision, which is an international trade fair recognised by the fashion textiles trade, held in Paris twice a year. Indigo is where individual designs are sold to fashion houses and manufacturers. It attracts a diverse audience of buyers and agents for a variety of products, and its reputation ensures a well attended show.

We were building on a project developed by Melanie Bowles at Chelsea College of Art and Design, Textile Department, where lecturers plan and run a stand at Indigo and show designs by 2nd year students. This enabled us to integrate with the University community, and share experiences and outcomes from this type of venture.

We wanted to develop Chelsea's original ideas further, to work collaboratively with students to ensure we maximised opportunities for student development. By involving students from all 3 years of the BA Surface Design, Year 2 of the FDA Surface Design, students from Graduate Certificate and Diploma in Digital Surface Design, selected alumni and staff, combining year groups into teams with team leaders, we knew that we had a broad and experienced skills base from which to draw, and an opportunity for much experience to be shared.

One of the first decisions made by the students was that we would represent Surface Design at LCC as a collective, branded by the name 'STAMP', with a logo, website and memorable identity.

Timetabled into the framework of the project were:

- Visits from members of industry who interacted with student teams and helped to select work for the final portfolio.
- Team building activities within the 8 individual groups. Each team of students were allocated a student team leader and deputy, encouraged to devise a list of tasks and then to organise themselves.

- Preparation for a successful show, involving each team as an important strand, communicating with each other.
- Ongoing analysis and revision, via a blog managed by students, and communications via Facebook, Blackboard, and Myspace.
- Useful post exhibition analysis, headed by the student team which were in attendance on the stand, and additional comments from members of other teams.

Main aims and objectives, and their achieved outcomes

We wished to enhance the quality of learning and teaching of PPD and related subjects through the students' further involvement with real life situations. We hoped that by engaging with agents and business partners directly, we would gain from some of their experience on pricing, and a knowledge of what might sell. This began during joint PPD sessions, timetabled within the existing curriculum, where visitors from industry gave lectures, held seminars and workshops using their experiences to guide our students. It continued once at the Trade Fair, with feedback and comments from potential buyers about the individual designs recorded by students in attendance. Sales of work were made to prestigious companies such as Donna Karan and Speedo, and others to companies in Tokyo, Germany and New York. Opportunities for 4 students (and a lecturer) to apply for Work Experience were selected by John Galliano from the Stamp Collective.

We wanted the experience to enhance the career progression of students, and open up opportunities for networking and exposure, as individual designers and in other roles. At least 2 students were identified as potential buyers or agents for textile companies. One student was later sent to New York on a selling trip for a company, based purely on his abilities with customers as observed at the Trade Fair. Students gained an awareness of the viability of a career as a surface designer.

Driven by students, the experience was new to our department and our staff, and would tap into the trade and industry market. Staff were involved with grant applications and other organisational duties, but it was our intention that students would eventually be able to take on most of the responsibilities.

As an objective this was an ambitious one, and the system of mixed year teams and tasks, led inevitably to some teams being stronger than others. The original 8 teams were divided into the following:

1. Design selection and administration.
2. Branding design and press contact.
3. Stand design.
4. Staffing and documenting the stand and Indigo. (Paris working team)
5. Creating a Website.

6. Monitoring the Blog Diary.
7. Alumni Liaison.
8. Photography.

It was also true that some of the tasks allocated to teams became too much for a single group, and had to be redistributed by staff.

In the end though, it is an indication of the success of this division of labour that students are now keen to repeat the exercise, and the mentoring system can come into play, with experienced students advising students new to the scheme. It has greatly added to the sense of enterprise within our School, already reflected in other small commercial projects.

Building on our increased professionalism, we hoped that involvement with Indigo would heighten the profile of the course in the textile industries. At this particular trade fair, University and College Stands are located together at one end of the enormous exhibition centre. This means that buyers will usually visit the professionals first and then finish with the student stands. General feedback was that as a newcomer we had made an impression, with a collection that was innovative and eclectic. It was felt that we needed to repeat our appearance at least twice more, to become established in the minds of the buyers. We were certainly remembered by competing colleges, and it was good to see some of our European Erasmus partners there, also showing.

In Paris, during Indigo, we did not stay with the students in the Paris Working Team. We helped set up on day One and we helped take the stand down on the last day. Otherwise they were on their own for 4 days. It was hard for them, with long and tiring shifts, but they managed, and with that came a huge sense of achievement for each one of those students. It was an experience they will never forget, and now they feel enabled to be able to repeat this and successfully mentor others for future years and future trade fairs.

We expected to finance the project via a successful grant application from Trade and Investment's International Business Scheme, plus a small fee per design submitted, for participating students. We had spoken to the grant agency and without promising, they had indicated that this is exactly the kind of project they would be likely to support. Unfortunately on 30th October 2007 we received a letter from the British Wool Textile Export Corporation that the UK Trade and Investment TAP grant scheme had been suspended until April 08, as it had been heavily oversubscribed in the first half of the financial year and that no grants would be being given for this particular event. This meant that it had to be funded solely by the fee attached to each design accepted, and any other money the college department could raise. Students were happy to pay the set fee of £5 per design but there is a feeling now that next time with the grant, it would be much more comfortable financially.

We evaluated at every stage how successfully the project was proceeding. This included evaluating how effective the mixed year groups were and in what way. We encouraged our student teams to do the same, logging the developments regularly. Some success was found using the blog as a diary where all students could add

comments and concerns. Other methods of communicating information were via Blackboard, Myspace and Facebook. The problem became having too many places to look for information, and eventually Facebook became the most popular.

If there were frustrations, team members were encouraged to discuss them. One of the skills of the world of work is working successfully with junior partners and senior management, and this gave them a taste of this experience. At one point, a team leader found that the responsibilities of one particular group had become too large and she had to find a way of dealing with this situation. She was most gracious and showed all the signs of a professional, in her hand over of tasks and evaluation of the redistribution of the responsibilities.

Distribution of Tasks and Experiences of the Teams

Students were encouraged to volunteer their services and skills to whichever team seemed most appropriate. We were keen to have a good cross section of students from a variety of year groups in the each team. Then we selected the student whom we felt would make the strongest leader, and a deputy.

Design Selection and Admin Team

Main task:

- To organise a rota of students to help the visiting professionals and 2 members of staff to administrate and select designs for Indigo over 2 rounds. Students helping were not to be part of the year group from whom we were selecting designs.

Students' opinions about the work of their peers were valuable. Those who submitted work received a red sticker if the work was accepted and another coloured sticker if the work needed amending in a minor or substantial way. Students were far more offended and some even put off if they did not receive a red sticker immediately. Despite feedback via blackboard and in the lecture theatre, students needed careful encouragement to resubmit their work in the round 2 selection. We were shocked by this and decided at the second selection process, we would invite the students to stay in the room while we looked at their work, so they could have a better understanding of why designs were chosen and others deemed unsuitable for this particular trade fair.

Stand Design Team

Main tasks:

- To design the stand in conjunction with the branding team.
- To assess whether it was necessary to purchase props and lighting supplied by the trade fair operators.
- To print and produce coverings for the backdrop and table tops.

We were sent the information with regard to stand size and fixtures and fittings very late and this reduced the amount of the time the team had to plan.

Also, the work which would eventually be selected to display at the back of the stand, could not be chosen until the selection process had been completed. Despite this, and other personal setbacks, the team worked well together and the stand received many positive comments at the exhibition.

Branding and Press Contact

Main tasks:

- To devise an effective brand and logo for the collective to communicate with the press.
- To produce essential stationary.

The tasks allocated to this group became so vast, that a month into the project, it was revised by the team leader and divided into smaller groups, each with its own team leader and deputy, as follows:

Business Card Team

Main task:

- To design a business card which reflected the branding of the cooperative.

Sticker and CD Label Team

Main task:

- To design a sticker that included the logo, and allowed each designer to write details of themselves and the design, for labelling purposes.

Press Statement Team

Main tasks:

- To research appropriate magazines, periodicals and exposure opportunities.
- To write a statement which described the involvement of STAMP at Indigo and future opportunities to see work by artists involved with the cooperative.

The statements were written as a short sound bite and as a longer piece.

In retrospect, these would have been better received as an official press pack with images of work, and sent out a good deal earlier to have a chance of being included in the publications chosen. But the students worked well together and researched useful avenues for future publicity.

Alumni Contact Team

Main tasks:

- To make a group email on address book of all alumni students going back over the last 4 years.
- To write a letter to introduce the project to the alumni and invite them to submit designs for round 1 and 2 selection process.

Naturally email addresses had changed and so some messages were returned, but most were received.

Some alumni complained of being confused by elements of the letter, which may have put them off submitting work.

The letter was sent out too late for many alumni to submit for round 1, but a small number did submit for round 2.

Blog Team

Main task:

- To document the project in the form of a blog.

In retrospect, each team needed someone to be responsible for adding their experiences to the blog, for the diary to be fully representative of the project.

Website team

Main task:

- To help create a website for members of the Stamp Collective.

The students on this team learned the basics of how to create a website during a short course run by a visiting lecturer. However the main body of the work was carried out by this visiting lecturer, who collated the branding information and individual designer profiles into what is now: www.stampcollective.co.uk.

Photography team

Main task:

- To photograph all works included in the portfolio of 400 designs exhibited on the stand, in the photographic studio at LCC.

These were then downloaded onto Photobucket, where they have already been used for future promotional information, for individual students and for STAMP.

Paris Working Team

Main tasks:

- To set up and organise rotas and staffing at Indigo.
- Document the stand and the experience of running it and to report back to the larger body of students and supervisors and staff on return to London.
- Liaise with other teams as necessary, particularly stand design.
- Communicate with guest speakers and professionals re setting up the stand, transporting designs and accommodation and travel arrangements.

Although most of the main tasks for this team should have been taking place while in Paris, there were many tasks which they became involved with before leaving, which could have been better delegated, such as photographing the portfolio.

This team worked successfully together under the strong leadership of Kate Worthington and Fiona King (Deputy). They were efficient and organised and developed a good rapport with Suzsi Corio, a visiting speaker, who had a stand at Indigo at the same time. Other members of the team used the opportunity to network and make useful contacts.

Members of Industry who had visited students at college and then attended the trade fair as buyers or as fellow exhibitors, gave positive feedback with regard to presentation of work and handling of customers.

The team led a good feedback session on their return, accompanied by a powerpoint presentation of photographs taken while setting up the stand. Their comments were positive and students were impressed by their handling of a prestigious clientele.

How we would do it differently next time.

This has been an extremely successful project in many ways, and we would wish in future for it to remain much the same as this first experiment!

But there are always going to be ways to improve on an experience, and it will be affected by the characters, skills and enthusiasm of each year group. One year is never the same as another.

It would be very pessimistic to assume that because this time we did not sell many designs, next time students would not participate. But it is true that some students have been disappointed to receive all their work back, with no immediate opportunities gained. We must better prepare the students for this disappointment in future as we have no idea whether their work will be sold, or that anyone will be interested in their ideas. But students are eternally optimistic about their own work and their own potential – thank goodness!!

Useful comments have been made by students, particularly from the Grad Cert and Dip Courses, many of whom are experienced designers, who have already in some

cases had a taste of the Professional Industry. It was suggested that the team which took the designs to Paris, needed to be trained more specifically for the task they had been given. Being a sales person demands a certain detachment from the goods you are selling. You cannot be personally affected by the opinions of the client, and you must at all times appear as a professional.

The weight of the responsibility particularly towards the end of the project before we went to Paris, was born by BA3. They are the students who are most keen to face the realities of the commercial and professional world they are about to join. However, this clashes with the importance of the many tasks they are facing as they prepare for their degree show, just 3 months after Indigo. So the majority of the work should be shouldered by year 2 students.

The project in any year can benefit educationally, a wide section of the year groups and courses run in the surface design area, and the portfolio should be inclusive of designs from as wide a body of students as possible. This will help the brand to build on its reputation for innovation and eclecticism.

But the stand itself should be manned by BA2 students in future, travelling to Paris at their own cost. Next year, at least one member of this year's Paris Working Team will accompany the group, and this mentoring system will continue, ideally each year.

The students who put themselves forward to be involved with this challenging project were motivated learners, independent thinkers and innovative designers. The opportunity gave them a chance to show that to their peers, their tutors, the industry and themselves. This can only give them confidence and a validity to their self directed learning. By now, many have already graduated; some are continuing with work experience opportunities; others are engaged in internships with companies; and many are preparing for the next graduate fair – Freerange at the Truman Brewery. All will be better prepared for the world of trade and industry, in many ways. We look forward to the next cohort of students gaining similar experiences.

Future Directions

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With the emphasis put on the BA2 student group, we hope to be able to encourage widening participation from the diverse selection of students within the second year of the BA. As part of a community of practice in a real business situation, the students can learn from each other's individual approaches. They come from a broad

range of backgrounds, each with different aspirations for their future in surface design. This would be an opportunity to set themselves and each other tasks, within a social and real life environment, where then can begin to engage in deeper learning.