POSITION STATEMENTS & RESOURCE REVIEWS

Embedded Designers

Siân Cook

London College of Communication, University of the Arts London

An embedded war correspondent can wear special insignia which designates his or her status as a non-combatant, but this doesn't always protect him or her from harm. (http://www. wisegeek.com/what-is-a-war-correspondent.htm)

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Commercial brands are keen to be part of the 'we generation', integrating services, soliciting audience-generated content and understanding their customers. Market research has moved way beyond focus groups and questionnaires to 'deep hanging out' – literally moving in with consumers and employing techniques from social anthropology. Agencies view immersion as the part of the briefing process that is key to producing better work. Designers are exploring user-centred design, co-design or getting involved by adopting causes to champion and becoming visual spokespeople for disease prevention, peace initiatives, human rights and environmental responsibility.

But how close should we get? How can design educators impart a sense of responsibility to students, not just about getting involved with worthy causes in the first place, but in how they conduct that involvement in terms of ethics?

I have been involved with HIV/AIDS activism in the UK via various NGOs for over 15 years. My experience of volunteering and pro bono work has changed along with the fight against the AIDS epidemic. I am interested in how designers and non-designers work together in the creative process and how long it takes for a designer to become truly

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immersed. On one hand design and designers can benefit, but there is also a need to consider the potential pitfalls of becoming patronising, thoughtlessly plundering people's experiences, or losing any sense of objectivity. As a design educator, I am attempting to raise these issues so that socially aware projects are a mutually beneficial process for students and the participants – it's not always easy to predict the issues that may arise.

So how do embedded designers navigate the ethical minefield?

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The debates around designers' sense of social responsibility are not new. The concept of pro bono work is now generally accepted by those designers who wish, for whatever reason, to use their skills to help a charity, organisation or cause.[1] The level of engagement can range from discounted or free work for these clients to instigating, funding and organising entire campaigns and projects. A designer's individual reasons for working in this way are varied, but may be motivated by personal experiences, a sense of civic responsibility, a perceived creative freedom, a strong political leaning or a need to balance out work for more commercial interests. However, some motivations may not always necessarily result in good work. As Michael Rock pointed out, "The unfortunate reality is that many designers see the donation of service as an opportunity for creative liberty they never realize with their paying clients (perhaps they feel empowered and self righteous through their charity) rather than focusing on solving the real communication problem at hand." (Rock 1994, p.192). Conversely, charities can also be guilty of exploiting donated work – if no clear contract is agreed, the design can often suffer from being endlessly picked apart by committees and subject to numerous changes until the result is diluted and ineffectual.

For many charity projects, the designer/client relationship works in a similar fashion to any other commission – the communication problem is presented as a brief to the designer who then goes on to research, develop and produce. What interests me however, are cases where the designer is more than the last link in a long chain, brought in to realise a predefined brief. Of course a lot of design and promotion does involve much more in-depth immersion in the client's world, but generally this is better-funded work where more is at stake commercially. I would argue that the designer-as-volunteer scenario, where the involvement goes back beyond the brief-taking stage, can lead to a better outcome for the client and a better experience for the designer. As a long-term volunteer in the HIV/ AIDS sector, it is only over the last five years or so that I have been able to develop a way of working in conjunction with the charity that I currently volunteer for that is the most effective for the charity and satisfying for me.

Charitable organisations try to match the skills of their volunteers with appropriate tasks and some professions lend themselves to more obvious roles. For example a professional accountant volunteering to help out at their local community centre will often end up in the position of treasurer by default, but that should not necessarily exclude them from any other of the charity's activities or decision-making processes. For a designer, it can be an opportunity for broadening experience and developing an understanding of audiences and organisations that provides valuable insight, not just for solving the problem at hand, but as a way of developing as an empathetic and better-informed practitioner.

The London-based gay men's health charity, GMFA, is a volunteer-led organisation founded in 1992 by a group of gay men who felt that there was not enough HIV prevention work being specifically targeted at gay men. From the beginning, GMFA used a model of community mobilisation and peer education; rather than just producing health promotion aimed at gay men, gay men play a central role in the design and delivery of interventions.[2]

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I became an embedded designer with GMFA's mass media group, which is made up of volunteers with a wide range of occupations and skills. As a part of this group, I am very much a volunteer first and a designer second. The creative process is democratic and liberating, with visual ideas generated and discussed collectively. As another volunteer pointed out, my inclusion in the process helps to speed up the devising of interventions because decisions about the practicalities of design and production can be made on the spot. From my point of view, I am helping to evolve and explore the brief and benefiting from expert opinion in the field. It has taken time to build up this understanding – I am not a gay man. Nonetheless, I think it is possible for a designer who is willing to take the time to immerse themselves in an ongoing commitment such as this, to develop a more informed and rewarding way of working.

As GMFA campaigns are prototyped, they are also tested with audiences in context. This process also goes beyond what I have encountered when working as a commercial designer – because the work is being developed within the community it is intended for, the feedback can be much more valuable than that obtained by traditional focus groups. Many designers will try to include an understanding of their audience into their research process, but it not always practicable to do so first hand, and any process of testing and feedback is usually kept separate. So how do designers get more involved to begin with and what is the best approach for educating students about these approaches?

In Lucienne Roberts' book, 'Good: An introduction to ethics in graphic design', Sheila Levrant de Bretteville describes her working process:

> At a site or even at Yale I like to first just 'hang out' in the community where I will be doing my work, getting a sense of what and who is there, and trying to find out what could enhance opportunities to hear and see one another better…….Now that I have done this with many people – Japanese Americans in Los Angeles, African Americans in New Haven and a very eclectic mix of the working poor in Boston and Rhode Island – I have found some themes that recur in neighbourhoods with immigrant populations. I find I have an affinity with these kinds of issues and connections even though I am a white, middle-aged, middle-class woman, albeit the daughter of Jewish Polish immigrants.
> (Roberts 2006, p.138)

Social observation can be a very useful exercise for design students, but in current times it comes with its own problems, especially in a city such as London. Whereas a few years ago on the Design for Advertising course at London College of Communication, we may have sent students out to communities or public spaces to watch and document, with increasing sensitivity to potential terrorist threats, we have had to rethink how this experience can be more safely managed for both an ethnically diverse student body, the public and their officials. We have shifted our approach to a greater reliance on gatekeepers for particular communities as a way of maintaining the educational experience but trying to minimise both risk and the danger of falling into a form of cultural tourism. Recent successful collaborations with community groups, charities and their representatives (such as the disability charity Scope, a local estate community centre, Terrence Higgins Trust and the Dorset Traveller Education Support Service) have resulted in rich educational experiences. Students benefit from discussing the ethics involved in such approaches as well as having the opportunity to work outside of the protected environment of the college.[3] I also see this as a way of marrying the teaching of advertising communication techniques with an ethical philosophy, which elements of the commercial world are also beginning to

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adopt in implementing corporate social responsibility policies, thereby "…creating new innovative strategies that are maximally ethically consistent with the inherently ethically problematic nature of advertising and that eliminate or maximally minimize advertising practices that have a tendency to result in bad and harmful consequences for people and the community as a whole." (Spence & Van Heekeren 2005, p.120)

An exercise I used to run with a local special needs school involved second-year degree students devising a day's workshop experience to introduce the school students to the subject of Graphic Design. Both sets of students would pair up and work to produce a design in the day – the school students had a range of motor skill impairments or learning difficulties and the pairs would have to work very closely together in order to realise their ideas. Without fail, the day would be exhausting but joyous, and for the design students, an experience that they would refer back to years later. A different type of education was taking place; instead of talking about accessibility in design as an abstract concept, the students now had first hand experience that could inform any future pieces of communication that they designed.

More than a decade ago, the designer and author Dan Friedman[4] was calling for designers to look beyond the obvious with charity projects. "I now dream of designers becoming advocates. I'm not talking about the few attempts some of us make which we refer to as pro bono work. But truly a change of mind set which reorients us away from purely aesthetic or narrow corporate values…" (Friedman 1990)

It would be a fitting tribute to his vision if we could harness our skills as designers, advertisers and educators to take design responsibility to this next level, but enter the battle as prepared and informed advocates – not mere voyeurs.

Notes:
1. 'Pro bono publico' (usually shortened to pro bono) is a phrase derived from Latin, meaning 'for the public good.' The term is used to describe professional work (such as legal advice) undertaken voluntarily and without payment. Unlike general volunteer work, it usually refers to using the specific skills of professionals to provide services to those who are unable to afford them.
2. For more about GMFA's work: http://www.gmfa.org.uk/aboutgmfa/our-work/index
3. Design for Advertising course website: http://www.advalue.org
4. Dan Friedman, author of 'Radical Modernism', educator, furniture-maker and pioneer of the 'New Wave' typography in America, died of AIDS-related illness in 1995.

References

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Authors Details - Siân Cook

Siân has well over twenty years' experience working as a graphic designer and educator in London, UK. The first half of her career was spent designing for the music industry, working for Peter Saville amongst others, followed by eight years at Me Company. She started her own studio practice in 1994 with various charities and arts organisations as clients whilst teaching part-time at Ravensbourne College of Design and Communication. In 2006 she became the full-time Pathway Leader for the Design for Advertising pathway of the Graphic and Media Design degree course at London College of Communication (part of University of the Arts London). She is a graphic activist in HIV/AIDS health promotion and has volunteered in this sector since the early nineties. As co director (with Teal Triggs) of the Women's Design + Research Unit, Siân has lectured and been published internationally. WD+RU's first project, the typeface Pussy Galore (1994), has just been acquired by The Musée National d'Art Moderne Centre de Création Industrielle, Paris as part of their elles@centrepompidou exhibition.

s.cook@lcc.arts.ac.uk

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