

Win/Win: Working with live projects for the public and educational 'good'

SLIDE: Title

Hello. Today I want to look at using external projects with students to both enhance their professional practice and produce workable solutions to real life problems for the benefit of the social good. In the second half of the talk I will focus on a recent case study where graphic design undergraduates worked with the Lifeline Transform Mentoring Project – a new initiative for young offenders in prison – to improve the organisation's communications. My aim is to offer a realistic look at running pro bono projects in a way which enhances employability and extends the student experience beyond the college environment. This is based on over 10 years of experience managing projects that embrace a social responsibility agenda. So first a bit of background...

SLIDE: GMFA images

I am a graphic designer as well as an educator and throughout my career there has been a pro bono aspect to my practice. I have volunteered with HIV/AIDS charities since the late 80s and have previously written about the experience of working as an 'embedded' designer. For me this means working closely with an organisation from the inside to apply design thinking to all aspects of its activities. I have been fortunate enough to have built this kind of working relationship with GMFA, the gay men's health charity, over the past 15 years to the point where I am now on the Board of Directors in a design and communications role.

SLIDE: WD+RU We Profess

I am also a Co-Director, along with Teal Triggs, of the Women's Design + Research Unit, which has been in existence since 1994. This has provided opportunities, informed by feminist principles, to test out collaborative approaches and ways of facilitating projects involving designers, educators and students. And more recently we have been considering how to model and visualise these processes.

SLIDE: Developing Citizen Designers

Charity-based projects are nothing new in design education and there are plenty of examples of work in this area from various colleges in the UK. A good compilation of global case studies are documented and discussed in Elizabeth Resnick's book, *Developing Citizen Designers*, which was published just last week.

Both the concept of 'pro bono' and its use in training students has a history primarily in the legal profession, and in America it is an established model, supported by organisations such as the Taproot Foundation which has looked at how it can be applied across other subjects.

Developing Citizen Designers sets out a categorisation of projects which is quite broad. Today I want to focus less on activism, design authorship and service design and look in more depth at the specific types of vocational experience relevant to graphic design students – the benefits, but also some less successful aspects of approaches that I have tested out in the past.

One of the problems with implementing charity or 'worthy' projects is that the format sometimes feels patronising and results in a well-intentioned exercise that is never taken further. Students can feel coerced into artificially constructed scenarios that they are not personally motivated by. I want to consider the level of 'real world' subject immersion that is actually appropriate and useful in an educational context.

SLIDE: Approaches

In order to do this I have tried to identify approaches with differing types of emphasis: Using external communities as a primary research source can be useful in expanding students' perceptions of audience and help inform a hypothetical problem without actually having a client brief to solve.

But the most common model is to work with an external client, who usually comes in to college to set the project. Student expectation is that their work could be selected and implemented, but often there is no follow through and the experience is more about gaining insights and idea generation for the client. The best case scenario is the potential of internships for students at the end of the process.

I find 'Co-design' to be a problematic term in this context. It is difficult to facilitate true co-design situations as this requires a much more integrated approach and whilst we can accommodate design research methods that involve elements of collaboration, this is more the territory of service design and at post-graduate level where experienced students can become immersed over longer time periods.

Design skills can also be introduced to a new audience who then become the students. Varying degrees of integration are possible, but the emphasis and often the main accountability for the project lies with educating the external audience in design rather than building new skills for existing students.

In professional life, a truly immersive experience needs to be built up over a longer period of time and is difficult to replicate for students under a unitised modular system. Although curricula may include provision for collaborative units, these often exist in isolation rather than encouraged as ongoing. As a consequence, it is staff who invest in building the relationship with the outside organisations, not the students in the role of designers. Bernard Canniffe's work at Minneapolis College of Art and Design and Iowa University for example would better illustrate this longer community investment model.

So on a practical level, what kind of projects do these categories represent?

SLIDE: Travellers

For a project looking at traveller communities, we worked with a number of stakeholders in an attempt to manage the students' research experience via community 'experts' and gatekeepers from a number of organisations. The final outcome was an exhibition around the topic rather than a direct intervention.

SLIDE: Diabetes UK

I have worked with students for various charities on projects such as this one for Diabetes UK. The external client scenario is improved if students get to make formal presentations of their work outside of college. In this case, the charity's digital agency were involved as part of the process and hosted the presentations. This was particularly helpful as they acted as a bridge between client and students. However, this model worked when we ran it 8 years ago because we had a smaller group, meaning that all of the students could present. It is much more challenging now with increasing numbers and pressures to guarantee parity of experience – there are now over 200 students per year on the course that I teach on.

SLIDE: Memory Cloth

WD+RU have facilitated complex collaborative projects such as this one, that involved a number of external stakeholders, organisations and students across several courses and levels. This type of project is only possible with extra funding and has to function as an extra-curricular activity due to the number of participants and the need to accommodate different timetables, the availability of external partners and accessibility for the general public.

SLIDE: LCF Projects

London College of Fashion has had success with its scheme for training machinists in Holloway prison, and also with their fashion journalism project that involves female prisoners in producing their own magazine. However, the skill share possibilities in the area of graphic design can be less easy to define and package.

SLIDE: Marjorie McClure School

But to highlight a successful immersive and collaborative format; for several years from 2002 I ran a project involving graphic design students at Ravensbourne with 6th form students at a special needs school in Chislehurst. The objective was less concerned with producing high quality design outputs, but about finding ways to communicate and work together. The experience was always memorable for students and promoted an awareness of potentially marginalised audiences and communities who might benefit from clear design. This is what prompted me to question 'Who deserves good design?' a consideration that has carried through to the most recent project with Lifeline.

SLIDE: Lessons Learned

To summarise the most important points that I have taken from these experiences;

You need to try and anticipate students preconceptions and deal with prejudices and stereotypes up front. For example, when running the traveller project (which was not an optional choice for students), we had no idea what strong reactions the topic itself would invoke. (In the words of Taylor Swift you need to find ways for students to 'shake it off').

Students often require priming in appropriate professional behaviour with clients and in the ethics of primary research. If it is their first experience working directly with a client, they often need reminding of their role as designer, what is within their remit and how to make suggestions diplomatically.

The clients can also need educating, and being able to gauge their level of visual literacy can be key to making the relationship work. They may also have preconceptions about working with students – often based on personal out-dated educational models.

As expectations need to be managed on both sides, I now put in writing a pre-project agreement. The understanding is that the client is under no obligation to use the resulting student designs, and if they wish to do so, this is dealt with separately post-project. In return, we can add elements to the initial brief or guide students in particular directions to help them fulfil the assessment criteria for their course.

When time has been invested and successful relationships built, these are worth nurturing. But if it's not working, let it go. And always have a Plan B! Having sympathetic industry contacts who can step in to help guide and supplement the process by talking about they might approach the brief can be useful.

SLIDE: HMP ISIS

And so to introduce the Lifeline project and Alex Rose, who graduated from LCC x years ago. As a student, he embraced the premise of social design from the beginning. He has experience campaigning around knife and gun crime and working in a homeless shelter, so not the predictable career route for a designer. In his new role working for the Lifeline Transform Service at HM Prison ISIS he is currently setting up a mentoring scheme for young offenders to support lifestyle change and reduce re-offending, especially among those with serious group offending histories.

It was Alex who approached me to suggest the project as he could see potential in involving students as a way to provide design solutions that he could work with on a practical level, but also to demonstrate the application of design thinking to a workplace that often have to have very different priorities. The materials that had been used in the past tended to be in-house produced Word documents using clip art and the occasionally rainbow coloured distorted type that looked more appropriate for a primary school.

SLIDE: Project Diagram

It was important to find the best fit for the project on the Graphic and Media Design course, both in terms of student ability, commitment and appropriate learning outcomes. For the Industry Practice Unit in the final year, students select projects from a number of options, all of which relate to some aspect of professional working and this would also allow me to manage the project first-hand. Alex and I invested time in evolving the brief through a series of meetings and reporting back to our respective institutions. Alex came in to college to brief the project which was a significant point in the process, as his passion and commitment struck a powerful chord with the students, and 32 of them chose to do the project. At the formative assessment point, Alex was able to look over work in progress and make some general observations. In order to deal with time limitations, there ultimately needed to be a selection process, so students were given the opportunity of submitting a PDF summary of their ideas from which Alex and his team short-listed 10 students to make full verbal presentations to the client. From this, a final design direction was selected to take forward. But all of the students completed designs for their final assessment.

SLIDE: Project Brief

The challenge to the students was to rethink how to communicate with young offenders. How to 'sell' the mentoring service, building it as a credible 'brand' and add value to the scheme through design.

The service required specific promotional items that could be produced on a very limited budget and with basic means of production. Students were also encouraged to think creatively of additional elements that could enhance the prisoners' experience of the scheme.

SLIDE: List of prison restrictions

Because of the nature of the project, there were obvious restrictions. This could never be a complete immersive experience, but I would argue that direct contact with audience is not always the best approach. Design students are not ethnographic experts and in professional scenarios it is likely that they would be working as part of a multi-disciplinary team or drawing on pre-existing sociological research. Having Alex as a gatekeeper worked well as he did a very effective job of explaining the situation from the prisoners' point of view, as well as from Lifeline's. Students also found other ways of conducting research – it soon emerged that a number of local students were only a few degrees of separation away from their audience and they were able to use these contacts but without being placed in potentially difficult or intimidating situations. International students were successfully able to work on the project by sharing in this local knowledge.

SLIDE: Anthony Quote

These research limitations allowed students to focus on finding ways of applying their design skills – the area in which they have the expertise. Social design projects can sometimes become very ungainly when students are expected to solve complex sociological problems that are too far outside of their experience and skill set. So it is important that they understand why the client is asking them to be involved and what they already have to offer.

SLIDE: Student Work

Through careful consideration of tone of voice, many students were forced to reconsider their use of language and copywriting in the designs, putting themselves in the position of the message recipients.

SLIDE: Student Work

They also had to be inventive in their use of materials and formats, all of which were limited by budget and pragmatics, whilst the materials required visual impact, clarity and a distinctive look and feel. It was necessary to find a balance between students' ambition for the work and meeting the precise challenges of both the brief and the course requirements.

SLIDE: Process Books

As an assessable part of the project students were required to make process books to document their research, insights and design methods. These contained some thoughtful self-reflections (and the quotes I am using came from a selection of these). They were considering aspects of professional practice that they had not dealt with before, even for those students who had completed a year out in industry between their second and final years. Whilst they may have interned at design studios, experience of direct contact with clients and especially the third sector was new.

SLIDE: Sarah Quote

Opening up students' thinking about the design profession becomes even more necessary in the light of increasingly large cohorts of graduates entering the creative industries. Graduates now require a wider range of transferable skills such as collaboration, strategic planning and project management, and an ability to apply these across a range of potential roles and scenarios.

SLIDE: 3 x Quotes:

Working with social causes situates design outside the traditional studio model and introduces practical considerations such as funding, production, measuring impact and accessibility. It also sets a precedent for pro bono and third sector work as an integral part of professional practice.

SLIDE: Meredith Davis Quote

These are considerations that are in danger of getting lost in restrictive curricula that are concerned with delivering what students think that they need to learn (such as software skills and design formulas) as opposed to having experiences that are just as valuable, but may not be considered within the remit of a traditional design education, as Meredith Davis points out.

SLIDE: Benefits

In order to find the win/win sweet spot, and make a convincing case for continuing with such projects, all of the stakeholders need to benefit.

SLIDE: Roxanne Quote

For students, the benefits can be practical; real world experience, working with limitations, building a portfolio, improving research methods and presentation skills etc. But it also places consideration for audience at the centre of what we do as designers. By helping students challenge assumptions about who deserves good design, higher education can move away from the 'design for designers' approach that can permeate an insular academic environment.

For clients, they potentially gain a low cost solution, a broad range of ideas and sometimes unexpected outcomes, but also an outside view of what they do via access to a young demographic and their experiences, whilst raising awareness of the charity or organisation.

SLIDE: Yharnna Posters

These are posters that Lifeline will shortly be using, designed by student Yharnna Joseph-Morrison.

There was good follow through put in place with this project and Yharnna and I were able to visit HMP Isis to present the designs and the process – this helped the whole Lifeline support and mentoring team to have a better understanding of design thinking and the difference this approach might make.

Mind mapping and visualisation techniques suggested by Yharnna from her own working methods are also helping inform the actual content and presentation of exercises for prisoners to complete. This is also influencing the decision for all of the learning materials to be contained within one workbook that can be used in both group sessions and for individual independent study by inmates.

The project has already had an overall impact on the client's thinking about their communications as well as passing on these benefits to their audience, the young offenders. And although all the final pieces still have to be implemented and assessed, initial reactions have been very positive and there is the likelihood of more design work being developed in the future.

SLIDE: Student Work

This type of project is also motivational for staff as it gives us a chance to use our skills as designers. It can open up opportunities for research and ways of looking at alternative means of delivery that keeps projects current and relevant.

For the institution, it enhances professional relationships and reputation but also demonstrates commitment to local communities and their concerns. There are also additional advantages in strengthening relationships with alumni and using their experience to benefit current students.

There are challenges working with growing student numbers and handling potentially sensitive subject matter. The Lifeline Mentoring Project enabled students to make use of their own cultural and personal frames of reference, but within the safety of the college environment. Drawing on the insight and experience of an ex-student as the project gatekeeper proved invaluable in the project's success. But both charities and colleges need to invest in laying the groundwork in order to foster rich educational experiences that also benefit those organisations most deserving of clear communication design. This is vital in order to ensure the win/win situation that is an inspirational experience for all parties involved.>

SLIDE: Win/Win! Thank You.