CREATING BETTER COMMUNITIES: INVOLVING DESIGN STUDENTS IN REGENERATION PROJECTS

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ABSTRACT
How can University Design students pursue their studies imaginatively whilst making a real contribution to the community and built environment in an English Midlands town? The paper discusses the scope of creating better communities through design, detailed in two cases studies piloted by the University of Northampton and the Sorrell Foundation's Young Design Programme. The first case study is a collaboration with the 'Healthy Living Hub', a community grassroots group aiming to enhance the environment of a large Northampton urban park with wayfinding/signage, to stimulate regeneration and further funding. The second case study discusses a partnership between Product Design undergraduates and secondary school pupils. Students form small design teams and work 'for' the pupils - who act as clients - on a design problem in their environment. The project dovetails with UK government policy such as the large-scale rebuilding of schools and the Creative Partnerships programme. It has been noted that pupils involved value opportunities to make a positive contribution to the community and display high levels of social responsibility. The paper highlights the role of the Design Department as a trail-blazer in encouraging undergraduate students to use their skills and knowledge to support and rethink local projects to do with the community - a process known as 'live projects'. Furthermore, it considers the exposure to live projects in terms of enhancing the curriculum, challenging undergraduate students with outside constraints and deliverables and furthering their knowledge as the projects also explore the benefits that communities experience in return, through university engagement. In conclusion, the author reflects that the key is to understand what students learn from structured opportunities off-campus and to conceptualize this learning in terms of employability and the social implication of design on communities.

Keywords: Live projects, creative partnerships, young design programme, urban regeneration

1 INTRODUCTION

In Design studies, live client projects are enhancing the curriculum, challenging undergraduate students with outside constraints and deliverables, furthering their knowledge. Research skills such as shadowing, exploration and representation are being developed [1]. In return, the community benefits from university links on various levels. 'Service Learning', which involves matching a community need with academic goals, is becoming increasingly important in Higher Education. As Lund and Budny summarise [2], *"service learning can be a valuable educational tool which helps to develop engineering students' sense of value and direction, teaches team dynamics and professional communication skills, and engages the students in the community surrounding their university. A fundamental challenge in developing a successful and rewarding experience for each student is the identification of appropriate community partners and projects."*
Here, 'Live Projects' refer to design assignments set for students, where an actual commercial client or community partner requests input from students to solve a particular problem. Briefs for student assignments are developed in consultation with academics and external partners. Live projects are run as equivalents to traditional theoretical studio based design assignments and as such are different from the more common models of work placements and learning through work programmes.
A study of live practice by Viljoen and Hoskyns [3] commissioned by the UK Subject Centre for Art, Design and Media reviews the extent of live projects, related research in Learning and Teaching, and classifies the different types. Other studies on community engagement by university students working with schools, are exemplified by Butcher [4] and Smith [5], who presented work on the Sorrell Foundation. As we shall see, involving design students in regeneration projects has the potential to

impact on the communities in a real way. Primarily, this paper focuses on the impact on undergraduate learning, in particular, the enhancement of skills through live client engagement.

2   COMMUNITY PROGRAMMES AND DESIGN INTERVENTIONS

2.1 Objectives
The author aims to introduce a variety of 'live client' projects into the curriculum that support community interventions and regeneration, and to assess the resulting improvement in students' skills and employability under the following headings:
- Research and investigative skills, in conducting surveys, and community consultation.
- Familiarization with the nature of a feasibility study, master plan or client project brief.
- Use of references, site visits and surveys, community engagement and publicity/public relations.
- Design skills: concept generation, visual communication and prototyping.
- Appreciation of design management skills and business deliverables.

2.2 Methods
Two case studies focused on live client projects collaborating with the community are discussed; the author, part of a staff team teaching Design undergraduates at a British University, reviewed their structure and design in terms of pedagogical principles; their effectiveness was assessed through (a) student oral and written feedback, (b) client engagement and oral feedback, and (c) summative student assessment through presentations and multi-angled feedback by staff and peers, recorded through a scribe and documented with audio visual footage for inclusion in the students' Personal Development Portfolio. The second case study has recently been completed. This contribution is of an exploratory nature and captured participants' perceptions more fully. The analysis of this qualitative data is awaiting client feedback but has been well received. So far, findings align with the Pilot Evaluation of the Young Design Programme 2005-2008 concludes that the "*the client-centred model encouraging 'real life' experience of the cycle of a design project, has been extremely effective in bringing institutions and individuals together*" [6].

3 PROJECT DESCRIPTION
In our approach, two case studies are presented, exemplifying the community categorization of live projects [3]. Case study 1, titled 'The Racecourse', originated from an opportunity to work with the local community neighboring the university campus and can be considered a one-off commission. Whereas, case study 2, titled 'The Young Design Programme', is externally managed as part of a national initiative, with ten universities and thirty-fice schools currently involved. It is managed systematically as a regular and continuous part of the curriculum at a number of the participating universities.

Case Study 1: The Racecourse and the Healthy Living Hub
The Racecourse is a recent project by design students working with a community grassroots group, the Healthy Living Hub. This project was focused on enhancing an urban park in Northampton with wayfinding/signage, stimulating regeneration and further funding to extend the programme in the future. In 2007, the Healthy Living Hub team from Friends of Northampton Racecourse approached Product Design students at The University of Northampton with the brief to design useable and vandal-proof installations for the Racecourse. Following the consultation, survey and concept phase, the proposals of two students were selected and combined to create an arrow shaped installation, which has become popular as a place to meet and sit on the Racecourse. Also, large concrete hemispheres were placed at the twelve entrances to the park to define the perimeter and provide wayfinding to aid public use and interaction with the site. The coordinator at the Healthy Living Hub, emphasized that "*our overall aim was to involve all of the diverse communities which surround the Racecourse in the exciting projects taking place. It has therefore been very important for us to work with members of the student population, to take on board their ideas and to see them through to completion ... Our ambition of these pieces is to see them in many different ways – as seating, play, meeting point, talking point and, of course, merely pointing people in the right direction*" [9].

Figure 1. Racecourse student project: Consultation, design, celebration

Fifteen Year Two undergraduate students on the BSc Product Design were to be part of a twelve week project timetable consisting of studio tutorial sessions, with focus shifting from consultation and site survey to workshop (making facilities) in the second half of project. Students developed visual presentation and problem-solving skills, highly useful for future assignments, with the following indicative comment: *"It taught me to plan, prepare and present work."* They gained skills from the live project such as identifying deliverables and adhering to deadlines, problem solving through investigation, experimentation and making. Further, they benefitted from a collaborative portfolio piece with a community partner, seeing the winning signage design being further developed and built. Students gained early insights into manufacturing and managing a design project in a community context and the constraints within local planning law. They said: *"Live projects prepare for work outside – yes, deadlines, budget, and client cooperation"* and *"You need to know costs, how long it takes to be made and to talk to different people"*.

Celebrating their achievement, the students joined local VIPs and the neighbourhood on completion of the project. The official launch coincided with The university's Open Day, which secured a wider dissemination of the projects activities and success. The students were involved in publicity throughout the project period, learning to raise the impact and profile of their efforts. UK press reported the project: *"Creative plans to regenerate a Northampton park have won the praise of a leading politician"* [8].

The following client communication is indicative of an ongoing dialogue with the design staff team, which greatly helped the subsequent realization of the winning student project: *"Phil and James have been working really well with us. To keep you up to date we are now in the process of sourcing a fabricator for the project. We will need to ok everything with our funders and with the borough council as owners of the park. Then it is just a matter of coming in on time and on budget"*. Student feedback is testimony to engagement and curriculum enrichment, with comments including: *"I enjoy live projects and have developed new and improved existing skills as a result"* and *"Live projects have given me more clear ideas about the skills and knowledge needed in Product Design"*.

Case Study 2: Young Design Programme

The Sorrell Foundation's Young Design Programme aims to promote a collaboration between design students and secondary school pupils, by asking them "what they want to improve in their schools" [10]. This programme informs the process of regeneration of school campus and surrounding community. The approach, established in 2000, follows UK policy initiatives such as the 'Widening Participation' programme and the 'Creative Partnerships', a creative learning initiative *"designed to develop the skills of young people across England, raising their aspirations and equipping them for their futures"* [7]. They foster innovative, long-term partnerships between schools and creative professionals, including architects, scientists, multimedia developers and artists.

The University's Design staff, after having attended an explanatory talk at a launch event at the London headquarter of the organization, developed a student assignment and mapped this onto the curriculum.

Eight student teams were composed and these were deliberately cross-disciplinary in order to provide them with the experience of working with people from different subject specialisms; namely Product and Interior Design. Twenty-seven students worked in three different secondary schools (including two academies with representatives from their feeder primary schools) in eight teams of three to four students grouped to share skill sets. At the university's 'Challenge Day' the pupil client teams met the student design teams for the first time and were tasked to work out what design problem they would

like solved. For many, this would have been the first time they had ever entered a higher education environment [5]. During this meeting, design teams showed their clients around the college and the client teams presented their design problems; these included school communal and reception areas, outdoor spaces, toilets and specialist classrooms.

Figure 2. Young Design Programme: Client briefing, conversations and presentation

Following these initial meetings and throughout the project lifespan, the design teams attended meetings at the school to gather background information, develop ideas, show progress and get feedback from their clients. This whole process is described as "the conversation" and included meetings at creative destinations in London, the Royal Air Force Museum in Hendon and the Royal Festival Hall at the Southbank. These visits were arranged to help the pupils reflect on their school environment in comparison to contemporary "designed" spaces. Upon completion of this project the finished design concept was presented to the client team for feedback and was separately assessed by course tutors at the university. The students' feedback, sampled through questionnaires and recorded interviews, suggests that this project has been useful to all members of the student design teams involved. A student reported that it *"had allowed all of us to gain valuable experience, and develop skills, which we would have been unable to do through a typical university lead design project. In particular I have been able to develop better time management, which will be of great value in the future. This project also allowed me to improve my communication skills, and has enabled me to work younger aged group of clients than a typical design project, which further helped to develop communication and presentation skills."* Students addressed the problems concerning the organizer's communication and programme management: *"Overall this has been a useful and enjoyable project, however at times it could have been better organised, and … more advanced notice of the event would have allowed us to better prepare for the boardroom meeting with the sponsors, which would have made to event more useful in terms of the information extracted from the meeting."*

4   SUMMARY OF DESIGN STUDENT LEARNING

In both case studies, students were extensively briefed by the client team and group work and plenary sessions identified problems leading up to the design brief being finalised. The Young Design Programme enabled students from differing design subject backgrounds to work together and share a range of learning outcomes such as:

- developing support structures within and between teams
- school children enabled to experience a university design studio
- university design student teams being enabled to experience the end users
- developing clear mechanisms to communicate one's message and ideas to others

Work was monitored by means of individual and group tutorials and practical demonstrations. The student design teams presented the newly designed environments back to the school children giving them the opportunity to gained an insight into the design industry and university design study process. The children gained much from the experience and regarded the students as professionals, which bolstered their confidence and helped them to adjust to working with different client groups: *"It was fun working with real architects; they could transfer our visions for the new academy in to proper designs that looked amazing, we can't wait to see the final designs"* [11].

5 REFLECTION

5.1 Benefits for students, staff and institution

The relationship between community, local schools and academic institutions is likely to produce more than short-term gains, and provides networking opportunities to benefit the parties involved. It has already led to changes in design teaching, by reinforcing communication and design management skills. The experience of long-term working relationships will also affect the student experience (e.g. Case Study 1). At some of the UK universities, such as the University of Arts London, the Young Design Programme is managed systematically as a regular and continuous part of the curriculum [5].

The undergraduates experience curriculum enrichment through live client projects, exposure to business situations, project management and a real understanding of social issues in the local community.

In design studies, the production of models and prototypes enhances manual skills and a deepened understanding of 3D CAD. The importance of a visual language, in the form of drawings and models is key [12]. The importance of teaching visual communication is confirmed by the case studies. Oral presentation skills have to be refined when presenting to live clients, often at community and board level, with direct implication on employability.

The applied research undertaken by academic staff in the context of the case studies provides up-to-date understanding of multilayered communication and managerial skills and the awareness to planning issues, publicity strategies and manufacturing processes, which can be fed back into teaching. Also, the experience confirmed that *"community organizations, agencies and government bodies each have rules, procedures and practices that either facilitate or inhibit collaborations"* [13].

5.2 Community Impact

Through the university's involvement with Young Design Programme, the students have worked with what were 'failing schools', known in the communities as 'sink' learning environments. These schools are, by their nature, unlikely to send many pupils to study design at Higher Education level. Whilst engaged in programmes stimulating social regeneration within the community, it has to be asked whether or not it has galvanised the students' thinking and challenged them beyond conventional design considerations. In their feedback, the students cherished *"the opportunity to work with the school children"* with one of their colleagues stating that *"I am considering working with schools."* This suggests that the student seriously considers the teaching profession as one of his/her future career paths. A student remarked that the most important point of the brief was *"to create an environment that both pupil and staff can be proud of, and provide all users of the school including visitors with a sense of belonging."* Good design builds reputation and identity in a place and the community at large, and could be "a way of showing they are proud of their school" [10].

Most importantly, from the viewpoint of the Sorrell Foundation, *"pupils work in client teams to debate each common issue, noting what it is like in their school now, and proposing how things could be improved in the future. This information produces the Pupils' Brief, a publication informing architects, head teachers and the local authority about the pupils' ideas"* [10]. Through this, the students, in turn, contribute to the process of urban regeneration.

Furthermore, the students impact upon the clients by being positive role models and raised "ambition" in the pupils. One of the children said: *"I liked working with proper architects and as a result of this experience I would like to train to be an architect myself, they made it look really easy"* [11].

In both case studies, the students were involved in publicity, met with policymakers and have been interviewed by a press officer. On the Racecourse, the consultations and celebrations involved councillors and politicians, with associated photo opportunities. In the school project, however, the work with the client was felt affected *"because of repetition and staging for recording/camera purposes"* and *"it felt more directed towards a need to make Sorrell look good."*

In comparison, live projects with industry would involve much less press attention and publicity, often due to the confidential nature of the companies' research and product development. In contrast, community involvement opens up another dimension of learning related to communication.

5.3 Conclusions

As illustrated above, the use of live projects is particularly effective in contemporary teaching and learning in Design, and potentially used in a wide range of University disciplines. The university acts as a provider of technical assistance and consultancy, training and research to the community. To make real contributions, however, universities must change from their currently perceived status as ivory towers and become an agent in community engagement and empowerment. To produce this change, a revised view of scholarly functions is needed, one that creates outreach universities, *"addressing societal problems, through a 'co-learning' model, involving the merger of expertise in communities with expertise in universities"* [14]. This was felt in both case studies, with the design department questioning whether to act as consultants, partners, or, learners. In the student experience this became explicit in the shift from designing for the pupils to designing with the pupils. To conclude, *"More than ever, we need students who are broadly educated who are exposed to many different populations, contexts, and methods of inquiry during their training, and who can integrate research and practice to address critical social issues"* [13].

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