Minding the Gap again.

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KEYWORDS:  
Teaching Collaboration, Think Tank, Cross disciplinary collaboration, Cross disciplinary communication, experimental teaching, global learning.

ABSTRACT

In may 2008, lecturers from Regent’s Business School (RBS), London, United Kingdom (UK) and The College of Fine Arts, University of New South Wales, Australia (COFA) met by chance at a conference dedicated to design management in Paris, France. They discussed the possibility of a cross continental, cross-cultural and cross disciplinary teaching collaboration. It was considered that this could contribute to a deeper richer learning experience. (Gibbs 1992) for business students studying design management at RBS and design students studying sustainability in Australia. The result was the development of an online communication space where business students in London and design students Australia could freely discuss topics common to both their courses. In April 2009 a paper, entitled Mind the Gap, on the 2008 collaboration was delivered at the European Academy of Design conference: Design Connexity. The project showed promise so the authors decided to continue the teaching collaboration for a second year in 2009. This paper documents a comparison of the two years of experimental teaching and learning collaboration and their outcomes. It explores the challenges of facilitating positive, constructive and meaningful exchanges between a small class of Design Management students at a British Business School and a large cohort of first year Interactive Systems students at an Australian Design School with very different agendas relating to course outcomes for students. Particular attention is paid to the designing of the collaboration and the students’ and staff learning experience within such diverse contexts and analysis of these within the two consecutive collaborations. An analysis of lessons learnt from the process of designing and facilitating Mind the Gap 08, how they were addressed in Mind the Gap 09 and whether they were successful is used as the illuminative lens.

INTRODUCTION

In 2008 a teaching and learning collaboration was set up to facilitate meaningful exchanges between a small class of design management students at Regent’s Business School (RBS), Regent’s College, UK and a large cohort of sustainability, and small group of final year design students at the College of Fine Arts (COFA), UNSW, Australia with three very different agendas. The results of this collaboration were very promising in the way they facilitated exchange between, and learning experience of, the students involved. Consequently, it was decided to continue this collaboration in 2009. Participants were drawn again from a small class of Design Management students from RBS and a large cohort of first year Interactive Systems students from COFA, the final year students were not involved this time. In both cases the agenda of the course outcomes was very different, as well as the student backgrounds and contextual experiences. It was the differences that were the focus of exploration and the ability of the students to draw creative inspiration from each other.

The results of the 2008 collaboration were presented at the European Academy of Design conference: Design Connexity in April 2009. The findings captured within that paper formed the basis for reflection on the process of setting up the subsequent collaboration in 2009. In both years attention was paid to the designing of the collaboration and its impact on the student and staff learning experiences within such diverse contexts. This paper, therefore, pays particular attention to the comparative analysis of these experiences within the two consecutive collaborations. Furthermore, an analysis of lessons learnt from the process of designing and facilitating Mind the Gap 08, how they were addressed in Mind the Gap 09 and the resulting collaborative experience are also discussed.

LESSONS LEARNED 2008

The collaboration was facilitated by an online-shared space entitled Think Tank (TT). Two factors are required for collaborative use of these technologies to occur. The first is the ‘motivator’ - a need for exchange over a common artefact. The second is the ‘conduit’ – an appropriate platform for the exchange. In the case of this collaboration, the ‘conduit’ was the TT. This was developed to look and feel like a normal website due to negative feedback from students about their experiences with most learning management systems. Joomla, an open source, easy to access and use content management system was used to do
this, a forum module was added and discussions between participants occurred in this forum. There were a number of forum topics set up to start discussions and the possibility for students to start their own threads. In both years, the design of this environment was aimed at fostering interaction and exchange where students could dip in and out in their own time. In 2008, TT didn’t carry any particular outcomes nor value in relation to the final project outcomes. In 2009, in response to the previous experience, the TT brief was issued first followed by a project brief to the RBS students. Additionally, TT counted towards their assessment with the project being evaluated for its reliance on the TT experience. For the COFA students, the TT provided an informal forum for them related to an assessable process diary where a self-determined ‘wicked problem’

The 2008 collaboration highlighted a number of positive responses and a number of areas where there was need for further adjustments and changes. From the students’ perspective the process of collaboration tended to unify the groups of students along the geographical boundaries (UK v Australia), where students still felt that the exchange was a positive experience in terms of work related output, often seeing it as relevant to design industry. Due to geographically based delay in response, the COFA students tended to continue the discussion outside of the virtual environment, where as the RBS students tended to disassociate and concentrate on other issues. The time limitation was also a factor. The collaboration process was set up for a limited time, which the COFA students considered too short.

The RBS staff felt that there needed to be greater ownership and structure implemented into the student collaboration by the teaching staff. Staff observed the collaboration had a notable effect on the project outcomes that students produced, where the results indicated a rather favourable use of the Internet mediated collaborative spaces. It was noted that the collaboration became an interactive record of discovery allowing for greater reflection into research and opportunity growth. The COFA staff, on the other hand, were reticent to ‘direct’ the process / discussion preferring a student driven focus. The collaboration fostered very positive tutorial exchanges and offered great illustration of different vernaculars and communication techniques/needs of the COFA students to those from RBS.

In summary the lessons learned from the 2008 collaboration illustrated that the communication ‘gap’ between management and design functions found in industry also occurs between students possibly because of the difference in cultures, vernacular and focus: outcome vs. process. In order to address this, it has been agreed that there is a need to generate physical and virtual structures where students feel ‘safe’ and can claim ownership and self-initiated discovery. Both RBS and COFA staff agreed that there is potential in widening the participation in order to make the interactive online space a better source of creative inspiration. In order to overcome the difficulties students might have with online participation more thought had to be put into developing methods for students to get to know each other to encourage more interaction. Finally both COFA and RBS staff agreed that TT needs to be associated with the notion that it is a space to promote furthering of creative ideas. TT is the first cross-disciplinary experience on a project for both the RBS and COFA students. This shows the value in TT but also the importance in illustrating its purpose and ultimate potential, to the participating students, pre log on. Perhaps the facilitators need to identify where a preparatory exercise is needed and develop one.

**THE 2009 COLLABORATION**

From the RBS perspective, following the recommendations from the first paper the brief was split into two parts not revealing the end game to the student. This time around the students also were encouraged to take a greater individual participation in TT. The fact that the TT topics were set up by the lecturers to direct focus toward the intended project brief helped with driving the overall process and dealing with the time constraints. This time around students were to respond to the TT individually, but worked in groups in the latter part of the project to respond to a creative brief. All three teams responded well to the challenge, but it was clear that those who didn’t make a connection between the two elements of the project didn’t offer as insightful outcomes as those who did. A barrier did exist in the individual seeing this as a process of collaborative learning and group knowledge as well as individual learning. Thus, Group A and B used TT as a tool in resolving problems whereas group C was challenged by TT as a tool to resolve the creative brief, adding to their quandary.

There seemed to be a greater level of commitment from the UK students than their Australian counterparts, where upon reflection of the tech-tired Australian cohort last time around the UK participants were tech-pumped with positive experiences from IT and media support in 2009. The RBS lecturers felt that the UK students managed to develop emotional connection with their involvement in which TT help to motivate continuous participation. In addition, learning from the 2008 experience, the RBS classroom environment was consciously adjusted to ensure a positive and nurturing environment and to spur students to work on TT outside of the class time. The TT developed discussions in class whereby the virtual realm sparked discourse in the physical space, opposed to the 2008 collaboration. As the UK students were using different media and digital technology they were comfortable with the use of TT and vice versa. Moreover, the sequence of technology used across the module in the UK was staggered in reaction to the findings from Australia of the tech-tired students. The use of a Process Blog and video production equipment supported the student-technology relations.

From a COFA perspective, student participation in TT was voluntary. Whilst there was a greater percentage of students, about 70% of the cohort, who initially participated in TT, only bout 20% of them were very actively involved across the whole run period. They used the space to explore, with their local and international peers, their self determined
‘wicked problems’ as well as contributing to the themed discussion topics. The interaction in 2009 between the two cohorts was quite different to the 2008 experience. In 2009 the students interacted more between the cohorts, whereas in 2008 there tended to be interaction only within cohorts almost to the point of parallel discussions. The COFA students who were most active felt they gained benefit from the interaction so they pursued it. The final year students were not involved this delivery. In 2008 these students happened to be the first posters to the discussions that seemed to throw the other students because of the long, eloquent and considered responses they made. COFA staff felt this may be why the students in 2009 were more evenly matched in their participation levels and responses.

NEW LESSONS LEARNED

It is clear that the way the TT becomes meaningful to students depends on a number of factors such as: the classroom context, its physical environment, the rate of response from others and the links established by lecturers to the learning process. Getting the context of the collaboration right is important, but even more challenging is the process of making the collaboration meaningful in a short period of time. This is what the RBS students and lecturers were tackling during the 2009 collaboration.

As the flow is organic within the constraints of the set topics and TT virtual capacity, it should make it easier for the students to draw out meaning from the collaboration. The 2009 experience indicated that the incentive to share was driven by the reward of feedback and thus participation was vital. Hence, meaningfulness of TT needed to have greater relevance to the individual and the group as a collaborative effort in collective knowledge, in order to benefit from the learning and creative process. However, familiarity of technology within the context of the students work has been shown, both times, to be of importance. The efficacy of students to work is based on a balance of familiarity with other forms of technological aids and a trouble free experience across all mediums. There is a danger, where in heavy reliance on multimedia learning aids, when one element-relationship results a negative experience, it can affect the wider reception to technological aids. Therefore, for effective use in future undertakings a specific workshop can be developed giving all participants an equal entrance velocity onto TT.

As TT is not a static Virtual Learning Environment (VLE), the 2009 collaboration also motivated and encouraged individuals to own as well as develop their own Personal Learning Environment (PLE) – Attwell, Graham (2006). The nature of collaboration, thus, fostered both individual as well as collective knowledge building, where each participant retrieved different experiences from the overall VLE, developing on an individual level of a PLE. Building on the foundations of TT the students have shown that they can engage with the work needed to create and maintain a PLE. This was demonstrated through individual Process-blogs, and use of multimedia labs/videos. This work was immediately published in the portal, simultaneously executed, for breadth of coverage. The TT as a PLE, allowed each student to centralise their personal learning progress by taking charge of their own learning journey, rewarding experience and empowering them with a much better set of skills.

Although TT fostered very positive experiences, there were also some barriers identified in the 2009 collaboration. Some of these barriers stem from both the technological side of TT and the broader context. There is no trouble-shooting guide to TT, which may operate as a barrier to student’s involvement outside of the classroom support. In some cases TT is still seen as a precious space, where students are expected to get it right. As it is a space of exploration and learning this myth needs to be removed. The user experience is dominated by the purpose of discovery and it is the aims of this that will inform the student toward their final work and ultimately assessment, highlighting wider issues of student receptiveness, beyond TT, to aids in the creative process for assessed work.

There is still the barrier of time zone difference which means that threads of conversation may develop within the cohorts in real time simply because it is only that cohort that is awake or active at that time. Because these threads may develop quickly there is often no opportunity for members of the other cohort to contribute because the topic is fully explored before they get the opportunity. Moreover, there is a fear of saying the wrong thing or making a fool of oneself in front of their peers.

MOVING FORWARD

It is credible for the group experience to be extended beyond the confines of these two cohorts and into the realms of other disciplines expressive of the broader definition of design tasks. The value in a contribution made to TT is not just the reward in feedback but the existence of the question placed into a different paradigm of considered opinion. In the case of ‘large issues’ the individual can be overwhelmed by the question, shared ownership can give room for exploration and ultimately greater perspective. It may be desirable to look beyond the forum / discussion format of the TT to using wiki’s, blogs or other web2.0 tools. The usefulness of these offers potential for exploration in the 2010 collaboration.

CONCLUSIONS

TT continues to be a source of learning for both the staff and students. With the ability to adapt, the functionality and effectiveness is becoming richer for all concerned. This is an imperative quality to collaborating whereby the movement of the project is progressive and shared. TT embodies the concept of open source knowledge, finding the in-between space in which creativity often thrives. With time it is becoming more and more a structural coupling of students and staff for mutual benefit.
The 2009 collaboration has illuminated TT as a proven opportunity for the students to use a VLE as a tool within their creative process. The slight disparity in disciplines and intuitions needs focus and development. The 2008 paper, from the first collaboration, addressed the opportunity highlighting differences in learning cultures and the very often neglected commonality, embodied within a sense of entrepreneurship (Sadowska et al 2009). A stronger, individual, learning experience via addressing the findings first time around, has matched these areas in the second collaboration. However, emphasis must be placed on the strength and ability in private learning via open source and collaborative education. Koestler’s (1964) model of ‘bisociation’, as developed by Jones (2007), has been used as an aid to creative process as a practical way to capitalize on the awkward, clumsy or tentative early stages of a design project. This bisociation of subject competency is the development of future problem solvers in design and beyond. The existence of biochemistry, design management, welfare economics, etc is the synergy that TT can offer between disciplines for greater possibilities. TT is an opportune space where future influential characters can identify and empathise with other areas of specialist knowledge, cross-pollinating for effective problem solving.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

The Authors would like to acknowledge their students for their participation in TT 2008 and TT 2009 along with all teaching staff involved

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