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Can design thinking have a social life through networking?

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Brenda Duggan

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Undisciplined Disciplines

Can design thinking have a social life through networking? — Brenda Duggan

Introduction

‘The design process is best described metaphorically as a system of spaces rather than a predefined series of orderly steps. The steps demarcate different sorts of related activities that together form a continuum of innovation’. (Brown, 2008, 4) This paper addresses two different spaces for examining design thinking — the design research notebook and the digital space, the topic-driven blog. The premise for this paper arises from teaching digital media on a visual communication programme. I wanted to ask the question from my perspective as an educator — if the individual research notebook is a convention or vehicle for design thinking within a print technology culture, could the use of group-blogs provide a space, acting as a continuum or counter balance, in addressing design thinking in a digital networked culture? Can design thinking have a social life, through networking? This paper will examine the ‘different sorts of related activities’ that takes place in design thinking through the design research notebook and the group blog. Through the use of both for articulating design thinking — can we blur the boundary between private and public space?

These questions arise from my own personal experience of using both notebook and blog in the classroom. I in no part advocate replacing the physical design notebook, but in a quest for difference and pushing the students to think in an unfamiliar genre, can this enrich their visual

process? The scope of the paper is to show how their thinking changes through a different technology. Henry Jenkins examines participatory culture and engagement with new media in a white paper written as part of the MacArthur Digital Media and Learning Initiative. (Jenkins 2009) He examines how a digitally networked society shifts the focus of literacy from one of individual expression to one involving skills developed through collaboration and networking. To increase student agency towards their practice within a participatory culture, the student needs to know its processes of engagement. 'We must learn to read one source of information against another to understand the contexts within which information is produced and circulated'. (Jenkins, 2009, p. 44) Landow observes that the academy, through the ages, has been characterised by that of the dominant information technology, which influences educational practice. 'Hypertext, by holding out the possibility of newly empowered, self-directed students, demands that we confront an entire range of questions about our concepts of education'. (Landow 1997, p. 272)

In the classroom, from private closed space

The following design project was conducted with two cohorts of seventeen 1st year students embarking on a visual communication degree. The module, of which I teach a component part in digital media, is called 'Design Process'. My aim is to challenge the students to reflect on their design process through using different genres. They examine this in a print technology culture — the design research notebook and a collaborative digital space — the topic driven blog. Let me outline some key elements of the digital media project to give context to the visual thinking.

The students had completed a 'typographic self portrait' project as a component part of this module on typography. In this digital media component, the students were asked to use their print based 'portrait' as content for a digital exploration. This project was a vehicle for examining typography in a digital context, from static or fixed to fluid and kinetic. Let us examine what happens in the design research notebook regarding their design thinking and process. Through the ideation period of the project this physical space is used to record examples of visual research, annotate and scribble notes. In it the student uses drawing and sketching as an extension of thinking towards visualising possible direction.

The illustration [Figure 1.1] shows this dynamic interplay between these elements of design thinking. There is correlation between the design problem and the students' development of this through planning and rough storyboarding. Layout and organisation of the work is non-linear and multi-directional.

Donal Schön (1991) viewed design as a reflective conversation. He

wrote in *The Reflective Practitioner* — of design as exploration and enquiry in dialogue with the situation. This reflection involves the reflective conversation with a situation that is unique and uncertain. He asks the practitioner to contextualise situation, shaping and making themselves part of it. (Schön, 1991, 163) The design research notebook is used as a way for the individual designer to develop this conversation with the design problem through analysing the brief, visualising, collecting, recording and reflecting through the process of enquiry towards a final project. With this regard, the graphic designer assumes the role of autonomous problem solver where the situation is the design problem. The conversation with the situation is very evident but through a one way channel between the student and the physical visualisation of what is happening in the notebook. The conversation is private and closed, with an emphasis on individual authorship.

Here in [Figure 1.2] we see digital media elements being examined in the static print technology culture. This can be very useful to ‘key frame’ what happens through the animation and break this down into still images, which freeze layout, structure and grid. The work recorded in the notebook is very student centric with little evidence of contextualising their practice in relation to the other.

The public social space

‘A classroom designed to foster distributed cognition, encourages students to participate with a range of people, artefacts and devices, a class room not only in which participation requires active collaboration with people and tools that are physically present, but also with people and tools that are virtually present’. (Jenkins, 2009, 21)

Along side specific design projects for this module, visual exploration and design process, the students were introduced to the possibilities of social networking for design thinking. The use and prevalence of social networking sites were discussed with the main question being — how could they be used as a tool for thinking and articulating design process? As a design educator I felt the need to question whether the students’ external influences and conversations were being counted and included within the classroom, and in so doing how can they be used in their learning and thinking? A constructivist approach to education is described as a ‘learning that happens where there is a continuous building and amending of previous structures as new experience, actions and knowledge are assimilated and accommodated. (Fry, 1999, p. 22) From this prospective we need to ask — how do we give greater importance and count the students’ knowledge and experience? The discussion asks them what happens when you think about and discuss your work in a digital network collaboratively. Of two cohorts, I divided them into six groups

of between seven and eight students. Now the students had a physical individual notebook, the private space, and a collaborative blog, the public space, in which to articulate design thinking.

Let us briefly examine the shape this public social space takes, what is a blog? The word blog comes from the two words web and log. Blogs are allowing users share ideas, information and trends while also linking into conversations that are happening elsewhere on the internet. Blogs emphasis a conversation that is fast, fragmentary, present and distributed. 'Weblogs are collections of briefly formulated thoughts and ideas focusing on connections and brief nuggets of thought. Links are vital to the genre'. (Mortensen , Walker, 2001, 265)

What happens in the student blogs with regards to design thinking? In all cases the blogs represent an eclectic arrangement of visual material, a selection of the group's collaborative 'trail' of thinking. There is often no obvious theme or underpinning that seems obvious to the visitor. Yet this collection represents a path of discovery, the students making decisions on information that reveals itself as their collective knowledge. We see examples of postings from, for example, a design conference, references and inspiration from YouTube and Vimeo. (Taylor, S et Al) The blog references many examples and comments from other designers. Along side this; students have posted their own photographs, printed posters and typeface design from other modules on the course. (Tully, T et Al) Overall we see strong contextualising by them on what they are doing in relation to other projects and people in the wider public sphere. Mortensen and Walker (2001) describe this associative connection in a blog stream well when they describe how thought follows thought and one idea tends to trigger another, though not necessarily in a casual chain. The richness of the references and inspiration posted shows how one idea or image follows another developing a collective visual memory.

Within the private notebook design thinking is in one direction. The reflection in action that Schön (1991) discusses is limited within the autonomous designer. But the blog has a two-way communication possibility hard-wired into its structure. This gives a new dimension to Schön's reflective practitioner, where the designer has a digital space, quite literally, to listen to the situations 'back-talk'. This opens the students up to multiple conversations within the participatory culture. The student blogs give us examples of how they find voice by posting their own project work. Their posts exist along side examples and references from outside the class room therefore allowing them to see their work as communication in context to what is happening in the public realm.

'Its useful for feedback on your own material, (to) get inspiration from what other people are doing, networking and sharing, promoting yourself' (1st year student)

'The Blogs allow us to view work from all the different modules on one page therefore making clearer the crossover' (1st year student)

'The advantages are to explore other people's work and motivate (yourself) to create more and be more involved in the design 'world'.' (1st Year student)

Commentary and textual discussion on the blogs is limited, there is little or no text labelling or writing by the students. This difference is interesting and points to what Kress suggests as how a dominance of the constellation of writing and book is now being overtaken by a new constellation of image and screen. Evidence on how the students are using the blogs corroborates with this. Often labelling of posts is limited to casual one liners. (Byrne, K et Al)

Collaborative thinking

'We trust ourselves without proof; the necessity to defend and articulate one's position appears only in conversation with others'. (Vygotsky 1986, p. 243) So through setting up a networked dialogic collaborative space are we beginning to enable the student to think in relation to others? 'Participatory culture shifts the focus of literacy from one of individual expression to community involvement'. (Jenkins, 2009, p. 4) This opens the question on how the individual student can now see herself more within a community of practice, in context to her peer group.

So in using the group-blog , can we begin to facilitate a collaborative social process of meaning making? Does the inclusion of another mode of record and dialogue question how we hold the conversation in a different collaborative space? This should then help the student question how content changes in a different context. 'By crossing and hence blurring the borders of the individual text, the electronic link reshapes our experiences of genre, mode, text, intellectual property and even self'. (Landow, 1999, p.156)

Where to now...

I have outlined examples of how first year students have been introduced to examining design thinking through blogging but I want to examine how this will translate into collaborative thinking and content development at a later stage in the visual communication program and from there onwards into the students professional career.

In third year of the visual communication program we have industry collaboration with the London design house 'Imagination'. Each year the 3rd year students tackle a brief in partnership with Imagination. This year the brief entitled 'Openness' asked the students to examine how the audience is playing a more important role in participation in the design process and experience.

Excerpt from the Imagination brief:

'The current phenomenon of 'Openness' has formed from many different influences, the development of the internet through social media, Creative Commons, YouTube, even X-Factor. 'Openness' has developed a whole new generation or writing, directing, animating, photographing superstars, chosen not just by the 'media informers' but also by the public. Consider the above theme. We want you to develop a self-promotional piece that highlights Imagination's position within the changing nature of 'openness' in design and communication technologies. This brief should be seen as an Imagination commission that we could use to show how 'Openness' and 'Imagination' can be interpreted'. I will discuss two group projects that set up a digital collaborative space as an integral part of their design thinking thereby tapping into participatory culture in a meaningful way.

Project 01 — 'Reactor'

This first project team came up with a design direction to this Imagination brief, in which they would design a collaborative digital space for the company. This space was hypothetically proposing that Imagination's design staff could upload elements of their design briefs/projects to open up ideas for visual direction with the distributed audience. This would take the shape of an open digital space, called 'Re-actor, in which Imagination could have an open 'visual conversation' in a public space with a public audience.

This idea was playing on the serendipitous, associative way our brain works, taking the shape of a visual 'Chinese whispers'. The students worked traditionally recording and articulating their visual process in the design research notebook, but in parallel the student team set up a 'Flickr' account called 'visual conversation'. (Griffin H, Collins D et Al) This allowed the group to test their design thinking using an open forum to generate content, thereby developing the design solution.

The visual conversation started with one image, a light bulb. The next

posting was to be an image based on what came to mind when looking at the first image. This then developed a trail of visual images that had links, often tenuous, mapping a trail of visual conversation within the group. Here is an excerpt of the labels for the images, explaining the thinking behind selection:

The light bulb brought to mind
this photo of a night market

The night market reminded me this piece
Okami fanart by belbael on DeviantART

Holly's image reminded me of
a fire breathing dragon

The image of the dragon brought to
mind Little Dragon's song 'twice'

The package in the video reminded
me of the Swiss flag

I opened this in college and the
Swiss team made me think of the
Swiss typeface Helvetica

This engagement and inclusiveness with the public networked space when designing a digital media project that takes this genre into account, provides the students with an excellent method for developing and sustaining a clear and confident voice with an ability to formulate and stand-by their design thinking. The student team saw the importance of testing the possibilities for their project proposal within a public forum that went towards validating and giving confidence to their proposed direction. If we expect the student to work in a collaborate fashion on design projects in the future it is important that the educational space we are facilitating is inclusive of collaborate thinking.

Project 02 — 'Geocode'

The second project team used a vibrant and energetic blog stream for design thinking. This blog was used to find and record exciting inspiration and references that would feed into informing their own design process towards project solution. The blog contains, mostly, video excerpts from YouTube and Vimeo that frame the context, for this project, providing useful research to what was happening 'out there' in the real world. The




FLASH STORY-BOARD

The Flash starts off with the whole face (mine)

This image was made in Adobe Illustrator then



placed on flash. then I put all the individual symbols into motion tween and made them all scatter



in different direction bouncing out, fading out sliding out, up + down but the three dots that represent my freckles bounce back to the



board to make a face at the end with the symbols that represent my hair and bits of the hat

This is my first flash


You need a love life with friends.

you need a love life with friends a passionate love life

Poetry in Kinetic Form Youtube

This was a poem that was put in kinetic form which made it more effective (especially the o section), it was just a different way to looking poetry, rather than in a book reading down.


The dragon breathes out fire after this



Screenshots from the web site

Bemboszo.com

The website contained a type involving the animals/kakagom represent those letters you click on an individual letter 'd' for instance the letter, upper + lower letters/also the word design



[Left + Right] Fig 1.1–1.2 Scanned student notebooks (Source: Author)

cumulative effect of this ever evolving blog stream reminds me of what Vannevar Bush calls 'trail blazers' — 'there is a profession of trail blazers, those who find delight in the task of establishing useful trails through the enormous mass of the common record'. (Bush, 1945, 11) The blog served the purpose of making sense of an eclectic selection of team thinking. The project team had an 'everything is valid' attitude to what went into this blog stream. So through the linking or networking possibilities of information there is an important process of meaning making going on. As Jenkins points out 'knowing how to act within a distributed system is more important than learning content.' (Jenkins, 2009, 39)

Conclusion

At the start of the paper it was mentioned that technologies are inextricably interwoven with how we think. (Jenkins, 2009, 37) Much of what has been discussed here is critically questioning the modes of working through design process, in the designer's research notebook and the networked computer. This serves as a conversational opener only, asking us the educators what could be the attributes and possibilities presented to further explore. I have drawn on much of Jenkins ideas examining the digitally networked society. This discussion has been very much on the part of educator looking at learner. In developing these somewhat aspirational thoughts the collaborative and networking conversation must also evolve more on the part of the educators. If we expect our students to work towards a clear and confident voice within a community of practice, we as educators must also be prepared to question defined subject boundaries and discipline autonomy.

In questioning my individual practice in the classroom with the students, I feel this requires me to become part of a wide multiple conversation that looks at connections and links in an interdisciplinary capacity in what we present as educators.

As we know, the educator's role has been reconfigured to one of teaching the processes of learning rather than its products. (Boud & Feletti, 1991,16) I hope that through sharing these examples and questions from the design classroom we might become more aware of the open possibilities of collaborative design thinking and their social digital spaces at our disposal •

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