Cutting your coat according to your cloth

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Creativity in economic course delivery is essential. Reducing staffing costs, forced to devise methods for course delivery using limited staffing with increased student numbers, creativity in economic course delivery is essential.

ABSTRACT

The problem: Art and Design Academics are under increasing pressure to maintain quality in teaching and learning whilst reducing staffing costs. Forced to devise contingencies for course delivery without additional staffing.

Participants: Edinburgh College of Art (ECA) UG textiles student, The Embroiderers Guild, The Quilters Guild, conservation studio staff at The University of Edinburgh.

Method: Qualitative research through case studies exploring how partners from different generations and with complimentary experience can engage and exchange skills through embroidery and CAD, as creative tools for textile designers.

The proposition for this paper brings people together; facilitating exchange of complementary skills in partnerships, where teacher and learner swap roles according to activity (figures 1 and 2). The case study presented supports positive strategies in engaging the wider community, with project activities focused around acquisition of technical skills, to compliment core teaching in conceptual thinking, aesthetics and design development.
Forced to acknowledge National Student Survey (NSS) results, staff are increasingly aware of student satisfaction and the need to devise ways of delivering meaningful learning with ever shrinking budgets. Promotion of cross-disciplinarily and increased access to equipment and workshops across programmes, schools and the wider University, compounds this problem further, bringing pressures to impart specialist skills effectively to non-specialist learners. Conventional discipline-specific taught skills-based lessons, heavy on staff teaching hours are being cut, leaving students with gaps in access to specialist skills and advanced techniques beyond basic understanding. Individuals are turning to online sites as a substitute for face-to-face instruction. Unvetted for accuracy or level of professionalism, these learning platforms increase the risk of student access to poor teaching and impact upon learning on a range of levels. Crucially lacking in online learning, is the tacit understanding passed on through physical interaction with materials and conversation in action, vital for deeper learning and understanding around craft and materials based subjects. Boyer and Cousins (2009) study in learning through live demonstrations, ably argues the desirability to learn from, and with other people.

SUGGESTED SOLUTIONS

This paper acknowledges the benefits of learning through physical interaction between individuals, particularly around craft-based skills. Interpersonal interaction fuels richer deeper learning, in contrast to the risk of surface acquisition of skills through the two-dimensional (2D) interface of a backlit computer screen. The argument goes further, in promoting the benefits of reciprocal apprenticeship relationships between groups with complimentary skills, in this case amateur technical experts and computer savvy UG design students. Embracing voluntary experts from outwith the University, additional staffing costs are reduced, yet learners benefit from one to one teaching. This rewarding and rich experience for both parties provides tailored quality learning, furthermore promoting a connected community within, and beyond the University environment.

THE PARTICIPANTS

For this case study, two groups of participants with complimentary skills were brought together over three weekly sessions.

STUDENT GROUP: ROLE AND PRIOR EXPERIENCE

This group comprised 16 2nd year UG textile students with competent CAD skills, specifically Photoshop, as they had recently taken taught classes. With sewing now largely marginalized within UK schools education, most students had limited stitched textile experience.

TECHNICAL EXPERTS: ROLE AND PRIOR EXPERIENCE

15 dedicated amateur embroiderers from the local Embroiderers Guild and The Thistle Quilters volunteered for this project. They were aware from the outset that this was a reciprocal arrangement and understood that there was deep appreciation of their valuable skills and contribution to the project. This was important, as, for success, full commitment is required from all parties. With the average age of the group being 70, most of these women were taught sewing at school from age 7. In contrast, their experience with CAD was limited.

STAFF ROLE

From the outset, ECA staff were introduced to all participants as facilitators and coordinators, as opposed to teachers. Laurillard (2002) promotes the role of staff as being to foster the community of learners, helping to form effective and productive collaborations between learners, as opposed to conventional roles of staff providing the teaching to the learners. She also suggests that ‘Argument [or in this case exchange of skills] between students [exchange with technical experts] about a topic can be an extremely effective way of enabling students to find out what they know, and indeed what they don’t know...’ (Laurillard 2002: 158).

We learn best when we are fully involved in the activities associated with the learning experience. For students in the role of learners, learning alongside an expert can be inspirational (figure 1). For the volunteer expert amateurs, the opportunity to work with students, accessing new technologies and materials motivates involvement (figure 2). Additionally for students in teaching roles (figure 2), there is no better incentive to fully understand a task or technique than when one needs to pass this on to a third party. Therefore, this approach has the potential not only for effective acquisition of skills, but as an immersive experience for both parties in both roles.

THE QUESTIONS

Questions were developed and investigated through the case study:

- Would apprentices be tacit observers of the master’s practices, or can apprentices and masters learn simultaneously within the same activity?
- With the student experience, how can teaching another person, as an active method of learning confirm understanding?
- Can volunteer technical experts provide superior quality instruction and experience, compared with learning through printed publications or online interfaces?

OUR PROJECT REINFORCE TWO-WAY EXCHANGE,
WITH AN APPRECIATION FOR BALANCE AND VALUE
OF COMPLIMENTARY SKILLESSES.

THE ACTIVITIES

The Needlework Development Scheme (NDS) was established as a central focus for the project tying together all activities. In operation from 1934-1961, and using historic embroidered examples as teaching aids, and printed pamphlets to support learning, the NDS hugely influenced embroidery and sewing education throughout the UK during the 20th century and beyond.

DAY 1

NDS specimens acted as catalysts for discussion, with mixed groups and pairs preparing supports and boards for the preservation of the historic textiles samples (figures 3 and 4). All participants were encouraged to note notes, sketches and photos to be used on day 2.

Positive feedback was received regarding the Day 1 experience, for example: ‘This worked very well. I liked that on day 1 we were all learning something new, as this allowed us to relax and get to know one another.’ (Expert M 2015) ‘Working with the collection helped us appreciate the qualities in these precious embroidery examples.’ (Student LM 2015)

DAY 2

During the morning session the students operated as mentors. Pairs and small groups of participants were challenged to utilise sketches, drawings and photographs from day 1, as a basis for creating files for digital printing. Students were tasked with preparing notes in advance to work with the technical experts in the computer lab, leading and assisting them to: scan and save images; open, crop, resize, repeat, layer and re-colour designs. The pairs/groups were encouraged to work with one monitor, with students taking turns in leading activities and supporting the experts in creative and technical exploration of the CAD tools.

McLoy (2011: 4) states that ‘Reciprocal learning is the concept that a person concurrently learns, or even re-learns whilst teaching another person a skill, trade or idea.’ In order to be able to pass on a skill, the students must fully understand the skill themselves. Running subsequently to the student Photoshop sessions the previous week with technical staff, these skills exchange workshops were intended to further embed this learning, whereby students led the experts in similar activities. As the experts had very little knowledge of CAD, students had to breakdown their own understanding in order to communicate to their partners.

Feedback from the Day 2 morning session included:

‘I felt an improvement on designing digitally such as the use of the Photoshop software. This was reinforced when I worked with women from the Embroiderers’ Guild as I was then having to teach these skills, which allowed me to consolidate the skills’. (Student LW 2015)
On explaining Photoshop techniques to others, one student commented ‘talking the process through did really help to cement it in my own head.’ (Student AW 2015) The additional benefits of working with individual partners encouraged students to answer questions posed by their partners and break down their own understanding in order to communicate this to someone else: ‘It made me reflect quickly, yet deeply about my own knowledge in order to understand the lady so I just had to watch her intently.’ (Student CB 2015)

In this project I found that the exchanging of skills between the embroiderers and the students was successful as it gave us the opportunity to learn a new skill as well as refine our own. This was definitely the case when teaching our embroiderer, Georgina, as when we were teaching her I found that Hazet (fellow student) and I were also refining our own skills on Photoshop together, helping each other. (Student JW 2015)

In this field of research where learners use teaching as a means to improve and embed learning, the researchers devised synthetic learners for children to test ideas and understanding on through teaching the synthetic learner themselves (Leeuwong & Biwas 2008). In this case study, our students were testing their own understanding of CAD through teaching the guild members. The second day afternoon activity introduced and used the sublimation digital printer and large format heat transfer press. The groups printed their files together; further developing trust and social bonds through engagement in shared activities.

DAY 3

In order to investigate students self-learning and to provide comparison with reciprocal learning, students were given two separate tasks:

Task 1: Using only one book or pamphlet, learn a stitch or technique (figure 7)

Task 2: Learn a technique or stitch from an online resource.

During the tasks it was important that the students did not try to cross-reference or confer with other students for help or direction. Additionally, these tasks supported a range of learning styles.

Feedback from the tasks that took place during the third day included: ‘This exercise really made me appreciate my generations ability to film something and put it online. If I had been learning stitches (from books) in the days of NDS I would not have been doing textiles, I don’t know if it was the language, but it just made the reading a lot harder to understand.’ (Student CB 2015)

The second day afternoon activity introduced and used the sublimation digital printer and large format heat transfer press. The groups printed their files together; further developing trust and social bonds through engagement in shared activities.

Feedback from the fourth day session included the following student comment: ‘It was much easier to learn alongside a teacher than by using a book or video tutorial. Julie was a patient teacher and we discussed where I was going wrong and different ways I could make my stitching neater.’ (Student LM 2015) This expert also used a book for reference whilst teaching (figure 9) and a student observed ‘I would like to point out how easily Margaret could interpret the instructions, where we had some trouble learning straight from the book. I feel like this difference is generational.’ (Student LM 2015)
skills in partnerships through specific physically working on exchange of The premise for this paper is that fostering relationships:

through facilitating workshops and amateur technical specialists in organisations. For technical experts in Universities and amateur craft.

RECIPROCAL BENEFITS
new CAD software she had learnt. For examples see www.

Skills exchange is not a new phenomenon with websites and with virtual user group/partnerships, on or virtual user group/partnerships, on which society is in danger of becoming over reliant.

As part of the project, students interviewed the experts for feedback on the process and recorded this as a research component on their reflective blogs, see: Hazel Stevens - https://andsotosew.wordpress.com/ Alison Wibner – https://vodskillsexchangeproject.wordpress.com/ Emma Wilkinson - https://ewilkinsonnds.wordpress.com/ Jemima Homer – http://www. jemimahometextiles.wordpress.com/

These records clearly demonstrate the process and enthusiasm of the participants who felt valued in both roles of this project:

‘It was an extremely enjoyable few days and I loved it. I am sure I learned more from the student than he did from us.’

(Expert AW 2015)

‘I would love the chance to work with this fabulous group of women again.’

(Student AW 2015)