CREATIVE INDUSTRIES, CREATIVE SOLUTIONS: DEVELOPMENTS IN A WORK-INTEGRATED LEARNING PROJECT IN DURBAN

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Introduction

The 'Creative Industries, Creative Solutions' Research Project is a collaboration between the Graphic Design Programme in the Department of Visual Communication Design (DVCD) at the Durban University of Technology (DUT), South Africa; and the 'Continuum' unit of the University of East London (UEL), United Kingdom, which focuses on access and widening participation in tertiary education. The British Council has funded the project through their Educational Partnerships in Africa (EPA) programme. The Project aims to set up a working graphic design studio within the Graphic Design Programme as a means of widening participation and developing work-integrated learning (WIL) elements in the courses offered by DVCD. In this studio, students will experience the commercial process from briefing to production, including financial processes, in a protected and mentored environment.

This article compares the South African and British contexts of the Project, briefly mentioning relevant similarities and differences between the partner institutions, the cities where they are situated, the creative industries in these cities, and aspects of WIL provision and requirements. The article then reports on progress made to date, along with indications of changes that have become necessary because of new data. In particular, reference is made to the business plan written for the Project, which discusses feedback from students, staff, and industry liaison; financial management; premises and equipment; and staffing and managing the Project. It further discusses issues of clients and types of work to be sought.

The Project is intended as a response to the requirement that WIL be included in all courses taught at the DUT, and as an attempt at widening participation in the DVCD, in the sense of successfully widening the range of backgrounds from which students are drawn. WIL as a course component has had a confusing past for many in tertiary education, as the distinctions between WIL, experiential learning, co-operative education, in-service training (or learning), work-based learning, and so on, have not always been clearly defined or distinguished. One current definition, from the Council for Higher Education's (CHE 2008:43) Programme Evaluation Criteria, is:

> A component of a learning programme that focuses on the application of theory in an authentic, work-based context. It addresses specific competences identified for the acquisition

of a qualification, which relate to the development of skills that will make the learner employable and will assist in developing his/her personal skills. Employer and professional bodies are involved in the assessment of experiential learning, together with academic staff.

Enhancing employability is clearly at the heart of this definition, as by extension is entrepreneurialism, which could be viewed as a form of 'self-employability'.

Although the area may have been inspired by such pre-industrial practices as apprenticeships, the current theoretical basis in use at the DUT still primarily derives from the work of David Kolb (1984), whose model of the learning process 'explores the cyclical process of learning from Experience through Reflection and Conceptualising to Action and on to further Experience' (Pickles & Greenway 2007:1). His model, referred to as experiential learning, was not specifically intended to encourage learning in an employment setting, but was rather an exploration of the way people learn by doing, in any setting. Kolb's work has been criticised, amongst other reasons, for over-simplifying a complex process, and for ignoring aspects of the process that did not fit into the phases of his model or their sequence (Pickles & Greenway 2007:3-11)

Nevertheless, the tertiary education sector in South Africa has taken up the benefits of learning through practice. In particular, it has become a distinguishing characteristic of the University of Technology (UoT) subsector. In their previous guise as technikons, UoTs were comparable to the old British Polytechnics. As an ex-Polytechnic, UEL is thus a natural partner for DUT in this project.

Top: A wide-angle view of the studio.

Middle: A view of the studio, showing the use of students' work in relief cutouts.

Bottom: Another view of students identity work as cutouts.

Context

International

The creative and cultural industries, of which the profession of graphic design is a part, may not have been perceived as economically significant in the past. Yet they are one of six 'flagship' economic sectors earmarked by the government of Taiwan as most promising for investment and development, along with 'bio-tech, health care, high-end agriculture, tourism, [and] green energy' (Schuman 2009:2). The Taiwan government expects these sectors to be the most significant in the world within the next decade, yet there is little investment or development in the creative and cultural industries from the South African government (with the possible exception of the film industry). Similarly, according to Tony Hudson (2009) and John Storan (2009), both of UEL, the creative industries sector is now one of the largest generators of wealth in the London area, if not the largest. So far, interestingly, it has not been possible to ascertain the value of the sector in KwaZulu-Natal (KZN). The DVCD has a list of industry contacts running to nearly 150 entries, but this does not indicate how many people are employed. Nor is it known how complete this list is. Likewise, although it is possible to find out companies' adspend, the total value of above- and below-the-line design and all the other services that a graphic designer may provide, has not been possible to find. This suggests that the context of the sector is poorly known in KZN.

The partner institutions

The partner institutions embody significant similarities and differences. The DUT draws its students mostly from the province of KwaZulu-Natal, on the Eastern seaboard of South Africa, and primarily from within 50km of Durban itself. Within this area, students are drawn from a very wide range of economic backgrounds: some have come from severely disadvantaged backgrounds, whereas a fortunate few may arrive at college in their own new cars.

In the course of an initial visit to UEL, Professor John Storan and Tony Hudson, co-manager for the project, provided a great deal of background information on their institution and its context (Hudson 2009; Storan 2009). UEL serves a wide area of the East End of London, traditionally an impoverished area with a large immigrant population, poorly served by secondary and tertiary education; to a lesser extent, it serves the broader Thames Gateway or estuary region. Most students there leave school without the necessary qualifications and skills for tertiary education. As a result, UEL faces similar challenges to a South African UoT in terms of underprepared students and students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds.

There are, however, significant differences between the institutions. Students at UEL come from 120 countries including the UK, bringing a wide variety of language/cultural backgrounds. Over 70 percent of UEL students are 21 or over when they enter the university, according to Hudson (2009) and Storan (2009). This both necessitates and is a result of extensive outreach work, for which UEL employs over 30 outreach specialists. In the DVCD, the proportion of mature students is much lower: the majority enter the Department straight from school, according to the applicants' responses on their entrance forms.

Because of the higher average student age, and the resulting domestic and other non-academic pressures their students face, UEL employs a number of course structures and models, including numerous part-time and on-line offerings. At present, the DVCD offers only full-time courses at the National Diploma level, although part-time study is available at BTech and MTech levels. There are no on-line or

modularised offerings. UEL further provides a fast-track access course to prepare students for tertiary education and Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) processes, although they acknowledge difficulties with this (Hudson 2009; Storan 2009). DVCD is a participant in a roughly parallel Faculty Extended Curriculum Programme (ECP).

UEL lays great emphasis on student preparation and retention, and considerable research into both dropout rates and graduate destinations has been conducted. All UEL courses must include an 'employability strand', although this may be implicit. Late-registering students have been identified as being particularly vulnerable, and inventive interventions have been developed to assist them by, for example, using facebook, YouTube and SMS forms (Hudson 2009; Storan 2009). Dropout rates and 'throughput' are also of great concern at DUT, but less progress has been made in researching causes and specific forms of vulnerability.

Courses at UEL are funded per student module completed (Hudson 2009; Storan 2009), rather than per entire qualification completed, as in South Africa. This arrangement allows for much greater flexibility than is possible at DUT, but does require the more disjointed modular structure.

Education issues in South Africa and Kwazulu-Natal

Education in South Africa, and specifically in KwaZulu-Natal, struggles at all levels with a number of serious issues that impact quite severely on access and widening participation. Health problems for school students include the HIV/AIDS pandemic, which, along with various other causes, has resulted in huge numbers of orphans. Health, finance and other reasons have resulted in over 400,000 South African school age children either dropping out of school prematurely or never attending it in the first place (Govender 2009:4). The rate of teenage pregnancy between 1991 and 2003 for KZN varied between 8.9 percent and 13.3 percent, while South Africa's rate as a whole varied between 10.4 and 16.4 percent (South African Department of Health 2002).

The majority of students leave school in South Africa without the academic qualifications necessary to continue to tertiary education (see, for example, Bloch 2009), so the pool of potential students who qualify 'normally' for admission to the course is limited. 'The matric pass rate in KwaZulu-Natal decreased to 57.8 percent in 2008 compared to the 63.8 percent pass rate' in 2007 (SAPA 2008). In 2004 and 2005, only about 25 percent of school leavers in South Africa achieved the level required for university entrance (South African Yearbook 2007, quoted by WikiEducator 2009). Although the requirements for UoT diploma entrance are slightly more relaxed, these figures give an idea of the scale of the problem. Again, these figures only indicate the numbers who qualify for tertiary education: they do not mention those who cannot afford it. Therefore, the progression rate from secondary to tertiary education must be even lower. Issues of access, continuing education, or widening participation are therefore huge in South Africa, but resources are not. Tertiary institutions in particular, such as the DUT, are largely unable to help those who do not reach the required standards: the institutional rules forbid their recruitment (Durban University of Technology 2009) and the resources are at present inadequate to address the problem. The recently revised new Higher Education Qualifications Framework (South Africa, Department of Education 2007) was intended to delineate a single educational framework for all students and all courses. Despite these claims, it does not, however, make adequate or acceptable provision for the articulation of access or foundation courses, or even for the courses run by Further Education and Training (FET) colleges,

with formal higher education degree or diploma courses. Those who have not achieved the required minimum matriculation grades seem to have been simply condemned to vocational education without a serious pathway for later access to tertiary higher education.

Financial hardship and the need to earn a living further impacts on the ability of the Department to retain many black students in the system after completing the initial National Diploma. The proportion of black students drops by nearly half from third year for the Diploma to the BTech and from between 51-66 percent in the undergraduate years to 28 percent in BTech (Andrew 2009). All these factors thus hinder the potential progress of the DVCD towards a demographically representative student body, faculty, and industry, the ultimate objective of transformation (Pityana 2004).

The Project studio is intended to encourage retention of these students and support the transformation of the DVCD and the graphic design industry. Although the numbers involved initially will be small, the studio will be an example of how students can gain valuable work experience and employment while studying, and increase their chances of employment once the BTech is completed. Similarly, the Project should contribute to changing the current misconceptions of the profession and discipline. Achieving this will both grow the discipline and should help to widen participation, another aim of the Project.

Education for graphic design in Durban

Education in graphic design at the DUT and its predecessors has been experiential for decades, in the sense that students were expected to apply their knowledge in doing design projects as part of course work, but until fairly recently it was not possible to include much experience of genuine industry conditions or constraints. Lecturers emulated industry conditions and followed industry requirements, but the process was incomplete in the absence of the industry itself. Although there were frequent individual projects involving industry, it took the efforts of lecturer Dennis Purvis and other colleagues to cement into place extensive current relationships and routine industry-simulation provision.

The graphic design industry in the Durban area emphatically did not want to engage with the standard work-placement model of WIL for students. At an industry liaison meeting in 2006 (Department of Graphic Design 2006), industry representatives made it clear that they did not feel this model was appropriate for them. The reasons for this were primarily that studios and agencies in the area are typically small, with less than ten members of staff. They cannot generally spare staff to mentor or supervise a non-productive person for more than a couple of hours, unless that person is going to remain with them for some time, and so justify the investment of time and effort.

Partly in response to this obstacle, the Graphic Design Programme has developed an industry-simulation model of WIL for students in the National Diploma. Industry representatives come to the DUT and set, mentor, and critique projects in collaboration with lecturing staff. These projects give students the experience of working with practising creative directors, some of whose timetables and criticisms are much tougher than those of lecturers. This model has been highly successful, both with students and with industry, to the extent that about 80 percent of applied projects in third year are now run this way. Regular partners include Mister Walker Design (formerly Orange Juice Design), Disturbance Design, Amnesty International, Mr Price Stores, *House and Leisure* magazine, the *Sunday Tribune* newspaper,

and for the first time in 2009, the Durban branch of the TBWA advertising agency (Purvis 2009).

Industry simulation is accepted in the new Higher Education Qualifications Framework (HEQF) of the South African Department of Education, but only at the lesser level of certificates and diplomas, up to National Qualifications Framework (NQF) level 6, and in the professional bachelor's degree, at level 8 (Honours level). It is not specifically excluded from other qualifications, but the role and extent of WIL in degree programmes generally seems to remain ill-defined. This is clearly a problem to be faced as the DUT re-curriculates for the new HEQF.

Despite this experiential provision, both employers and graduates have indicated that the lack of production experience and financial knowledge in particular were two of the most important shortcomings of their preparation for work in graphic design. A project that will fill this gap must therefore be beneficial, both in preparing the students and by so doing making them more employable. In addition, it needs to demonstrate to employers that their concerns are taken seriously.

The Project to date

The aims of the Project

The Project aims to close the circle of work experience in graphic design education by extending the student's experience to the full completion of a design project. The Department concerned intends that it should do this by providing experience in the business and production sides of graphic design through the establishment of a working graphic design studio in the programme. Secondarily, the Department

intends that the project should provide third stream income for the DUT.

Specifically, the primary aims of the Project are:
*   To establish a graphic design work integrated learning environment that provides a real time/real life graphic design and advertising business experience for students. This includes student engagement in final production and management processes, thereby increasing employability and facilitating entrepreneurship.
*   To broaden relationships with employers through mentorship and design brief exchanges.

The secondary aims of the Project are:
*   To generate third stream income for the DUT and for students in order to sustain the studio.
*   To offer staff access to information regarding technology issues and business practice (EPA Business Plan 2009:3).
*   To broaden relationships with industry suppliers and associated industries.
*   To serve as a research testing ground and demonstrator for further DUT/WIL projects.

The studio's primary mandate is to facilitate education in graphic design and advertising business practice. This means that students will be required to engage with all spheres of the business of running a graphic design and advertising studio (EPA Business Plan 2009:3).

Brief research amongst British graphic design institutions suggests that this form of work-experience is not common. The difficulties of establishing and maintaining a client base were given to us as important hindrances in the UK in the course of conversations with students and staff at the Design and Art Direction Annual Student Exhibition in London (June 2009).

Many of the courses were located in areas with smaller graphic design sectors than Durban; others had not been able to establish the kinds of links that the DVCD academic staff has with industry or with clients; still others seemed not to have thought of the idea. On the other hand, it does seem to have been common in the United States in the past, if not at present, according to comments by Prof Teal Triggs of the London College of Communication (August 2009).

Markets

Potential markets for the Project have been identified as including:

- DUT faculties, academic and administrative departments requiring informal visual communication and design. This work will be produced in strict adherence to the DUT's Corporate Identity Specifications.
- University of KwaZulu-Natal faculties and departments requiring informal visual communication and design. This work will also be produced in strict adherence to the UKZN's Corporate Identity Specifications.
- Advertising and Design Studios – mentored 'agency brief' projects; online logo, illustration and photography bank.
- NGOs and other non-profit organisations.

Services for these client groups will be structured to circumvent conflicts of interest with industry and the DUT's in-house Design Studio (EPA Business Plan 2009:4). Other tertiary institutions do not have competing units.

Business plan and finances

The overall business plan includes a detailed marketing plan, with SWOT analysis, marketing and advertising objectives, the intended perceptions of the project on the part of the intended market segments, and financial forecasts. In financial terms, it is intended that the project should be self-sustaining, and in fact able to generate a sufficient surplus to enable it both to continue after the initial British Council funding ends, and to contribute to the finances of the Department. To this end, DVCD academic staff has engaged in efforts to raise funds for additional equipment to offer a printing service within the DUT. The intention is for the printing service to cross-finance the studio, if necessary, thereby reducing the pressure on profitability. The financial forecast is optimistic, but at this stage, there are many unknown factors that could alter these projections radically. However, given the number of potential clients in the target market groups, the forecast does not seem unrealistic at this stage.

In researching the feasibility of these plans, Project personnel visited the Departments of Somatology, Chiropractic, and Mechanical Engineering at the DUT, all of which operate comparable WIL units. Project personnel have also had discussions with external industry contacts. These visits were to explore the models used by the other DUT departments for this type of WIL/third stream income project, to explore the need for the services the Project studio intends to offer, and to discuss the risks and possibilities with industry. Feedback has also been sought from students and the other staff in the programme. In general, the response has been very positive, with both industry and the internal DUT Design Unit in particular allaying a number of concerns.

Premises and equipment

DVCD academic staff investigated a number of possible locations for the studio, but all involved either disruption to functioning elements of the Department or the

need for substantial renovations. The option that seemed to require the least of these was our eventual choice, the Attic. This had been set up as a gallery-cum-photographic studio, but was underused. Situating the studio there is a more efficient use of the space; and it is a very interesting room. It should also remain possible to make space available in this room for photographic work, should this be necessary. The main disadvantage of this space is its remoteness from the entrances, but it was felt that with good signage this could be overcome. Work has progressed rapidly in designing and setting up this space, and a very exciting ambience is developing there.

The EPA funding will provide equipment for two designers. The Graphic Design Programme will therefore provide matching equipment until the Project can generate finances of its own. In addition, Project personnel are keen to finance the acquisition of large format printers with which to offer a printing service to staff and students at the DUT, and have engaged with the Technology Transfer and Innovation Directorate and submitted fundraising proposals in this regard.

Staffing and managing the project

The Project is run by a studio manager (SM), who is also lecturer-in-charge for the duration of the EPA funding. He will run the studio on a day-to-day basis, and act as creative director. His deputy will be an assistant studio manager (ASM), an MTech student, whose role will centre on client service and production management, with the potential of taking over as studio manager after the initial funded period if the project is successful. Four students will act as designer/art directors, under the SM and ASM. In addition, it is hoped to include third year students on short-term bases as part of their Professional Design Practice subject.

The two senior staff will be primarily responsible for generating work for the studio, distributing it to the student designers, and managing the workflow and administration. Students will be required to work to cost and deadline, and account for their time and expenses. The studio's bookkeeping will be open to all the participants, in order that students learn its financial workings. Their experience will thus mirror that of working in a professional studio.

The main obstacle encountered has been in the administrative, logistical and financial areas. As this type of project is still unusual in the DUT, many of the systems required are either not in place, still being worked out, or too unfamiliar to be efficient. A number of such issues have taken a great deal of time to resolve, and Project staff would have to advise anyone considering developing a project of this nature to ensure that all these systems are not only in place, but unlikely to be rearranged soon, before going ahead with the project.

Branding the Project Studio

The studio is to be known as 'Workspace', to emphasise its productive nature. The studio manager has run a branding project with current third year students to develop an identity for the studio. As well as providing the students with a useful 'real' branding project, it served as a very successful means of promoting the project with the cohort of students who would provide its critical first group of designers. In addition, the branding project has provided a number of delightful images that are being used in the decoration of the Workspace Studio.

Pilot Project and further preparation

Project personnel intend to run a pilot project for the studio designers before the end of 2009 in order

to iron out any problems before the official launch to industry in January 2010.

Reflections and conclusion

Progress has taken place in the context of visits by project staff to England and by Tony Hudson to Durban. These visits included a presentation at the Forum for Access and Continuing Education (FACE) conference in Stoke on Trent in July 2009, which allowed a great deal of networking with colleagues in similar areas, and where Project personnel presented a preliminary version of this article. All this has been very effective in focusing the project. As a result, a number of initial concerns have diminished: industry representatives, for example, have pointed out that the amount of competition offered by the studio is unlikely to be large enough to cause ill feeling. The area of competition remains one where the Project as a whole must tread carefully. Estimates of potential work from client groups have changed towards internal and NGO groups. The organisation of the studio has changed, and the plans for it are already influencing the nature of the courses in whose context it will act. One factor that has become much clearer is the necessity to curriculate precisely for the WIL component, and to monitor this closely: many courses have run into difficulties by failing to do this. In addition, the potential financial scale of the project has grown, not least because the DVCD would like to involve the Photography Programme in its work in addition to graphic design.

Project personnel are now very optimistic that the studio can be self-sustaining in the long term, beyond the duration of the EPA funding, and that in doing so it can offer both a significant learning experience for students and a highly beneficial service to its clients at the DUT and beyond. In return, the Department is also optimistic that the operation will

Top: The final logo for the Workspace Studio

Middle: Identities designed by students for the studio, including (lower right) the basis of the final design. (Craig Johnson, Bianca Carroll).

Bottom: Another student's visual identity work (Kevin Goss-Ross).

benefit it financially in difficult times and provide a focus for research. It will generate traditional academic outputs in the form of publications, and non-traditional outputs in the form of design artefacts and products, and it can offer topics for those wishing to complete higher qualifications. It has already been an enormous learning curve for staff involved. The potential consequences of a successful project of this nature are very significant. The DVCD Graphic Design Programme looks forward to reporting on its continuing success.

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