Elastic minds? Is the interdisciplinary/multidisciplinary curriculum equipping our students for the future: A case study

ABSTRACT
This article takes a snapshot view of interdisciplinary design curricula through an examination of the multicultural, design postgraduate portfolio in one multidisciplinary university in the United Kingdom. It looks at how we are equipping our future designers/teachers to experience interdisciplinary/multidisciplinary professional practice. Many design courses, especially at postgraduate level, now consist of shared studio-based modules across a range of disciplines. For some, this may have been influenced by small student numbers in individual courses and an expediency of resources, but for many this has been a philosophical move to equip students for the interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary world they are inhabiting. This small case study looks at a cohort of postgraduate students who through their MA course are undertaking and sharing interdisciplinary studio modules, with other design MA students alongside a multidisciplinary PG certificate in Learning & Teaching in Higher Education. The study highlights the synergies and tensions between professional practice and design pedagogy through the experiences of a

KEYWORDS
design education interdisciplinary multidisciplinary group work design practice
student group made up of professional designers who are already working in multidisciplinary professional fields. It records, through questionnaires and interviews, their experience of projects where they are balancing the roles of professional designer/teacher/student. It examines the multidisciplinary nature of the curriculum and asks students to comment on their experience of working in an interdisciplinary environment and to articulate how/whether their experience on the course has influenced their approach to both their pedagogic studies and outside professional practice.

**INTRODUCTION**

Over the last 25 years, under the influence of such milestones as the introduction of the personal computer, the Internet and wireless technology, we have experienced dramatic changes in several mainstays of our existence, especially our rapport with space, time, the physical nature of objects and our own essence as individuals.

(Antonelli 2008: 16)

The designer’s brief has also changed and broadened. There has been and continues to be a growing discussion on how the designer’s role is developing. Tim Brown, when discussing Design Thinking with Iliyas Ong for Taxi (2009), states that now ‘it’s about using the processes that designers have used for many years but applying them to a broader set of challenges both in business and society’.

Lowry, in the foreword to the catalogue of the exhibition ‘Design and the Elastic Mind’, states that:

Design is a bridge between the abstraction of research and the tangible requirements of real life … In this era of fast-paced innovation, designers are becoming more and more integral to the evolution of society, and design has become a paragon for constructive and effective synthesis of thought and action.

(2008: 4–5)

The title of this exhibition gives a very visual and succinct explanation of what today’s designers require.

Elasticity is the ability to negotiate change and innovation without letting them interfere excessively with one’s own rhythms and goals.

(Antonelli 2008: 14)

Paola Antonelli, the curator of the exhibition, also states that in order to be truly effective in today’s society designers should

dabble in economics, anthropology, bioengineering, religion and cognitive sciences, to mention just a few of the subjects they need today in order to be well-rounded agents of change.

(2008: 24)

This is also voiced in the Cox Review on Creativity in Business (2007), which states that:
Design is what links creativity and innovation. It shapes ideas to become practical and attractive propositions for users or customers.

Lowry (2008: 4) states that ‘Design is a bridge between the abstraction of research and the tangible requirements of real life’.

But is the way we educate design students equipping them for this interdisciplinary/multidisciplinary professional environment? Is this critically evaluated and should we expand our traditional design pedagogies? Undergraduate design in the United Kingdom is still predominantly taught as a specialist subject, in contrast to the liberal arts model used in the United States. Should this just be something experienced at postgraduate level?

The American Institute of Graphic Arts (AIGA) carried out a two-year project (2006–2008) gathering the opinions of designers, educators and AIGA members to define what ‘essential competencies’ a designer in 2015 will need. Their findings stated that these designers will need a ‘wide and deep multidisciplinary knowledge and experience to solve problems’. They also stated that there will be a shift from ‘mass communication to more narrow definitions of audience which will require designers to understand both differences and likenesses in audiences’, and therefore that designers will have to reconcile globalization and cultural identity. There is also a move from customers/users to co-creators as a result of the rise in transparency of personal and professional lives (social networking, blogging, gaming etc.)

None of this is new to design. Design has always pioneered interdisciplinary group working through bodies such as the Bauhaus and the Stanford D-School, and collaborating with the design group IDEO, Cambridge Crucible, the RCA innovations lab, and the Media Lab at the University of Art and Design, Helsinki to name just a few. Design Thinking is what companies and organizations such as these are now offering.

However, Tennyson Pinheiro (2010: 1), a Brazilian Design Thinking professor, writes that ‘Design has changed. Designers, not quite’. He states that designers should get out of ‘designland’ and realize that there needs to be equality of all who are involved in the work including marketers and end-users. Marshall, in his article in Form reproduced by Icograda, asks

Is design education training people with job-ready skills, inducting graduates into professional life or educating students to be citizen designers? ([2001] 2009: 2)

The Design Council (2010) uses the term ‘T-shaped’ designers – the vertical upright representing the design training and expertise, usually gained through their design education, and the horizontal being the broader experience gained through links and relationships forged with other disciplines.

But how are we as teachers setting curricula to answer the demands of this changing world?

As well as the growth in interdisciplinary PG courses both here in the United Kingdom and overseas, there has been a move within educational establishments to integrate students (especially at postgraduate level) from different design disciplines into interdisciplinary module groups. Some institutions have merged departments into the same faculty, such as technology, engineering and design. Whether this is based on a philosophical decision or an economic one, it does open up new opportunities for collaboration, but
how appropriate and relevant is this to future professional practice, and how successful are we as educators in integrating these collaborations into the curriculum? Are we really exploring the creative potential that is emerging in the spaces between disciplines?

(Hayward in Blair et al. 2008: 68)

**METHODOLOGY**

Through a small case study, I explored the experiences of inter/multidisciplinary work of a group of postgraduate students through both their professional practice and their academic environment, and asked whether, from both their professional perspective and experience as a student,

- the curriculum utilized their acquired interdisciplinary skills
- the curriculum would equip other students with the skills to work in today’s professional practice
- their interdisciplinary academic experience would change their current professional approach to practice.

This study will contribute and inform further study I will undertake into the understanding of how designers work in a multi/interdisciplinary environment.

I currently run an MA course in Design with Learning and Teaching in HE at my current institution. The case study group consisted of the first cohorts for the course. The students on this course are all professional designers who have been working in the industry for a minimum of two years. The students spend 60 credits of their modules working in interdisciplinary design module groups in studio alongside students from the MAs in Fashion, Product and Space, Graphic Design, Motion Graphics and Design with the Creative Industries. Another 60 credits of their course is made up of the modules for the PG Certificate in Learning and Teaching in HE. Here they are working alongside not only other MA students from MAs in Creative Writing and in Fine Art with Learning and Teaching in HE, but also newly appointed academic staff at the university from all faculties including healthcare, science, business, law, computer technology, humanities, art, design and architecture, music and media. The final 60 credits of their course brings together design pedagogy, theory and practice in an individual major project.

The student sample consists of seven full time and five part time students. The disciplines they come from are as follows:

- two graphic designers (one practicing freelance in the United Kingdom who also teaches an evening class, the other from Pakistan with teaching experience at a design institution)
- two fashion designers – one already employed by the university who is a knitwear designer and an Iranian refugee (educated in the United Kingdom) selling her fashion label in the Arab States
- one photographer with eighteen years experience in the business
- one jewellery designer from Ireland who has been freelancing for six years
one interior designer from Taiwan who has already received a PG Diploma in Design in the United Kingdom

one practicing interior architect with experience teaching as an assistant at a university in Saudi Arabia

one children’s book illustrator who has been self-employed for fifteen years and does some teaching in adult education

one furniture designer with his own furniture design company

one lighting designer from Brazil who has worked in the United Kingdom for six years

one props designer for film and television who runs a freelance practice with her husband

The group is made up of seven female and five male designers. Ages range from 24 to 44 years (60 per cent being over 30).

They are an interdisciplinary cohort – both in the design disciplines and through a shared range of professional experiences from their differing design cultures. They offer an interesting case study group, as currently they are experiencing interdisciplinary studio-based modules alongside other related design courses and a broad multidisciplinary mix of views and approaches through the PG certificate in HE, alongside their professional design practice experience. They are continually being required to shift their role from professional practitioner, to student, to teacher, through their observed teaching sessions and their practice both inside and outside the institution.

I have selected methodologies – an online questionnaire and follow-up semi-structured interviews that would allow me, as the researcher, to have a close dialogue with the participants of this feedback. The individual one-to-one interviews consisted of open-ended questions, developed from the questionnaire and project research themes and borrowing from the HE Academy report ‘Students’ experiences of interdisciplinary Masters’ courses’ (2009: 32) by McEwan et al.

The interviews included questions on:

• understanding of and reflections on ‘interdisciplinarity’
• transitions to interdisciplinarity at postgraduate level
• positives and negatives of taking an interdisciplinary course
• the role of fellow students in interdisciplinary learning
• communication skills
• problem solving
• developing ways of thinking (including thinking holistically)
• the impact of interdisciplinary learning on professional practice.

The epistemological position I have taken is that people’s experience of the world and how this affects their outlook and future approach to situations is factored into their prior experience and interpretation of their environment. This research is informed by an interpretative ontology. There is some reference to discourse analysis, which allowed me to pursue in some depth what was said. An advantage to this approach is the opportunity to analyse the individual’s answers to the questions asked, looking for an
understanding of the language used by the participants in the study. In Wenger’s words,

    we project our meanings into the world and then we perceive them as existing in the world, having a reality of their own.  

    (2004: 58)

The questionnaire consisted of ten questions asking about

- their experiences of interdisciplinary-multidisciplinary collaborations in their professional practice,
- their experiences and observations of inter/multidisciplinary groups on their course modules and
- any impact these experiences had on their pedagogic practice.

Three questions had multiple choice answers and the remaining six questions required written responses from the students. The three questions requiring direct answers were

- Does your professional practice involve working as part of an interdisciplinary group?
- In what proportion of jobs that you have been involved in over the last three years have you worked as part of a multidisciplinary team?

With regard to the shift and rapid changes in technology and the use of social networks, the third question asked students

- How important do you consider face-to-face verbal dialogue and feedback to be in the success of multidisciplinary work?

The questionnaire also asked them

- whether their professional practice involved working alongside other disciplines and if so what these were
- what they had found to be the advantages and disadvantages of working in multidisciplinary project teams
- to comment on their multidisciplinary experience as students on the MA course.

At the time of the case study, the students had all completed the first semester of their course. They were asked to comment on

- the strengths and weaknesses of working in multidisciplinary groups.

In response to the questionnaire, students were then invited to share further thoughts through one-to-one semi-structured interviews.

**DATA ANALYSIS**

Amongst the sample group, 30 per cent currently work in interdisciplinary groups most of the time and the remaining 70 per cent work in interdisciplinary groups some of the time.
In answer to the other two questions requiring a direct answer, Tables 1 and 2 show the spread of experience of interdisciplinary work.

The feedback indicates that interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary work and interaction play a major role in this group of students/designers.

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**Table 1:**

**Table 2:**
Bernadette Blair

professional lives, with 50 per cent of them being involved in interdisciplinary interactions for half or more of their professional practice. This is considered by them to be an important aspect of their practice.

When asked whether their professional practice involved working alongside other disciplines and if so what this entailed, the variety of disciplines was very broad. An example given by one student was that:

As well as working with other design disciplines such as photographers, technical staff, fine artists, graphic designers, furniture and lighting designers, ceramicists, web designers, fashion stylists, art directors, hair and make up artists, picture editors, architects, and art editors, I work with engineers, nurses, lawyers, teachers, performers, writers, marketing departments, suppliers and accountants.

(Student 3)

This gives a small indication of the breadth of communication skills, subject knowledge and understanding skills that are required by today’s designers in order to function within the global creative industries.

ADVANTAGES OF WORKING IN INTERDISCIPLINARY TEAMS IN PROFESSIONAL PRACTICE

The questionnaire and interviews also asked the students to comment on any advantages of working in these interdisciplinary teams. The following responses were given:

It helps you in creativity terms. There may be areas which you never knew existed and working in these teams you learn and see more. It helps you branch out and look at the subject of the brief differently.

(Student 1)

Allows ideas to develop in a less linear way and encourages the unexpected.

(Student 3)

I’ve found that having someone on the project coming in at a different angle often can improve the quality of the outcome. Even a sort of tension between ideas from individuals in different disciplines can push a project into an exciting new territory.

(Student 7)

This echoes the McEwan et al. report, where Ivanitskaya argues that:

Interdisciplinary approaches, while arguably less effective than traditional approaches for building the depth of single-subject knowledge, emphasize higher-order thinking (e.g. analyzing, applying, generalizing) and seek meaningful connections between and among disciplines.


Another advantage given by some interviewees who would normally work in isolation was the opportunity to network and socialize.
skills sharing, hearing other opinions about work and input. More sociable than working alone – building networks.

(Student 6)

For the students who do not often work in professional multidisciplinary teams but more on their own, this final observation was recognized as a potential issue when they had always been responsible for all aspects of a job. However, one student found that in current professional practice he had little control or choice about who he worked with.

there is little choice, that is how work is produced. Work in the real world is seldom by consensus. It is channeled through the hierarchal process. The art director briefs the picture editor. The picture editor picks the photographer, the make up artist the hairdresser etc. Then on the shoot they follow the brief and report to the photographer who reports to the client/art director.

(Student 10)

Thus, in the professional workplace, interdisciplinary collaboration is for all the sample in this study a requirement of many briefs and a regular occurrence.

When asked whether they had found any disadvantages working in interdisciplinary groups, the designers/students frequently cited the lack of understanding and commitment of the other group members. They also stated:

Sometimes it can be time consuming as some people do not pull their weight or forget to send certain documents on time in order for you to complete your research. They forget their input is just as necessary, or the communication isn’t there within the groups.

(Student 1)

Different approaches to time keeping – lack of understanding of how long it takes to make knitwear. Can be difficult to manage teams for meetings.

(Student 2)

I’ve found that a misunderstanding or misconception about a discipline by a practitioner from a different subject area can plague a project and be difficult to overcome. A sort of closed mind about, for example, the role of the designer may mean the designer on the project is only brought in at the end to ‘make it look nice’ rather than being involved from the start.

(Student 7)

As well as professional skills such as understanding of other disciplines and time management, social skills were key:

You need patience and have to accept who the client/art director picks as the team. Knowing you don’t have to do everything, just worry about your own responsibilities.

(Student 10)
Clashes between people at times when collaborating because of different points of view and backgrounds and experience.

(Student 4)

ADVANTAGES OF WORKING IN STUDENT INTERDISCIPLINARY GROUPS

The students were also asked to comment on their multidisciplinary experience on the MA course. At the time of the case study they had completed the first semester of their three-semester course.

It has been interesting. It has given me an opportunity to meet like-minded people but from a different generation which is interesting. They are more concerned with the social networking sites which seem to be the way they communicate with people on their course. Before it used to be telephone call or e-mail. There use to be more physical interaction, which was good. The social networking sites are good but it also has its disadvantages as some people don’t check it every day. It somewhat becomes un-personal just a void to share ideas only with people on your course. Whereas when you are in uni or a studio space it is easier to talk and communicate on a different level to many types of people from different areas – MAs, BAs, part-time students.

(Student 1)

This student is recognizing the communities of practice (Wenger 1998) of social collaboration and face to face when working with others.

I think working in these groups is a necessity in that it helps you communicate, understand people on a different level which can be used in the outside world later. I think it is always good to learn about different people’s disciplines.

(Student 2)

I have learnt from other people and their experiences and have got to know closer what their discipline involves and ways they deal with it in their everyday lives. All this has added to my previous knowledge and experience and has enhanced my time at university.

(Student 4)

Interesting to bring different skill sets together, unexpected results.

(Student 5)

HOLISTIC AND ANALYTICAL SKILLS

When asked further about this last comment, the student was very enthusiastic about the varying ways students, even from other design disciplines, approached a problem and how varied their working methodologies could be. It highlighted how designers can get into a formulaic way of working. A student on an interdisciplinary course interviewed in the Higher Education Academy project on students’ experience of interdisciplinary Masters courses echoed the student observations in my study.
I thought I was fantastically analytical until I started really doing this and then I realized that I was fairly superficial in my analytical approach, there was something more to it and I think the fact that interdisciplinary makes you step outside your own discipline just to see the commonalities amongst disciplines.

(McEwan et al. 2009: 53)

Development of holistic and analytical skills is cited as an advantage of interdisciplinary courses by the McEwan et al. report (2009). They state that Holistic Thinking:

Gives a better all round picture of the central theme of the subject rather than just approaching it from one angle and that it allowed the option for synergies to arise and an opportunity to consider not just one aspect of the problem but many.

(McEwan et al. 2009)

**STRENGTHS/IMPACT OF INTERDISCIPLINARY GROUP WORK**

When asked what they thought were the strengths and problems of working in interdisciplinary groups, the comments very much echoed Brown’s (1988) research on group dynamics, and will be familiar to many design educators, as much revolves around ‘the studio/workshop conversation/interaction as a learning situation’ (Edstrom 2008: 41).

1. ‘building a larger network and relationships – that can be beneficial on a personal and professional level. It’s interesting to mix students from other disciplines/courses and keep up to date to a certain extent with what they are involved in’
2. ‘learning from other disciplines’
3. ‘learning new skills’
4. ‘working in a team’
5. ‘learning more about your own way/method of working and finding ways to improve it’
6. ‘putting various skills and knowledge together to produce something unique’
7. ‘It expanded my knowledge of other students’ working cultures’.
8. ‘Spending time with people who see in 3D is fascinating. Trying new things and experimenting is very rewarding and being told you can fail but you should try is how new boundaries get broken’.

Danvers (2001) talks of elements of chance/serendipity being often essential in the creative process, together with a sense of something unexpected, not predetermined. Combining the elements above allows opportunities for improvisation and new thinking to take place.

**POTENTIAL PROBLEMS OF WORKING IN INTERDISCIPLINARY GROUPS**

The students also commented on potential difficulties which in that opinion could arise during interdisciplinary group work in the educational environment.
The size of the group was seen to be an important factor in ensuring collaboration by all members. The interviewees stated that:

- ‘If group is larger than 4–5 can tend to sub-divide’
- ‘In large groups of people it can be difficult to come to a decision’

If the group is too large, it can be extremely difficult to get consensus of the final solution.

Another interviewee stated that sometimes

- ‘Some students do not pull their weight’ and that
- ‘Some people have different levels of experience in how to behave and work professionally’.

Commitment and experience of those in a group is important. Channeling a variety of different ideas into one solution can also be a challenge in group work.

The dynamics of the groups and the roles that individuals play are also seen as key elements of successful group work.

- ‘Firstly each member of the group has his/her own idea which they want to produce and of course a good project only needs one idea’.

Also positively and negatively

- ‘Divergent cultures, skills and working methods can make the actual process of producing work an amazing journey, but it can also make it very laborious’.

Students enjoyed working alongside design students from other cultures, but sometimes language and terminology could be a hindrance. Although this group of students are fairly independent workers, they also had some critical comments about other students’ behaviour in group modules.

- Little structure to the teams. There is so little structure that the teams seem to just fall apart
- Students don’t turn up (two out of ten at our last meeting)
- Students have little to no understanding of professional practices
- Students do not read briefs
- Students have little experience in timetabling and organizational skills
- Very poor communication skill.

Many of these comments echo research into discourse and feedback. Research has found that in art and design, feedback received by students both formally and informally, with tutors or in dialogue with student peers, can be both instrumental and detrimental in influencing students’ interpretation of the information received (Austerlitz & Avarot 2002; Austerlitz 2007; Cuff 2000; Blair 2006, 2007, 2009; Blythman et al. 2007; Oak 2004; Percy, 2004).

One point raised by many of the students in this study was that working in multidisciplinary groups can achieve something that cannot be done by one person or the same discipline even though it may require effort and not be easy.
It’s difficult. Firstly each member of the group has his/her ideas which they want to produce …

(Student 7)

When the students were asked to comment on their experience of working in groups through their professional practice, some of the same issues arose. They said it could be frustrating, as sometimes they (the other members of the group) do not understand the creative processes and therefore get a bit lost.

Sometimes things have to be explained in great detail for them to understand, for example the time scale – when receiving briefs you are given a quick turn around but if the director cannot supply the images on time or copy it can lead to the deadline being moved. Sometimes they expect magic to happen as they think it is a simple job on the computer. They don’t realize their input is necessary. That is why I think multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary groups are important. It helps give you an understanding on what is happening.

(Student 1)

Tuckerman (1965: 396) illustrates the different stages of how a group develops and works together:

- **Forming** – when the group comes together

- **Storming** – where they discuss ideas and get to know each others’ strengths/weaknesses. This can then lead to the nomination or acceptance of a leader.

- **Norming** – where the group agrees and understands how it will work together, and finally

- **Performing** – where the group functions effectively.

In order for these stages to be successful, tutor intervention and briefing the students as to how to work in groups may be required, which often do not take place. But even difficult experiences of group work were seen by the students to have their worth.

I have some experience working in community arts – teaching workshops to children with other artists. I believe the advantages were skill sharing, hearing other opinions about work, having a variety of input, it is more sociable than working alone. It increases one’s professional networks.

(Student 6)

Another designer/student had worked with a writer to produce a substantial publication. The student said that the strengths of this partnership were that they regularly questioned and assessed each other’s work and that this objective opinion throughout the process was found useful. The student’s partner on the project was able to ‘see opportunities’ and improvements that were difficult for the student to grasp while busy designing and vice versa.

Disadvantages were that their methods of working were strongly allied to their previous experience. Because the project was quite unique, constantly changing and evolving, they both found it difficult to change their methods to meet the challenge of the project and working together.
**CONCLUSIONS**

**Synergies and tensions in multidisciplinary/interdisciplinary work**

Parallels drawn between professional practice and academic study were evident from the data, as their student experience indicates:

Tension only seems to occur when people don’t pull their weight or contribute to things, as it means triple work for other people on the team. I have had to talk to people numerous times to get them to pull their weight, on the MA course and professionally.

(Student 1)

In my course of study there are tensions between some students while working in a group on one project. Mainly people have different opinions and some are not able to fully understand what is the goal or target of the group work. Also with us all being equal and not knowing each other it was difficult to nominate a leader. In another student project working with a different group the development of the project and the final outcome achieved from the group working together was very successful. I believe this was due to skills shared and the personalities of the people involved. All participants worked well as a team with none competing to be better than the other.

(Student 6)

I have found that certain people have an affinity with the way I work and are enjoyable to work with, often sharing ideas which spur each other on. Some people I find less agreeable to work with and would avoid in the future.

(Student 9)

Therefore, the dynamics of the interdisciplinary group are key, as well as what Wenger refers to as reification, which can be created by the group or come from work practices outside the group community (1998: 60).

The interviewees said that when reflecting on both professional and academic interdisciplinary groups,

Interdisciplinary work seems to be similarly challenging in both contexts. Possibly, within a college environment emotions and personalities become more of an issue because of the flatter hierarchy in a college environment.

(Student 6)

So is there anything that could be put in place in academic group work that could help the successful outcome of the group? One student stated that in practice,

Working as a professional, I found the outcome to be successful in projects that I completed. This was due to a very organized and experienced coordinator who could delegate responsibility to the team.

(Student 5)
Also within the context of my professional practice the client is a strong guiding force for better or worse and this can bring clarity of purpose to a project sometimes. Whereas decisions about the direction of a college project are mainly in the hands of the students producing the work so the path can sometimes be quite chaotic and unclear.

(Student 7)

Thus, it would seem that care in putting the groups together and allocating roles to members of the group could potentially lead to a more successful outcome. Students’ learning experiences will also depend on their preferred learning styles and approaches to learning. Awareness of the different learning styles that may be present in a student cohort can assist tutors in managing the learning needs of a student group. Kolb (1984: 84) identified four different categories of learning style based on where students sit on the axes of Concrete/Abstract and Active/Reflective orientations.

Finally, the questionnaire asked the group whether their professional experience of interdisciplinary /multidisciplinary had impacted on their pedagogic approach to their teaching projects and practice on the course so far. ‘Thinking more broadly’ was one comment made.

Yes, it has encouraged me to bring more varied visual material to lectures/seminars. It has been helpful to regard my pedagogic studies and outside professional practice in this way as thinking with a ‘particular hat’ on e.g: printmaker; photographer can prevent ideas from developing and therefore thinking as an ‘image maker becomes more open’.

(Student 3)

Another student, whose professional experience remained fairly solitary, stated that he or she was always open to finding other ways to work professionally. Another student was also considering how he or she could bring successful interdisciplinary work into his or her teaching practice.

I would say that having had the experience of working with multidisciplinary groups during my MA has shown me how I could incorporate group work into my teaching and to consider the skills of other students and how they can share their knowledge and also support each other.

(Student 6)

One student thought that one had not influenced the other as yet, but that from completing the questionnaire, I’m beginning to see a parallel between taking into account the strengths and weaknesses of a partner from a different discipline. In both stances I would assert that some prior thought and possibly tailoring of tasks and methods could make the learning experience and/or interdisciplinary work more effective.

(Student 7)

They unanimously agreed that working across different disciplines prevented one from getting stale and ensured design currency. Finally, one student reflected on the impact of multidisciplinary groups on his pedagogy.
Pedagogically I know to work in groups of less than five.
Have a blog style form of communication that staff could contribute to.
Elect a group chairman or have a staff member or PG peer as a leader to ensure progress and delegate tasks by consent participation or even independent work is better than no work or blaming the system.

(Student 10)

Difficult as they may sometimes be, if we do not continue to develop these cross-disciplinary opportunities for our students, we are not equipping them with the required skills for future professional practice when they leave university.

We also need to ensure that it is not just students but also academics who have regular opportunities and are encouraged to form liaisons and meet with other professionals. The Free Radicals group consists of scientists, designers, artists, architects, historians and philosophers from four universities in the United Kingdom. Commenting on a meeting of the group, Feldman states that:

The discussion was alive with exchanges that could happen only among a collection of diverse minds with wholly different kinds of expertise. It was like witnessing a series of small explosions.

(2009: 29)

The professional bodies referred to in this research have voiced the importance of the changing role of designers in the future. Are we as educators/designers equipping students for these changes? This small case study and the research theory indicate that this is happening, but can be variable. We need to continue to develop these opportunities, and I hope to build on these initial findings through further research.

An interdisciplinary/multidisciplinary curriculum benefits and can equip students for professional practice, and is today a necessary part of a designer’s and a design student’s education. It is also clear that there is not just one model or solution. As Marshall states:

Institutions will have to define and be clear about their place in a larger set of offerings. Increasingly students have to assess which learning mode and institutional approach best suits them and accept that ‘designing’ their own education is in and of itself an important education.

([2001] 2009: 5)

And we as design academics need to ensure that the appropriate mechanisms are in place for this to be realized and allow ‘elastic thinking’ to take place.

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SUGGESTED CITATION


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