

CETLD Evaluation Report: Spotlight Project

Chris Mitchell, Learning and Teaching Coordinator, Royal College of Art

Introduction

This report summarises the outcomes of an evaluation of the Spotlight project. The report draws on feedback received from participating students at both the mid-point and conclusion of the project, as well as tutor feedback and an analysis of quantitative data.

Background

The *Spotlight* project was a year-long initiative led by Chris Mitchell, the Learning and Teaching Coordinator of the Royal College of Art (RCA), that set out to investigate the potential for fostering online collaboration between students of different Departments at the RCA. The project was funded by the Centre for Excellence in Teaching and Learning through Design (CETLD).

The RCA has been experimenting with an open source Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) called Moodle to improve cross-College communication, enable greater access to digital archives and provide aspects of student support. The intention of the Spotlight project was to investigate how it could be used to facilitate academic discussion and collaboration across disciplines. The RCA is a wholly postgraduate university with approximately 750 Masters students, the majority of whom study full time on campus, and around 100 research students enrolled on MPhil/PhD programmes. While there are opportunities for students from different Departments to work together, a recurrent theme in annual student survey responses is that more could be done to facilitate this.

The format of the project was simple. 24 first year students from 10 different Departments were recruited to take part in a series of 6 online, asynchronous tutorials interspersed throughout the academic year. The tutorials were of two different types. *Works in progress tutorials* involved each student digitally presenting their work to peers through Moodle, which was used as the basis for a collaborative group critique. The presentations could be in the form of image, audio or video files prepared in advance. Participating students were given access to a store of high quality digital recording equipment provided by the CETLD in order to do this. *Themed tutorials* explored a particular theme that had relevance to the range of disciplines represented at the RCA. Each started with a set of tasks to complete, either as an individual or as part of a group, and lasted for a week, starting on a Wednesday.

For all but one of the tutorials students were divided into three groups, each facilitated by a single tutor. The tutor's role was to guide and moderate rather than to lead discussion. Two of the tutors – Elisa Canossa and Zoe Whitley – were recruited from the Victoria and Albert Museum, the other was Richard Doust from the RCA.

In preparation for the start of the tutorials, tutors and students were provided with training and handouts on Moodle and the digital equipment provided, as well as meeting face-to-face at a launch event.

The Tutorials

The following is an extract from one of the themed tutorial discussions on the issue of *identity*. It is included as an illustration of the types of debate that occurred during the Spotlight project.

From Richard – Thursday, 26th October 2006, 09:57

I guess I will get the ball rolling on this one. As an artist I guess I can be defined by a certain degree of self-obsession. I make the work that I want to make and do not need to compromise. It is difficult to define an approach to making art...other than to say that for me it comes from a need to make the work and to use my work to explore themes and issues which I am interested in.

From Hannah – Monday, 20th October 2006, 18:11

I have waited a while before replying to this one because I find it a really hard question to answer. I feel like a 'fine artist', but have increasing difficulty in equating this label to a particular set of skills. I have come onto the course here precisely because I wanted to experiment with this 'fine art' thing in other contexts, and being amongst graphic designers and illustrators has thrown up so far very different types of discussion about work than I have typically encountered in fine art crits. Partially the mindset here seems to sway more towards a problem-solving attitude, i.e. finding the best solutions to the task in hand in terms of functionality and aesthetics. This manifests itself most noticeably in a really strong focus on an end product, which to me is an alien concept as my practice seems to come in a continuous stream rather than beginning-to-end stories. Whenever I am required to present, I pick out a cross-section of what I have been most recently working on, rather than drawing things to a conclusion. So I would suggest the main difference I am noticing is in a working rhythm or pattern rather than a skills base (I believe the skills-based approach to defining practice is completely outmoded now). What I am waiting to find out is whether my working rhythm will change through being subjected to strict deadlines or not!

From Georgina – Tuesday, 31st October 2006, 17:26

I see myself as a graphic designer, but I guess because of a huge shift mainly due to technology, it's difficult to define what that actually entails, in a skills sense. Where once a graphic designer was just someone who focuses on layout - a very skills based job - it's now suddenly exploded to include a wide range of skills. These days graphic designers are web or print based, they do film, commercials and even sound. So I guess these no real boundaries on what a graphic designer does, just the overriding point that a graphic designer has to solve a communication problem.

From Kevin - Tuesday, 31st October 2006, 22:14

I am taking a break from model making to reply to the message about how to describe Industrial Design Engineering. Well...the fact that I am still in studio until 11 or 12pm every day is perhaps the first thing I should mention. The project runs to pretty tight deadline and we have crits most weeks. Probably 95% of people on the course have Engineering degrees (this year is the first year that they have allowed non Engineering background people to apply) and the reason is mainly because there are a lot of assumed skills needed to understand the lectures or to meet the challenges they set in terms of CAD modelling and mechanical drawings as well as Artistic and conceptual drawing. The reason that most people are here doing IDE is pretty similar. You start an engineering degree having been told that you are going to learn to solve problems and design things that will improve the world in some way but then after 3-4 years of doing mathematics and applied physics you realise they all lied! So now filled with the knowledge of how stuff works you come to the RCA and learn how to open your mind and apply it all to designing things that will change the planet even in some small way, but for the better. I think that this is the idea, for me anyhow, not just making pretty things... but with a purpose.

From Ben - Tuesday, 31st October 2006, 22:18

I would define myself as a graphic designer too, so I will follow on from what Georgina has said. Where fine art can be said to be introspective, graphic design is about looking out. There has indeed been a massive boom in technology but I would say that the key component to all design work would be visual communication, whether this is communicating an idea, information, a message or a feeling. Graphic design is always viewer-led and as Hannah has already mentioned, it is by and large conducted with a goal in mind. The discipline has, in recent years, transcended a reliance on specific media but I would draw a line firmly with the word 'graphic'. One dictionary definition of this word says: "written, inscribed or drawn". This is hugely important to me as it places our practice primarily in the world of the visual sense, and the word design means "planning, organisation, intention, purpose, adaptation of means to a preconceived end", meaning that our role can often be seen as visual conductors,

organising elements with a view to producing a coherent visual answer to a brief, problem or question. It is easy for graphic design students to get lost in this, but we only have to look back at our heritage in print to more easily define our futures. Of course, there is much more to graphic design than churning out brochures, flyers and websites but without a foundation in some basic tenets we are more in danger than ever of failing to find our place in the world. This is also an exciting time for designers; I have enjoyed working in film, fashion, exhibition design, installation design and many other diverse practices but the common thread to everything has been the task of visually communicating to a specific audience.

From Claudia - Wednesday, 1st November 2006, 21:23

After reading all the replies until now, I can see that as a Product Designer I see myself in the world between Graphic Designers and Industrial Design Engineering. Let's see if I can explain this better. I see Product Designers as "object thinkers", which the main job is to come up with ideas for new objects that can not only serve a function (even if the function is not-to-function) but also have some cleverness to make the consumer think beyond the object. But for me, this needs also the help of "good communication" and "working skills". When I'm working in a new project I have to be conscious enough to pass the message that I want to express through the object, and here communication is the key element and therefore I have to be sensitive to that. On the other hand, I can't just say that the product will work without paying some attention to the way things work in the world around us, and this forces me to come up with new or different approaches to ways that the object can work. Without taking the job of graphic designers or engineers, product designers have to be sensitive to this other two fields in order to come up with successful objects (= objects that can have a life and be consumed).

From Ben - Wednesday, 1st November 2006, 23:05

I found your ideas very interesting; as far as I can tell product design shares many facets with graphic design although certain things such as functionality can be equated with legibility and in a lot of cases the problems are similar but in 3 dimensions instead of 2. Also there is a certainty of physical interaction that is missing from most graphic design. Print is certainly meant to be touched and held, but it does not carry out a function of itself in excess of carrying a message. Sometimes I wish I were a product designer.

From Ramiro - Wednesday, 1st November 2006, 23:56

I've been thinking about Claudia's comment:

"...product designers have to be sensitive to this other two fields in order to come up with successful objects."

I wonder what makes an object successful? Is it when the designer comes out with a truly useful, functional, brilliant designed object for him/her or when other person such as a potential user likes the object and thinks that is really an excellent product I reckon in a world full of objects a new product, created in a place like RCA could have a real function, be useful for something... in a nutshell a 'product that solves a problem'

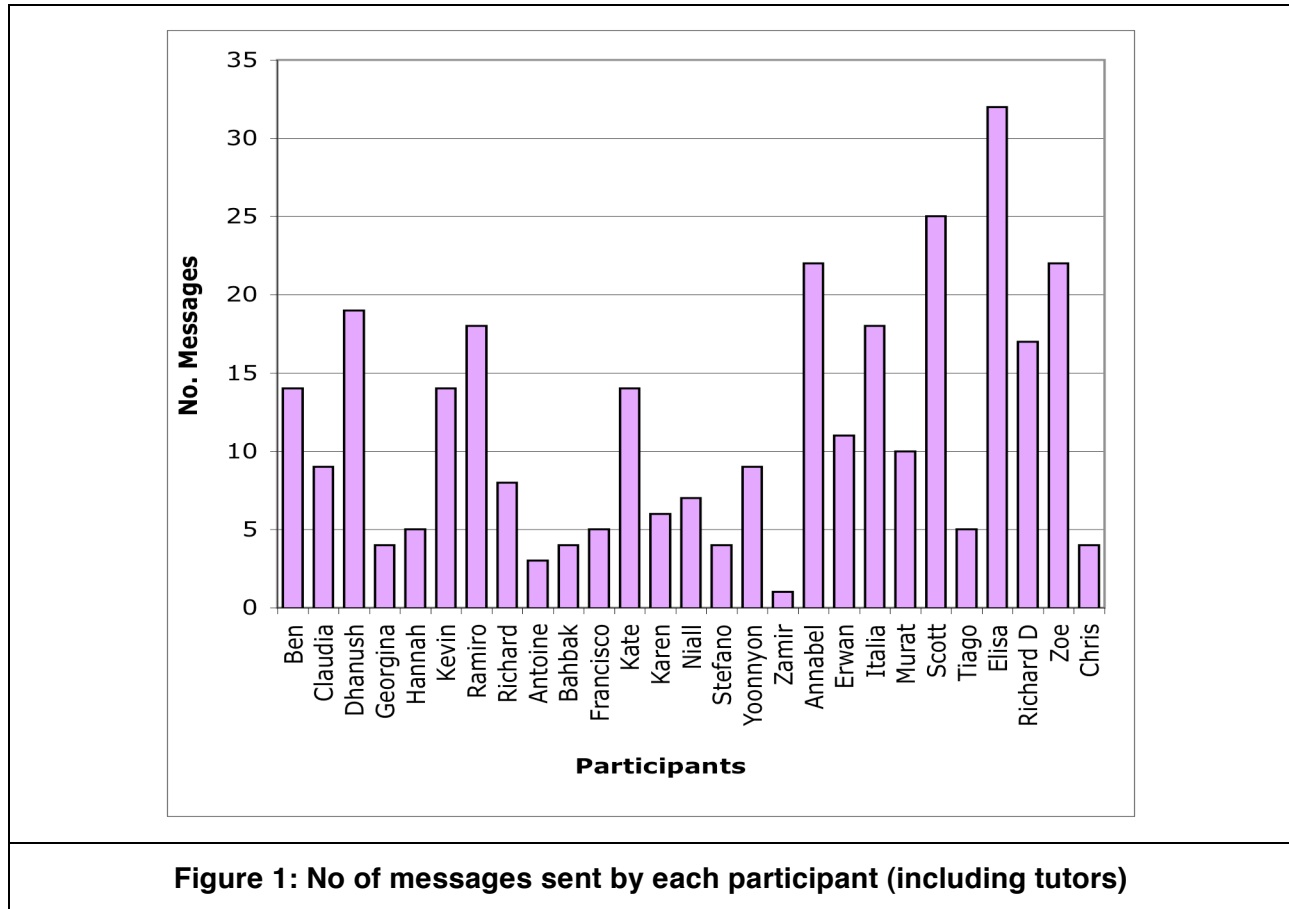
From Dhanush - Thursday, 2nd November 2006, 12:38

Vehicle design shares many similarities with product design. For example, most of my classmates are from a product design/industrial design background. In industry people have been principally concerned with the appearance of the product. The emphasis at the RCA today is however on the broader context of 'Mobility related design', through research on material applications, brand experiences, and the relationships of people with their personal and public mobile spaces. This also means that old conventions and design methods are often challenged by students bring their experiences from varied backgrounds. I see my work at the RCA as being very different from that exists in the contemporary practice. I see it as a birthing ground for the experimental fantastic. Most learning happens from each other.

From Richard - Thursday, 2 November 2006, 15:01

Sorry this comment is out of time (I have been off sick for the past few days). I was interested in bringing up something which was raised in a recent seminar with fine art students, which may help define these shifting boundaries. We discussed whether the practise of making art was a luxury...this is coming from a view as western artists, but it struck me as relevant to this discussion. Does the fact that my work performs no practical use define me as different from the designers in the group...or is this too simplistic?

Engagement



The feedback indicates that an individual's motivation to participate was conditional on that of their peers. If a student perceived that others valued the tutorials and were contributing to it regularly they were encouraged to do the same:

"The more engaged the students were, the more rewarding the group dialogue." (Spotlight Tutor)

This example of 'positive feedback' helped to generate a high quality and quantity of debate in some tutorials, as shown in the earlier extract. Conversely it appeared to hinder engagement when discussions were slow to develop. This effect was exacerbated by the asynchronous nature of the tutorials, which meant that a student might not receive a response to a comment for days:

"On several occasions my comments and even my work-in-progress have been ignored by the entire group, this would not happen in a physical tutorial" (Spotlight Student)

"I wished more people responded and got involved. By the end it felt like it was difficult to sustain an interest as no one else did." (Spotlight Student)

Students also reported a degree of self-consciousness over the archiving of the tutorials. The perceived permanence of their contribution prompted several to adopt a cautious approach, which seemed to stifle the dynamism of some debates:

"I find using [the VLE] acts as a barrier. I find it restricts what I want to say as once I have posted the comment it is on display and so it makes you feel self-conscious about your opinion in a way a vocal tutorial would not" (spotlight Student)

"I would like to be a bit more spontaneous and more at ease when answering these questions" (Spotlight Student)

"My feelings were that [students] found it difficult to 'let go' of their contributions – especially their visual material, although those pieces of work actually posted were very interesting." (Spotlight Tutor)

	No. Messages	Av. Word Count
Total	235	190
Males	148 (63%)	177
Females	87 (37%)	167
Top 5	102 (43%)	165
Bottom 5	16 (7%)	210

Table 1: Quantitative Spotlight Evaluative Data

In this context it is interesting to note that the top 5 contributors used on average 45 fewer words per message than the bottom 5 contributors, perhaps indicating that the students who able to engage most successfully were those who posted shorter, more informal messages.

One of the most consistently reported causes of disengagement was time:

"Frequency and the closeness of the tasks seemed to overcome many, if they were late submitting, or missed a task it seemed difficult for them to catch up" (Spotlight Tutor)

"Its easy to drift away from Spotlight when the work at the department seems to build up" (Spotlight Student)

"With all the work for my normal courses it's hard to make the time for it" (Spotlight Student)

An analysis of the number of messages posted to each tutorial indicated that the number of messages declined in all three groups beyond the mid point of the academic year, which corresponds to a probable increase in the course demands of the students involved.

Design

The Academic Environment

The programme of tutorials was highly structured, with each tutorial starting with a proscribed set of aims and activities and lasting for a fixed duration. A number of student comments indicated a preference for a more fluid system:

"I felt that I didn't have the time to do a great deal of things especially for the group. It would have opened up a better quality discussion if we had just been pinning up everything we did randomly on the notice board as and when." (Spotlight Student)

"A constant noticeboard type of documentation of what ever we happened to be working on...would have encouraged me to check back more often or scan and upload a random sketch for example" (Spotlight Student)

Other students commented that they wanted the discussion topics to be more tightly defined:

I think that it could have been more useful if the topics were far more specific, as talking about my work in general with other students online was nowhere near as useful as the dialogue that we engage with every day in the studio/" (Spotlight Student)

Some students expressed a preference for greater student involvement in the design of the tutorials:

"Sometimes the subjects of the forum seemed to me too much from the top. Too much as in a critic/curator point of view and far away from language, themes, enthusiasms and inspirations of artists and designers" (Spotlight Student)

"Students who really want to be involved should take more responsibility – and it should be THEIR thing, rather than the college's thing."(Spotlight Student)

The virtual environment

Students reported difficulties in using the VLE:

"I found it absolutely counterintuitive every time I went to the site" (Spotlight Student)

"There's something about the layout I don't like. It just doesn't look enticing and clear...this one, I'm afraid, feels very institutional" (Spotlight Student)

"All of the students expressed frustration about uploading their work and using the equipment" (Spotlight Tutor)

Throughout the project there were relatively few technical glitches with the operation of the VLE. The frustrations expressed tended to focus on its usability and visual appeal. Although students were provided with some instruction and documentation on how to use both the VLE and the equipment, it was expected that there would be initial difficulties. Follow up sessions were organised for students who requested them.

The role of the Tutor

The brief of the three tutors was to guide and moderate discussion in their groups, encouraging contributions while ensuring that the tone of discussions was respectful. A couple of students commented that they would have preferred their tutor to be more vigorous in their contributions:

"[It] could be interesting to have a tutor who interferes, someone that is able to put other points of view, new information, to make the discussion always alive." (Spotlight student)

This comment probably reflects the role that academic tutors have in academic courses at the RCA, which the Spotlight course was not designed to replicate. The Spotlight tutorials were intended to be student-led and therefore the role of the tutor was deliberately facilitative.

Outcomes

Despite the frustrations outlined above, those students who persisted with the tutorials reported positive changes in how they reflect on their work:

"Spotlight has made me more critical of my work and made me question my place and role in my chosen practice" (Spotlight Student)

"By articulating my ideas, and getting some feedback on them, I have felt quite inspired." (Spotlight Student)

"I have REALLY appreciated the access to the equipment and there is no doubt that it has affected the work that I have been doing over the year as I have [been] making videos to explain my projects in crits" (Spotlight Student)

One student who started the academic year on a placement expressed how it had helped her to feel part of the College community:

"When I was in Japan, it felt like I was in contact with the College world and part of a wider debate" (Spotlight student)

Although students seemed to appreciate the opportunity for inter-disciplinary debate, some felt that the format did not enable them fully to engage with the work presented to them:

"You don't always get a chance to understand the thought process or research objectives behind the finished pieces or work at interim shows." (Spotlight Student)

"I find it difficult to react to work that I haven't been able to completely understand or appreciate" (Spotlight Student)

The quality of debate throughout the project was excellent and students seemed to recognise and value the contribution of the peers:

"The feedback seems honest, frank and direct" (Spotlight Student)

The tutors did an excellent job in keeping to their brief and restricting their role to a guide rather than a lead in discussions. More could perhaps have been done to ensure that the students were aware of how their Spotlight tutor's role differed from that of their academic tutor. Similarly a greater input of the students in defining the means and methods of the tutorials would have been ideal, but there was little time in the students' induction to the College and the opportunities to bring the students together were severely restricted.

Where the project failed was in the sustaining a level of debate towards the end of the academic year, when competing demands were diverting their energies and interests.

Conclusions

The experience of designing, running and evaluating the Spotlight project has been an instructive one, and elements of the course are likely to be repeated in a revised format in the forthcoming academic year.

The tutorials did provide an opportunity for students to showcase their work and to share ideas and experiences across discipline boundaries. Those students who engaged with the course did

seem to recognise its potential. However, there were several areas where lessons need to be learned.

The project was set up to run alongside the individual Departmental programmes of study, and students were participating on a voluntary basis. The format for the tutorials chosen did not seem to complement this. As one student commented

"I think that the structure of the date and deadline can make the participation seem more like an obligation...than a pleasure" (Spotlight student)

The structure would perhaps have been appropriate were the tutorials integrated with the students' normal academic practice, with all of the implications for assessment, but on a voluntary basis the students resented the degree of perceived compliance necessary, and ultimately disengaged in the later tutorials. In a model where this activity is complementary, rather than as a substitute for other activities, a more informal approach might be preferable, in which students are provided with a space to showcase work and share practice without the pressures of dictated process. Social networking sites such as Facebook demonstrate people's willingness to maintain ongoing journals of activity without external coercion or incitement.

The RCA will continue to experiment with aspects of online discussion and collaboration, but not in the way that requires the same degree of long-term commitment from students. It is likely that it will do in a series of one-off events or tied to a particular forum, such as the Inter-disciplinary Critical Fora that run in the evening throughout the first two terms of the academic year.