CETLD Final Report

The Domestic Interiors Database: a resource for teaching and learning through Design

Royal College of Art

Overview

Our project's origins lie in the AHRC Centre for the Study of the Domestic Interior which was formed in September 2001 and closed in October 2006. During its five years funding the Centre developed a full programme of conferences, symposia and publications on the theme of the history of the domestic interior from 1400 to the present day in Europe and North America. As one of its major outcomes, in 2006 the Centre published an online public Database of written and visual sources for the interpretation of changes in the representation of domestic interiors, the Domestic Interiors Database (DIDB).

The Database reflects the Centre's inter-disciplinary nature and incorporated new research in the fields of Anthropology, Art History, Design History, History, Interior Design, Literature and Musicology. The DIDB is an extremely rich resource that draws on major national and international collections and archives comprising a collection of 3,300 entries which brings together sources for understanding visual and textual representations of the domestic interior in Europe and North America from 1400 to the present. Our CETLD project was designed to provide us with the opportunity to discover what would be needed to enhance the Database for the long term; our primary aim being to extend its accessibility, use and audiences, and to enhance their understanding of it as a resource. Evaluation of student and educator response to the DIDB has thus formed the core of our work with CETLD.

Part I   The CETLD – DIDB project

Aims and objectives

Since the purpose of our project has been to investigate, analyse and interpret DIDB's wider applications for research and learning and teaching in design history and practice, the project has focused upon identifying the necessary developmental tools, methods and approaches for the use of Database in this and related fields. In particular, we have sought to evaluate the criteria that will enable us to improve the usability of the Database as a digital learning resource for the future.

The method by which we organised the collection of material for evaluation was through developing a programme of research based around workshops conducted with different user groups into the interpretation and use of the DIDB. These offered to explore the Database as a rich and stimulating learning environment in a number of educational contexts. Specifically, the project has developed an evaluative study of the DIDB for research and learning for undergraduate and postgraduate studies in art and design, fine art, museum studies and design history. According to the terms agreed with CETLD upon confirmation of our award, we are happy to provide this final report. The means by which the project was conducted are given in Part I and an evaluation of our findings form Part II.

Targets

The careful planning that surrounded the origination of our project and of its development, scope and format, plus the close scrutiny that our original proposal received from the CETLD review panel meant that it was not necessary to revise any of our original aims and objectives and that the project plan which received the award was been adhered to. This is not to say however that everything that we envisaged prior to commencing the project, particularly, regards likely workshop collaborators, has fallen into place in the way we had initially anticipated. Aware, of course, of the Design remit of our CETL we were keen to centre our project around working with

practitioners and historians of design and to focus on constituent groups within this catchment area as providing the basis for our evaluation of the DIDB.

During the project numerous approaches to under- and post-graduate practice–based courses across the South East and further afield were made. In most cases letters and emails were ignored, an indication no-doubt, of workload and of the pressure that course-leaders are under to meet existing deadlines. Very few institutions were interested in contemplating extra-curricular activity. In the light of this we made a virtue of necessity, branching away from working with design courses to include our partners at the Victoria and Albert Museum, (V&A) as design educators in our workshops.

Although the most time-consuming aspect of the project has been researching opportunities for collaboration and making approaches to prospective partners, we set ourselves the realistic goal of working with a maximum of two partners per academic term during our funding period (with a total of 5 workshops to be run during the project). On this basis we kept to schedule. The autumn term of 2007 was designated as a setting-up period during which we would familiarise ourselves with teaching and learning practice, philosophy and procedures. In spring 2008 we ran our first workshop at the Royal College of Art (RCA) followed in the summer term by a second workshop run with the National Film and Television School, Beaconsfield. Our third workshop was held over the summer vacation with non-academic partners at the V&A and RIBA and our fourth at the CETLD Design Scholarship Seminar at the University of Brighton. Despite the difficulties in securing workshop partners we are confident that we have met our aim to test the DIDB with different user-groups taken from different catchments of practitioners and academics, undergraduates and post-graduates.

Project Management

Stakeholders
With regard to our engagement with stakeholders, we have had a great deal of contact with Chris Mitchell, Teaching and Learning co-ordinator, RCA. Working with

Chris, we decided upon project evaluation criteria with which we structured both workshop sessions and written and oral questionnaires.

We have also had contact with CETLD partners at the Victoria and Albert Museum (V&A); with Rebecca Reynolds, HE Officer, in particular and also with Beth Cook, Research Fellow. Elsewhere at the V&A we have worked with the Head and Deputy Head of the Research Department, Professor Christopher Breward and Liz Miller and also with Morna Hinton, Head of Learning, V&A and a number of her colleagues in Learning and Interpretation (L & I). The workshop that we conducted with L & I, was also attended by Dr Paul Snell, RIBA Education. Anne Asha, CETLD Project Manager, Dr. Jos Boys, CETLD Academic Developer, and Chris Peach, CETLD IT have also provided invaluable consultation and advice at various points through the current reporting period as has David Gosling, CETLD Higher Education Research Consultant and Alan Davies – title please suply

Research Ethics and Intellectual Property Rights
With this team behind us, in addition to the wider University of Brighton, we were alert to the potential pitfalls we might encounter in relation to issues around research ethics and also the need to clear Intellectual Property Rights. Regards risk analysis, a minor issue around research ethics was in fact raised by the University of Brighton. This was related to the presence of Professor Jeremy Aynsley at the workshop run with the RCA History of Design students. He needed to attend as the sessions derived from one of his taught courses. However Professor Aynsley absented himself from the confidential evaluation discussion. For similar reasons we decided upon a format for our workshop with Professor Aynsley's V&A colleagues which kept his involvement to a minimum. In this respect we are confident that the methodology of these two workshops was not jeopardised. We have produced consent forms stating that whilst all evaluation material (both written and recorded) remains anonymous, we would like to invite all workshop participants to provide signed consent for the inclusion of this evidence in our final report. We have not been in a situation where clearing and third-party Intellectual Property Rights has been necessary, risk analysis with regard to IPR issues has not been an issue therefore.

Project staffing

At the close of the project two of the original project advisors are no longer employed at the RCA although both continue to act as consultants to the project. We have not experienced any difficulties arising from this change in staffing. The day-to-day running of the project was intended to be co-ordinated by myself as CETLD, employed on a 1.5 day a week basis and this arrangement has continued as laid out in the project plan.

Part II

Evaluation, outcomes and dissemination

As above, the outcomes of our project have resulted from our main objective to establish partnerships with other academic institutions and to run workshops with them: achieving these aims was pivotal to our continuing progress and to the success of the project. The workshops we conducted have themselves produced our key deliverables. Written responses arising from, and collated following each session, alongside transcriptions of focus-group recordings produced at each workshop have formed the core evaluation material written up here and this document, our final report, represents one key deliverable. In addition a set of guidelines as to website construction will be offered as another action point for our dissemination plan.

Our project process has included the wider dissemination and use of the DIDB amongst a number of new user-groups. Also important has been the successful establishment of contacts with the institutions and departments of the workshop partners identified: National Film and Television School, Beaconsfield, Leicester Museum Studies programme, Fine Art department, Brighton University and Learning and Interpretation at the V&A.

Evaluation findings confirm our initial view that the DIDB offers a vital and important resource but that users experience frustration with the usability of the site: 'the thing is, because the content's really good, it's just the navigation'. (FG1 15.1.08[1])   It has

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[1] Remarks drawn from individual workshops are cited according to subject-specific session as Focus Groups and the date on which they were held is given. Focus Group 1 – History or Design, Focus Group 2 – Production Designers, National Film and Television School, Focus

also become clear that the majority of our respondents, students, who, having grown up with the internet, expect an 'up-to-the-minute' facility and see the DIDB as the equivalent of an on-line library catalogue which might become more 'state of the art' with greater technological input: 'It doesn't look very modern I guess. It's a bit dull' (FG2 23.5.08). The following responses to the DIDB as a database and as a website provide a characteristic sample of comments from each evaluation group.

What is right

> Well [withheld] and I sort of felt that it was really great because it came up with a lot of resources you wouldn't find in other databases…
>
> Particularly films and things, we were quite surprised by that, that was really useful.
>
> I really liked it, I think it's an amazing resource and I just wish I'd known about it when I wrote my previous essay about domesticity. I'm really impressed with it. I think the images are really good quality, they could be bigger, some of them, but the ones I looked at had just an interesting selection of things really. It was well curated, well put together.
>
> Yeah, the content's very broad, very useful.
>
> (FG1 15.1.08)

> I found the commentary very useful because I found myself looking at images and then looking at the commentary, wanting to see more, actually clicking on details very, very useful and very interesting to read as well. Definitely.
>
> (FG2 23.05.08)

> The images are really useful.
>
> (FG3 18.9.08)

Group 3 – Teaching and Learning Department, Victoria and Albert Museum, Focus Group 4 – Design Scholarship Seminar, CETLD, University of Brighton. Thus FG1 15.1.08 refers to the workshop conducted with Design Historians on 15 January 2008.

What is wrong and what is wanted

It's just the navigation rather than the content or anything like that.

Maybe the title page could include some form of basic instruction as well as information about what the database actually is.

The title page, there's too much writing on the title page. I think it would be better to just have really kind of quick things about what it's about, bigger pictures and then maybe on the next page have all the kind of detail about what the thing is and that kind of thing.

Yeah, I put something similar. It's just like this wall of text and it seemed a little bit old to me as well because when you click on the pictures there are no links, so you kind of expect to go off to a bigger image… Yeah, I thought that was really good because it encourages like inter-disciplinary kind of study and I think that that's really important, especially for either art people or design historians because often that kind of thing gets left out.

It would be quite useful if you could click on the image and make it blow up you know, enlarge. For example with types of things like wallpaper, you couldn't really see the wallpaper.

No we looked at that as well….

And the magazines as well, sometimes you get this fantastic magazine from 1971 or something and you're looking at the pictures and you want to read the writing, the text as well but you can't because it's so small. If you could click on it…

Also I think from a design perspective, I think it's quite messy, the site. There are different type styles and type sizes and there's not enough distinction, it's not clearly formatted and arranged.

(FG1 15.1.08)

The categories within it… [advanced search] you chose something and then it was about children, the elderly and adult and then you chose something else and there's another pile of things to choose from. I ended up thinking I was never going to find something. It wasn't logical to me at all on the advanced search.

And also some websites have like a question mark after the link so that you don't have to press the link you can press the question mark and it just pops up the little box giving you and instruction

saying what that is and what it does before you press and then have to go back. That would just be a really simple and quick way of finding out what it does and what it means.

(FG2 23.5.08)

I found it quite difficult and I completely missed the simple search button.

It took me a while going, if there's an advanced search there must be a basic search and I kept on looking and then I went, oh of course that's where it is.

It's separating the two search buttons. I think you should put them next to each other…

…and probably at the left is better.

I'd re-address the home page because I think what it is … it explains what was done as a project, but in a way could be like, wiping the slate clean and going, 'if this is where a model is, use this and come back to search it, because that's your way in; and you could say why do they search in the first place; and what are you offering?' And then, I think also because it's in block text you have to read quite a lot…

It's about managing expectations at the outset. If it's clear what it is then you don't go expecting more and I came away thinking I don't even know if I've explored the potential of this because I don't know what the range is and what the scope is.

(FG3 18.1.08)

Evaluation methodology

Key to the evaluation process with which we have analysed respondent reactions has been the vital shift in our understanding of the DIDB as a learning tool that has arisen as a result of conducting workshops. The very process of conducting a project that required us to think in terms of the previously unfamiliar territory of Teaching and Learning has been extremely valuable.

In personal terms, the structure of this new knowledge and its impact for me - as the team member in charge of the day-to-day running of the project- can best be described by borrowing the discipline's 'core concept' and 'threshold concept' model, outlined below. These terms not only describe my own learning process in coming to, undertaking, concluding and disseminating this project, but also provide the 'system' with which evaluation of our findings has been conducted. It is significant to

the evaluation methods employed here and to my enhanced understanding of the Database as a learning and teaching tool, that in the run-up to embarking on our project I felt uncertain and ill-at-ease with Teaching and Learning as a discipline. The intellectual energy required to teach or to learn *within my own discipline* was one thing; both are exercises which I find stimulating and enjoy. But the need to think through teaching and learning as *processes* which were mapped and understood by intellectual and academic practices with which I was not familiar required a very different level of will and energy.

Given my mindset at the start of the project it is important to mention the critically valuable turning points which have occurred through the progression of the 18 month period of engagement with CETLD. The wider CETLD infrastructure and the learning community that this has provided have been at least as significant in overcoming my barriers to the subject as the process of running our individual project. Over the course of this time incidents in seminars, meetings or conversations have progressed my own learning. The first such occasion occurred in a seminar run by Alan Davies tbc please held at Brighton before our project began and at which a chart that he talked through suddenly crystallised my understanding of what was meant –in actual, rather than theoretical terms- by different patterns of student learning. Subsequent CELTD meetings, and conversations with Anne Asha in particular, have triggered recognition and a shift in my ability – and also willingness- to think along new lines. It is in the light of this personal education, that ideas about core and threshold concepts have become particularly useful evaluation tools.

Core concepts, threshold concepts

Core concepts might be described as the fundamentals of any given discipline. In my own subject, design history, they include ideas about the 'gendered' object for example, that is, the view that some objects predominantly display characteristics that are traditionally associated with either the masculine or the feminine. The notion that physical spaces might be belong to or exist within the 'public' or the 'private' domain is another example of one of design history's key, or core concepts. Since ideas such as these are critical to, and inform design historical thinking, core

concepts were woven into the structure of the DIDB via contributors' commentaries and also through the search options structure. Core concepts can also be viewed as being the building-blocks which form the foundations on which subsequent learning is built. An understanding of these is important to the progression of knowledge but is not necessarily transformative in terms of the way in which the student apprehends and views their discipline.

Threshold concepts on the other hand:

> …can be considered as akin to a portal, opening up a new and previously inaccessible way of thinking about something. It represents a transformed way of understanding, or interpreting, or viewing something without which the learner cannot progress. As a consequence of comprehending a threshold concept there may thus be a transformed internal view of subject matter, subject landscape or even world view. (Mayer and Land: 2006:p.3)

However, precisely because they have the potential to led the student down new intellectual paths and into unfamiliar and transformed areas of understanding, threshold concepts may lead to further difficulties in the form of 'troublesome knowledge' that is, knowledge that is difficult to absorb and hold since it is 'alien', counter-intuitive 'or even intellectually absurd at face value'. (Perkins in Mayer and Land:2006:p.4) As Mayer and Land observe in 'Barriers to Student Understanding', 'It increasingly appears that a threshold concept may on its own constitute, or in its application lead to, such troublesome knowledge.' (2006:p.4) A recognition of this difficulty and analysis of the extent to which students became 'stuck' with the DIDB has been factored into this evaluation.

If the student is able to progress through the liminal space in which threshold concepts threaten to create barriers to increased knowledge, the new learning spaces provided by these concepts have the capacity to be powerfully generative. In such cases 'the potential effect on student learning and behaviour is to occasion a significant shift in perception of a subject, or part thereof'. (Mayer and Land:2006:p.7)

Thus, regards my own learning, theoretical knowledge of the existence of teaching and learning tools and ideas about the different ways in which students learn were the *core concepts* which I brought to this CETLD project. However it was not until I had acquired the 'threshold concept' that Teaching and Learning employed *core and threshold concepts*, and not until I had understood what these were, that my mental map of Teaching and Learning as a discipline was transformed and an enhanced ability to 'read between the lines' and a more useful method of evaluating responses to the DIDB finally enabled.

In what way might core and threshold concepts be relevant to the DIDB and how has this understanding effected an evaluation strategy concluding this project for writing this report and for thoughts about future dissemination?   First, adopting the core/threshold concept model it is possible to evaluate the Domestic Interiors Database in terms of responses to it as a *layered* learning tool. My understanding of the learning opportunities that the DIDB presents in this regard is explained below. Secondly, this model suggests the usefulness of mapping out responses to the Database in terms of deep or surface learning, across each evaluation group. Thirdly this model also indicates the need for evaluation at the more focussed level of practice-group specific responses to the DIDB and the value of discussing these in the light of their representing core or threshold learning outcomes.

The nature and potential of the DIDB as a learning tool

The Domestic Interiors Database presents both core and threshold concepts. As the front page introduction to the DIDB states:

> The database is designed to include interpretative data as well as standard reference information, with a broad range of thematic fields that provide information about representational strategies. It enables users to explore the ways representations of the interior have articulated ideas about, for instance, gender, privacy, consumer practices, spatial organisation, leisure and class. [Core concepts] The database also allows the user to identify these different strategies for representing the interior.

[Threshold concepts] A 'commentary' field offers a statement by the researcher who collected the original source material on the thinking behind the selection of each entry in the database, whether it be typical of its time and place, or strikingly unusual. These are searchable by category or individual word, making possible a myriad of unforeseen connections. [Threshold concepts] (DIDB:2006)

The structure and intended use of the DIDB then, presents core concepts as fundamental ways of thinking about Interior Design History. Reviewing the Database here, it is evident that in mapping out these concepts a certain level of design historical knowledge was assumed on our part. This is something that might be found to hinder more general student learning usership although only one evaluator from our survey in fact indicated this response: 'I think, when you scroll down and it says themes, I thought, Oh great, it has other themes but they didn't seem relevant to design at all, like gender, sexuality or something.'

It is the case that the language we employed in DIDB content mapping, labelling and presentation was relatively subject specific. Again this might cause a problem for users unfamiliar with this terminology:

Language itself, as used within any academic discipline can be a source of conceptual troublesomeness. Specific discourses have developed within disciplines to represent (and simultaneously privilege) particular understandings and ways of seeing and thinking. Such discourses distinguish individual communities of practice and are necessarily less familiar to new entrants to such discursive communities or those peripheral to them. (Wenger:1998 cited in Mayer and Land:2006:p.14)

Equally, we are alert to the possibility that as Design Historians, our own discursive practices might make even previously 'familiar' concepts appear in a new light and as a result conceptually less easy to comprehend. Thus a couple of evaluators commented:

Well sometimes you need to word things differently, I didn't always understand what you were saying. That's what I was trying to do with putting in the same thing but differently so once you understand how the search engine reads…I found that if you start to understand the language it needed then it would work better for me.
(FG2 23.5.08)

It's written for a more academic mind and therefore there were terms that were quite … I don't know if there were terms that were used but they were certainly unfamiliar to me. So I, kind of, felt like I was drawing blanks which is a thing that excludes you.
(FG3 18.9.08)

In addition, since the DIDB presents images (both textual and visual) of *representations* of interiors it immediately offers to present threshold concepts that might be found to be useful and progressive for some students but unnecessarily complex and cumbersome for others: 'Dominant representational ideology, what was all that about? I was just like looking at this little bit and I was like, right, okay, that's nice, what does that mean?' (FG1 15.1.08)

How far did students simply want to view images of rooms from which they could garner information about, for example, changing modes of decoration without the additional twist of being required to recognise the space presented as being representational? Bearing in mind Mayer and Land's seminal suggestion that there 'might be concepts in any discipline that have a particularly transformative effect on student learning' (2006:p.xv) this analysis has sought to evaluate the degree to which the generative potential of the DIDB was realised by users as offering new ways of thinking and connection-making.

2 Deep or surface learning – responses to the DIDB across all evaluation groups

Also helpful to an analysis of the way in which the DIDB was used by workshop participants are ideas about deep and surface learning. (Marton and Saljo:1976) Deep learning can be described as an approach which triggers long-lasting and generative thinking, whereas surface learning might only equip the student with a

shallow knowledge of a discipline and one that lacked any substantive insight or understanding:

> Simply stated, deep learning involves the critical analysis of new ideas, linking them to already known concepts and principles, and leads to understanding and long-term retention of concepts so that they can be used for problem solving in unfamiliar contexts. Deep learning promotes understanding and application for life. In contrast, surface learning is the tacit acceptance of information and memorization as isolated and unlinked facts. It leads to superficial retention of material for examinations and does not promote understanding or long-term retention of knowledge and information.
> (www.engsc.ac.uk/er/theory/learning.asp)

The Domestic Interiors Database was designed to foster the creation of conceptual links and provide a model of how ideas might, tree-like, branch out from one another.

> The database allows the user to identify these different strategies for representing the interior. It also enables users to explore the ways representations of the interior have articulated ideas about, for instance, gender, privacy, consumer practices, spatial organisation, leisure and class. A 'commentary' field offers a statement by the researcher who collected the original source material on the thinking behind the selection of each entry in the database, whether it be typical of its time and place, or strikingly unusual. These are searchable by category or individual word, making possible a myriad of unforeseen connections.
> (DIDB:2006)

However, the DIDB can also be used very straightforwardly and factually, as any body of reference information. While this latter application was intended to promote the use of solid learning through the provision of well researched material and information, this type of usage could not be characterised as being an approach of

any depth. Did users engage with the Database at a deep or at a surface level and to what degree, indeed, was this dual facility recognised by users?   Before analysing the extent to which evaluators from different disciplines engaged with the DIDB at core or threshold level it is useful first, to examine the degree to which it was recognised that the DIDB could occasion deeper learning. Without this level of engagement with the Database, its potential as a to deliver threshold-level conceptual awareness is non-existent.

Deep or surface learning?

> Well the commentaries bit was odd sometimes in that you're looking
> at a magazine catalogue and there was a commentary. It's kind of,
> it's a bit pointless, if you ask me.

> (FG2 23.5.08)

With the exception of the above remark, whilst prepared to critique the DIDB, evaluators at each workshop were also ready to take the Database's rationale on trust. Though respondents found the Database's structure tricky to navigate, its potential to present more than a superficial survey was understood by every group. Commonly it was recognised that the website has a lot to offer which would enable deep learning but that structural problems and lack of user guidance precluded this.

> It's things like website behaviour that we've become accustomed to.
> You see a picture on a teacher database you just automatically think
> you can click on it. Or at least that when you hover over it, it will tell
> you what the image is and where it links to. But I entirely agree
> about the block of text [front page] as well, because it was very
> interesting and informative but it didn't tell me really about the
> usability of the site and I wanted to just, kind of, break it apart and
> put it into bullet points and have hyperlinks, and then when I got
> through the block of text and realised that actually that was it; that
> was as much instruction that I was going to get and I had to figure
> the rest. When I then got into an entry, I was thinking, well actually I

want more information than that. So how would I use this for research purposes. I'd be able to find lots of great sources and great locations I couldn't necessarily get at any more information. So I'd then need to go on another search elsewhere beyond the database in order to get that.

(FG3 18.9.08)

How far did evaluators appreciate the DIDB as offering various 'thinking models' (that is the Database's potential to demonstrate the possibilities for making conceptual and informational links) Did students pick up on this? And if so did this recognition vary according to user group? Certainly design historians made this connection:

> It was really good, a wide range, that's really good. The fact that they've got text, catalogues, pictures, photographs, fantastic. I thought it was really good. Really useful just to give you a kind of an initial push into different areas of research and things that you probably wouldn't have thought about being connected to whatever you want to find out about.

> Yeah, I thought that was really good because it encourages like inter-disciplinary kind of study and I think that that's really important, especially for either art people or design historians because often that kind of thing gets left out.

> (FG1 15.1.08)

Other users too evidently found that working with the Database prompted further lines of enquiry suggesting a deeper level engagement with material presented:

> It might be nice also to have some interviews with people who've lived in tenement houses or where we just have an audio aspect to it as well because that's very important to actually just have their own words rather than a journalist.

> (FG2 23.5.08)

> I liked the surprise of the things that did come up i.e. I wouldn't expect film clips to be in there or film images.

> I think 3,300 entries sounds like a lot, but I think I was almost wanting more to be honest, because I was feeling like, particularly

when it came to the digital imagery specifically related to art and design or architecture, I wanted to be able to make all sorts of other connections.

(FG3 18.9.08)

Many respondents clearly recognised the DIDB's expansive content. How far did individual groups engage with its generative capabilities; did users responses indicate core or threshold learning in other words?

3 *Core concepts / threshold concepts*

History of Design

Design historians were comfortable with the core concepts presented by the DIDB (for example, gender, sexuality, boundaries) to the extent that they were one step ahead of the Database's construction and suggested that threshold concepts might not only spin off from an investigation of core concepts but that the ability to work with these might be built into the Database's website:

Or it might help a lot to have the themes hyper-linked in the….or hyperlinks in general in the record. You pull up a kitchen and it has the theme of gender sexuality and you go, oh maybe I want to know more about that gender sexuality and then…

Yeah, because you couldn't click on the themes could you?

We were clicking on them until we realised that we couldn't.
[laughter]

How lucky that would be.

(FG 1 15.1.08)

Equally this group was so confident in their ability to bring already established knowledge to their use of the DIDB and to the images and text that their searches

turned up that their appreciation of the Database led them to suggest a greater need for simplicity: 'I don't think you ever need that many options.' (FG1 15.1.08)

National Film and Television School – Production Designers

> It's more in the style of a kind of academic database rather than what I'm used to but…. (FG2 23.5.08)

Practitioners wanted the DIDB to include practical information such as architectural plans and measured drawings. This necessarily pragmatic approach might appear to be indicate a use of the Database at only a superficial level. In fact, when as here, this type of information forms data essential to make continued creative leaps within design practice the absence of this material might preclude the DIDB's capacity to foster generative learning for practitioners.

> I think I expected there to be dimensions of the space though. Anything I looked at whether it was an illustration or a photo or even a drawing, there was no reference to how big the space was which is sometimes frustrating.
>
> Yeah, I mean put in technical drawings because I saw one and thought, great. You know, technical drawings and what came up seemed to be some very grand buildings and not so much sort of working class buildings or the kind of buildings that don't even exist any more. Information for how we should treat layouts and things for, not necessarily the….the obscure, but more the ordinary rooms that we are here but without measurements, this would be really useful. (FG 2 23.05.08)

Other students felt that the Database suggested ideas that they had not previously encountered.

> …those themes, they're interesting, social position, you think, oh I didn't think about that, so I can look into that.

I was saying that I actually found some of the text really different, just the way some people use it, especially the description, about how people use the space. With a picture that was particularly useful; I wouldn't know where to find something like that outside of this.

Yeah I just felt it sort of sparked your interest or something, it feels like a starting point and something you could go into more depth with in our library.

And also things that you wouldn't necessarily have thought of, then it does really make you think, 'actually I hadn't thought about that it's quite interesting…'

(FG2 23.5.08)

Victoria & Albert Museum, Teaching and Learning Department

Of all our evaluator groups the V&A educators were the most critical of the DIDB as an interpretative tool. Extremely well versed in the techniques of interpretation, this group were concerned less with the information they themselves might glean from the Database but, encouraged by us, were keen to explore the website in terms of what it might offer visitors to the museum environment for example. As such, the Database was not found to be transparent enough:

I think also there is quite a big gap between the content as given and some of the tags of themes and things but there was some quite intriguing tags, you know, sexual politics, gender, this that and the other, and then it was, like, but the information given didn't explain why it had been tagged like that…

It gave no clue to anyone as to why this or that entry might be particularly interesting and I found that you had tags like middle class or elite or whatever, and then you got into the record and it

didn't kind of reinforce why this was particularly representative. I suspect that probably you can't deal with that very much and maybe what you should think about doing is extracting a, kind of, a sample set of records that you are going to do more work on; that you're going to put like an interpretative layer over because I think, you know, I think in a sense you need to kind of give people a really good experience of some of the amazing stuff that you've got from really unusual sources, but really explain it and have browsing and the ability to see a range of self … of thumbnails. Like when you get that list of records there's no images, even if they have images with them.

(FG3 18.9.08)

For this group of users then, ensuring that the necessary material was in place to allow visitors to the website to appreciate core conceptual material was essential.

What I liked was the breadth of thinking, so you might get something from Habitat and also some quite recent and also, you know, you get things from the '80s, '90s which now is quite useful because often you will find you need this material so you're able to make more connections. And as [withheld] was saying the film elements, the text, secondary school teachers looking for broadening out on a theme would just being able to think around a subject, perhaps in a way they wouldn't normally do, but how one creates the portal and the rationale for it, that still has to be built onto the Database's] structure for them to use it and understand it. (FG3 18.9.08)

It was recognised that the DIDB has the capacity to generate new ideas and enable threshold learning however:

I did really like the fact that when you clicked on a small record that I could understand the context and the thinking and actually the themes and labels behind it. I thought that was quite useful because then I'm able to do a search under gender or sexual politics or something and go, ooh how does that relate to interiors,

what returns do you have. So my general feeling is I just wanted more because I was finding it quite interesting.

…I really liked the fact that I got film stills and that I got text from novels. I thought that was a really clever idea and I felt really excited by that.

(FG3 18.9.08)

Evaluation conclusion

This CETLD project has been invaluable in two key areas; through its benefits to us as educators and through the core aim of the project, the investigation of the DIDB's potential as an online learning tool.

Through the process of running this project I have gained much greater understanding of the distance that may exist between the way as teachers we present information and expect it to be taken up and the *actual* way in which it is received and used by students. This learning has been of great benefit to us as a team and has demonstrated a number of useful points about the teaching made possible through the DIDB. First, ideas that we are confident and fluent in expressing in written or verbal prose may not always translate straightforwardly into other formats. Secondly, communication via a website is a highly specialised and skilled method of interacting with others even before subject-specific considerations are fitted to that format. Thirdly students who have grown up with IT, have used it throughout their educational careers and who are extremely well-practiced in working with interactive media of all kinds have expectations beyond our own as to how they use the internet, why they use it, the demands they expect to make of it and of the results that such activity should generate: '…all this stuff which you can't click on…' (FG2 23.5.08) was not felt to be helpful for example. Other evaluators commented:

A changing front end and interactive capability was something that it was felt would enhance the DIDB: 'images of the week [might be included], if it was relevant, or new stuff, or …Like a period line or

something...you know 1400 to 21st Century, click on this and you get....just to help you get in.

In ebay when you can tick on images and then you press compare, that would be a good way of doing it. You tick the ones you want, go through the whole thing then tick compare and they all come up next to each other and then you can reclick on them and then they get bigger.

(FG1 15.1.08)

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…and then you're still not getting any hot links or any quick way in. The web's now used to, you know when you think of Amazon and you think of all the different images, it's all about choice so you get menus and things, hotplates and boxes and it's that combination of, you know, you can get this by clicking here; you can get that by clicking on another thing that was what I was thinking, that I was going to go through to another layer and then I realised I had to figure it out. And the images I wanted to click on.

(FG3 18.9.08)

Conducting the project has also brought to our attention the fact that if a website is to 'deliver' for its users, it cannot act merely as an on-line book. It cannot remain static but must constantly evolve, in structure, if not in content, in order to provide a state-of-the-art tool in the incredibly faced-paced environment provided by the internet. One respondent commented: '...and it's a bit off-putting, because the rest of this is so visually appealing. That first page seemed a bit, I don't know, something like ten years ago or something…' (FG1 15.1.08)

The Database presents core concepts through discussions of issues central to historical interior design. It also does this by offering to shed new light on the subject of interior Design History of the interior since its focus is not simply the historic room

per se but on the way in which these spaces have been *represented* over time, in varying geographical locations. And in this way the website presents important fundamental but also threshold ideas about the interior as the locus of all manner of cultural, social, economic and political ideas and concerns.

Precisely because it brings core concepts around issues of representation to bear on the discipline, the DIDB also presents threshold concepts in that it has the potential to open up transformative lines of enquiry -which might be characterised as spirals of understanding and knowledge- that may not have been previously available to the user. The potential for shifts in knowledge, perspective and understanding afforded by the DIDB's concern with the representational, may place the user in a liminal learning space which, if perceived as opportunity, proves enriching and beneficial. This very quality, whilst expansive for some however, has presented a barrier to other users.

> The content's there, I think it's great that there are all these different ideas….it's really hard sometimes to go on the internet, you know, everyone rolls their eyes when you say you researched on the internet, but when there's a site like this, it's really useful. There are different, you know, sources, so many; there's illustrations, paintings, photos and things in different periods which is really hard to find otherwise or you spend ages going through old back logs of catalogues, so it's great. However, it's difficult, I thought there's almost too much choice I wish there was just a drop-down list.

> (FG2 23.5.08)

Those who gained from using the DIDB appear to have been those users who realised the opportunities it presents for bringing different ideas together, or were those who engaged with or were stimulated by the idea of limitless connection making beyond the structure of the Database itself. Equally, given the navigational problems of the website, these were the students who willingly engaged with the process of pushing themselves through and beyond the threshold position of realising the availability of new and insightful material without being immediately able to access it:

I typed in The Bauhaus and only got two images and then I thought I'll try something, I'll take some Victorian fireplaces and again there isn't really much on that. So just in terms of quickly getting information I guess you just need to invest more time and research into getting more material really.

(FG2 23.5.08)

For some the physical act of following links on a computer screen has mirrored the intellectual connections that the DIDB has triggered, suggested and or facilitated.

If I could just say something in support of text. ….the fact that amongst the text you've got poetry so within design history it's very common to use novels as sources but much less to use a kind of poetic description and actually just having somebody bringing those difference sources together I think is interesting and offers links to all sorts of new learning possibilities.

From a contextual point of view, I think content on here is excellent. I like the way you might have an idea and think, oh, I'll link to that and click here and see how I develop this. Sometimes that might take you where you expected to go, or it might take you somewhere unexpected in which case I kind of wanted to trace my steps, but that's like any search I guess.

(FG4 12.11.08)

Interestingly, workshop evaluations have confirmed the situation that we witnessed during the project, that engagement with the DIDB appears to have been led by the individual's degree of knowledge and interest in their own discipline. Thus, for example, those students who were particularly curious about, and skilled in their subject demonstrated the ability to use this expertise to overcome the barriers represented by initial problems with the DIDB's search structure and to continue to a level of usership where the website was made to work for them. This willingness was most readily apparent amongst the Design Historians but evident with other groups too. Those who felt less confident with their subject, were therefore less confident

about interrogating the Database in unaccustomed ways, again something that was hindered by the database's useability issues.

Not surprisingly since the Database was created within a Design History context, overall, we found that History of Design students appeared to be the users who felt that they had most to gain from the DIDB. Since Database contributors included art historians, literature specialists, photographers and an anthropologist, it was this broad characteristic that was picked up as being of positive value across each user-group. At its most effective as a learning tool, evaluators found the DIDB to be a stimulating intellectual springboard and in this sense, it has revealed itself to be very useful in aiding a negotiation of conceptual transitions. The Database appears to facilitate this process firstly in providing a model for the possibility of this kind of thinking, and secondly through its contents which, in the most positive cases was recognised as triggering all manner of associations, new connections, understanding and 'learning leaps' .

Our aim for the future deployment of the DIDB is that it becomes more user friendly, still more stimulating, and is brought to the attention of new users in order that its potential is maximised. Following completion of our CETLD project our key aim is that the Database act as a gateway for an enhanced engagement with their disciplines for a variety of students. At the same time, recognising the Database's strong, ready-made potential for Design Historians we are particularly keen to deliver the DIDB to these courses in particular.

Future dissemination

Throughout the 18 months of conducting our project we discovered that the workshops we conducted acted as points of dissemination in themselves. As mentioned in Part I, sourcing workshop partners has been very time-consuming in relation to the 'take-up' rate, however, a happy outcome of the process by which we have sought partners has been the dissemination of information about CETLD, our

particular project and its aims and our place within the wider scheme. In addition the workshops conducted to date have generated their own publicity.

We are very grateful to have been given the opportunity to evaluate the DIDB and feel that the findings of our eighteen months evaluation will provide strong arguments with which we will be able to approach new sponsors in our bid to enhance the database and secure its accessibility as a significant teaching and learning resource for the future. Throughout, the CETLD team at Brighton have been helpful and informative and we are keen to remain in contact with CETLD beyond the submission of this final report and through into the period of dissemination of our project.

Having completed this tranche of our work with the DIDB, progressed beyond the barriers presented by 'troublesome learning' and witnessed the transformation and evolution of our understanding of the teaching and learning process, we are ready firstly, to put together a domestic interiors database to use as a teaching and learning tool, and secondly, to embark on a CETLD project. That we recognise the irony of this situation is evidence of the success of the CETLD project process as a teaching and learning tool in its own right.

It is our committed intention, to take the knowledge acquired through the 18 months of conducting this project and to employ it in demonstrating an altered, more useable Database to students within the design studies and practice. With the insight gained from the evaluation presented here we believe that we are in a strong position to deliver the Database to numerous new users, encouraging them to work with the website in such a way as to overcome initial barriers and to support progression into transformative learning. Although we aim to do this in person wherever possible, once we have made amendments to the site, part of which will be the production of a set of user guidelines, we will also be in a position to 'deliver' the DIDB electronically.

Since this has proved so invaluable, we also intend to disseminate information relating to our project experience. With this in mind we plan to draft a set of 'how to' guidelines for the production of a website such as ours which we would offer to CETLD for electronic publication.   Our core concern from this point on then is to turn the DIDB and our experience with the Domestic Interiors project into tools which

provides access into new ways of thinking and practicing. These map onto Mayer and Land's notion of a structure containing 'conceptual ideas that are essentially both simple and memorable and yet which are also highly generative, in that they contain richly layered implications for all kinds of educational contexts'. (2006:p. xi)

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