

Visual Pedagogy. Final Evaluation. Ike Rust 09 10 09

Background

Why I undertook this project, the project aims and background context.

In my time as Senior Menswear Tutor at the RCA I have undertaken several research projects initiated because of the difficulties I experienced with the curriculum and it's industry focussed bias above that of the student's creative expression. The research supported important changes that I implemented to create a more balanced tension between personal expression and the expectation of industry.

Each time I wrote up the findings in as acceptable academic and scholarly a structure as I could muster. And each time I felt deeply disappointed because there is not an academic scholarly language that can effectively describe the experience of what it means to be a designer. The nearest anyone has come is Professor Bruce Archer, who recognises the need for a language of designing. But even he breaks it down to 'doing', as if the craft is paramount. Yet the experience of design is much more complicated than a desire to make things. And it is this fullness of what it means to be a designer that I sought to bring to the fore in my project, and which forms it's core aim.

What happened?

Description of the process and explanations of any differences from original intentions, timetable and budget. Outline of evaluation process.

A film happened. Or a documentary, although I struggled with advisors to allow the film tell it's own story in it's own voices without the usual voice (of authority) over. It is undoubtedly easier to hear explained what is shown, why a particular shot is important and so on, yet I remain adamant that the viewer

should be allowed to experience the ambivalence, vulnerability, freedom and self confidence that finding one's own voice and making decisions allows. Within the edit I therefore sought to let the sights and sounds of designing and design teaching, which are one and the same thing, be an established authentic expression.

I imagined what events throughout the academic year would best help to define the experience of what it means to learn menswear design without disturbing the process itself. I avoided the immensely valuable personal tutorials, of which there are many, to focus on the more public reviews at which the students are required and therefore more used to explaining the nature and process of their work through what has been learned. But not always.

In discussion with the students, they immediately chose to take ownership of the creation of much of the footage. This was partly to do with their enthusiasm for the project and because much design learning happens within the menswear studio and a personal space out of the earshot of tutors. So, in certain ways I handed over the making of the film to the students, which considering the aim of the bid, made good if not common sense.

The evaluation process was constant and extremely useful. I was always very encouraged by the enthusiasm this project created in those who were encountered with it. Claire Pajackowska maintained my enthusiasm for this project in times of strife and Jos Boys was a constant and invaluable mentor who undertook to come to the RCA for tutorials and reviews twice per term. We also maintained regular email contact. A tutorial with Alan Davies was also very encouraging and offered structured feedback in terms of how to proceed with the project. With Jos and Allan we were able to discuss current pedagogic practice such as Sticking Places, Tacit Learning and Learning Spaces, especially those within the student. I also sought advice from Chris Rust at Sheffield Institute of Arts, in regard to Designing for Tacit Learning. I provided updates for

Anne Asher (CETLD) and Chris Mitchell (RCA) who were also present at the mid point evaluation. However, Professor Bruce Archer provided the greatest inspiration with his research papers that put forward the idea that there exists a designerly way of thinking,

Without doubt this project took on another form as it developed. It was always intended to be an account of how my students learn menswear design at the RCA, and this remains true. It also becomes an attempt to establish a language for designing that encompasses the unspeakable, intangible and difficult to express. This comes through in comforting and defining gesture, hands that draw in open space the inner vision, as desire played out in a fashion show, excitement, tiredness and desperation. When we understand that all of these properties, skills, actions and feelings are part of the wider language of the inner world of the designer, we will never be enabled to engage with describing what it is and how to teach it.

Lessons learnt

What were the successes and failures of your project? What have you learnt from the process and the results?

The enthusiasm I encountered from my students and their willingness to be a part of making this difficult project was paramount to its success. Ironically it also formed my main problem, which was how to manage the film footage, deciding what format to film in, keeping this constant and learning how to transfer footage in order to review and make decisions about what to use. The scale of this problem became clearly apparent during the editing process when all of the footage had to be re transferred into one manageable format. This meant that much of the reviewed and selected excerpts that were based on the original timing had to be re found. For a time I became frustrated and quite despondent. Recruiting an experienced and excellent editing technician brought solace and much needed advice.

It was also extremely challenging to edit one year into just over an hour. Much that is important seemed abandoned. It helped to maintain my original vision of keeping the film as true to the student experience, and within this attempting to incorporate and reflect the emotional, sensational and feeling elements of their learning experience. I also wanted it to be their voices, of course with feedback from tutors, which is integral to their experience, to be the script.

One great failing was my resistance to engage with the consent forms. To my bitter disappointment I am now picking my way through the cast of characters in the outside world rather than a few hundred feet away in the studio.

Excepting the technical and editing struggles of film, the main thing that I learned through undertaking this project is the complexity of what it means to learn to be a designer. I have been aware for many years that profound personal change occurs to the students who undertake this course, and that this is mainly due to the immense sense of self confidence that they achieve through understanding that who they are as designers. Is related to who they are as people. I believe this comes to the fore within the film through the ability to achieve outcomes based on personal vision driven by desire through the acquisition of the essential skill, craft, technique, to express in self through design.

Research outcomes

How has your project progressed research in the areas of both teaching and learning and in your subject discipline(s)?

My greatest hope in terms of the outcome of this project is that the film encourages practitioner teachers who have or will struggle, as I did, to formulate their practice or teaching within non purposeful research models, realise that

their vision, ideas, thinking, craft and practice have enormous value, which have yet to be fully understood, appreciated and recognised as research practice.

We were invited, and thus submitted a time consuming proposal of our project to the Art, Design and Communication in Higher Education Journal, guest edited by Alison Shreve and Anne Asha. This was dismissed for not being scholarly enough. I include this rejection because it evidences how policy, stricture and the academic narrow mindedness developed within humanities and the sciences are active within art and design.

The 'non scholarly' criticism rejected an attempt to explore a new model of communicating art and design that aims to identify and create a language which is true to the inner, intellectual and practical quality of design learning, which is embodied in the film.

Evaluating the benefits

What were the benefits for the different groups involved? What is your evidence in support of benefits being achieved?

The groups identified as beneficiaries of this project were RCA and the V&A. The RCA research culture has the benefit of a completed project that is not only practice-led but is also focussed entirely on the process of being a design practitioner. This is very important in a research culture that is still very much dominated by scholarship that is written, spoke, textual and cerebral. This project helps RCA research to develop its concept of workshop and design based research.

Evidence of this change is that the RCA has submitted its first AHRC Collaborative Doctoral Award bid from a workshop and design based research (Design Products) after many years of applications that came only from Design History. These changes are profound and necessary.

The V&A may not experience any immediate benefits from Halcyon Daze, although we aim to screen the film in relation to the Future Fashion Now. The intended aim is to enable the archivists of design to better consider the making process as worthy of curation, documentation and archiving.

This project shows that the making process in fashion design cannot be reduced to details of manufacture or materials or craftsmanship and that making design is also making meaning and that this process takes place through the transformation and personal growth of the designer. The project is especially concerned to bring the reality of emotional experience to bear on the protocols of archiving and museology.

There were certainly benefits to the students in their involvement and reflective discussions, and equally the project delighted many members of the staff team over the year.

How you have met the selected CETLD themes

How did your project support the aims of CETLD (as outlined on your original application)?

The intention was to create a film that enables the other to see into the world of learning inhabited by fashion design students and their tutors. The idea was not to demystify, yet the humanness, humour, determination, quirkiness and likeability of the characters that make up the film, enable a level of empathy that is important to not alienate the viewer. The fact that the film provides a very clear insight into the majority of the learning process (at postgraduate level) makes it a valuable teaching and learning tool. This was its primary aim.

The one arena where the film has not met its intended criteria is in collaboration with the V&A, although this can be established now that the film is almost complete. We made an unsuccessful bid to take the film to the V&A and to use it

as part of a seminar titled The Sublime Knowledge Fund, to discuss the process of design at the RCA to the students and tutors of other fashion schools.

This would have combined with the exhibition of RCA fashion student's work noted above, Future Fashion Now. Dr. Christopher Breward continued to provide valuable advice on access to the galleries and archives, yet my explorations were never fully formulated into an integral element of the film. What they did, however, is convince me that the valuable 'process' of creation is not in any way represented in their collections, which focus entirely on artefact or product. This was an early thread to the project that argued in favour of the value of 'doing' being undervalued within the history of design.

Project management, making and reviewing footage and editing of the film has taken the majority of the time and effort I spent on the project. This created an internal focus and in retrospect I feel that we could have crossed over with other projects, for example Abraham Thomas' 'From Sketch to Product'. I will attempt to compensate for this within the broad remit of the dissemination outlined below.

Dissemination

How are you disseminating the results of your project to a wider audience?

There continues to be a lot of interest in the film, primarily from the students and staff involved who have yet to see the final edit – or actually any footage. Several screening and discussion formats have already been arranged.

On November 04 in Denmark I presented and discussed the film at a masterclass to staff and research students as part of my visiting professorship at Designskolen Kolding in Denmark. This was the first 'outing' of the film. The response was very favourable, with students remarking on how positively it made them feel about their own work, how useful it was to see the working

process and critique of other students, and to ask the question of how best to utilize their time in learning design. Staff commented that it had a realistic sense of time often not attributed to the freneticism of fashion, and that it shows very clearly the desire they have to draw the best work out of the students and how difficult this can be. One guest from a Danish business school asked for a copy of the film to help his students understand the mind of a designer.

Other screenings are:

- Royal College of Art, Lecture Theatre One on December 04. Open for all students and staff.
- CETLD offices Brighton. Screening scheduled for January 27 2010. TBC

I have had the following determined offers for further screenings and discussions.

- HEART Museum, Herning, Denmark. As part of my visiting lectureship at TEKO Designskool.
- British Design School. Moscow, Russia. Personal invitation from Dr. Jos Boys.
- Virginia Commonwealth University in Qatar. Ali Khan, senior tutor in the fashion school has invited me undertaking further research in this field in at VCU.

We also plan to arrange a viewing at the Sackler Centre at the V&A in London, which formed a part of our original bid.

Links on the RCA and CETLD sites will allow access to the film. DVD's will be made available to schools and colleges who are interested in viewing the film and using it as a teaching and learning tool.

Next Steps

What do you plan to do next in developing your project beyond the lifespan of the CETLD grant?

The School of Fashion and Textiles aims to strengthen the claims of design as research so that future Research Assessment Exercises are more meaningful for creative design practice. More research into pedagogy is possible and future collaborations with the V&A are planned. A project that researches cinema, fashion, costume and celebrity culture is being discussed. This would include design practice as an integral research element.

Thank you to the CETLD for the opportunity to undertake this project.

Ike Rust. 31 10 09