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Developing the entrepreneurial spirit as a tool for teachers of art and design to gain confidence, leading to an increased ability to motivate

James Skone and Johnny Ragland

E-mail:
James Skone: skone@vienna.at
Johnny Ragland: johnnyragland@gmail.com

Universität für Angewandte Kunst Wien
University of Applied Arts Vienna
Design, Architektur und Environment für Kunstpädagogik,
Oskar Kokoschka-Platz 2,
1010 Vienna

Abstract

This study investigates whether providing support and encouragement to students of art and design education to establish and work autonomously within projects, ultimately influences their confidence when they become teachers. In particular, whether the entrepreneurial spirit students use to develop a project increases their ability to create an atmosphere of motivation. To be discussed, will be whether such enterprises should be written into the curriculum of art and design education.

The intention of this research is not simply to collect quantitative data, but rather to subjectively judge where these experiences lead students in terms of their career as a teacher.

The focus is on one such student initiative. The project was developed by twenty-three students, and launched by four of these students in 2007. Project design°mobil has been in active operation for three years. Over this period, those involved were observed. A significant increase in their ability to acquire relevant design knowledge became apparent. All four continue to teach through this enterprise, which provides them with an income. Feedback implies that these teachers have developed and increased their ability to motivate, and through this create an atmosphere of empowerment.

Hence, there exists an indication that researching further initiatives of this nature may establish a basis from which the concept may be included in the curricula of art and design education.

Key words: Experience; initiative; self-confidence; design; empowerment

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Prologue

The University of Applied Arts, Vienna (the Angewandte) is the only art and design institute in Austria to have a teacher education degree programme in design which is supported by technical craft subjects and the opportunity for involvement in student incentive-driven projects. The course focuses on the user oriented design process and participatory design.

The department for design education at the Institute for Art Sciences and Art Education at the Angewandte, of which James Skone is Head, conducted the study. The design education programme is divided into three; design, science and didactics. In Austria, all students in pedagogic education must have studied two subjects to be able to teach. Students enrolled in the programme mostly chose to study a further art theme as this second subject, such as; fine arts or textile art and design.

The objective of this study is to highlight a particular need, which enables a student to reach their potential. The authors wish to discover how a methodology might be further developed and used to research how student project initiatives might contribute to the student/teacher journey. This paper is presented as ‘part one’; conducted to expose a potential for taking this research further.

The authors’ background includes many years working in various aspects of industrial design and furniture design and making. Through their more recent work as teachers, they have both observed that their confidence as teachers mainly derives from their wide-ranging experience.

Hence, they have concluded that ability to motivate is achieved through experience – a vital ingredient to create an atmosphere of mutual trust and empathy in the teacher/student relationship. Therefore, the philosophy of the design education department at the University, where they both are employed, is to provide support and encourage students to take the initiative to become involved in fields, which would normally be considered outside their curriculum.

Introduction

Background to this research
The Austrian educational system has, as yet, been slow to recognise design as a subject of education per se and consequently is restricted in this sense. Areas of curricula of closest resemblance are crafts and textile crafts.

Aims of the Angewandte include widening students' career opportunities to include areas of work beyond their usual study programme. They are prepared not only for teaching within the school system, but also are provided with a grounding in alternative teaching; educating people in the 'free' non-school context. Tertiary education, working with youth or social organisations, giving seminars, lecturing in museums and adult education, are examples. These projects were the catalyst for the 'student incentive projects' described in this paper, and have been in operation for approximately eight years.

The Angewandte has an 18-year policy of employing practitioners from the field of industrial design as their Heads of design education departments. A wide-ranging design experience in commerce is also sought from those applying for the position.

The Angewandte uses the 'creative chaos and organised structure theory' in their design education. Kimbell and Stables (2008) argue that the competences developed through this approach to design education, show the creative and innovative process as also relevant and usable to questions/problems in fields other than design. Together with the practical support on offer, the open door, open-minded philosophy of the design department at the Angewandte encourages students to develop those skills which could be considered as transferable.

Problem statement leading to this study
Educating design at an Austrian state school can present a teacher with a dilemma. 'Invention, design and innovation' is a process of defining a new perspective to an ill-defined problem, which requires a questioning of the status quo (Kimbell and Stables, 2008). In the Austrian school system there is a greater reliance on the more technical approach toward design and this leaves less opportunity for experimentation. However, the authors have observed that recent political rhetoric in Austria indicates that a radical approach toward design education could be considered more relevant in modern society. The reasoning is that if a school system is to be truly regenerative, education should reflect shifts in social consciousness toward a more 'free' way of teaching the design message. Supporting this message is Julier (1997), who describes an aspect of design as a national expression (p. 13), and Howard et al. (2008), who argue that design represents the abilities of a society.

This perspective is supported by observations the University has made from Alumni meetings. Over recent years they show that after a few years' art and design teaching practice graduates find difficulty in sustaining the enthusiasm for their work that they originally experienced during their studies at the Angewandte. Teachers have become disillusioned and either fall into the mould and conform to a restrictive school system or leave to follow a different career.

Supporting argument

Providing experiences, which can advantage a student of design education, either in the classroom or in other fields of work, should be considered a vital ingredient of their education. This research poses the question, whether student project initiatives, as described in this paper, should form part of universities' curriculum.

Christopher Ireland (cited in Laurel, 2003) considers that interacting with people in a 'natural environment' facilitates an insight into their beliefs and preferences. This he views as an ethnographical process; an effective design research method ideal to learn more about the people for whom the observers are designing (p. 26 - 27). This approach includes the possibility of viewing these and similar such areas of focus that are beyond three-dimensional objects, space, and graphics as problem solving tools. The authors argue that design education, which follows this line of reasoning, extends the scope of students' skills by enabling them to view their competences, i.e. those pertaining to the creative and innovative process, as relevant to questions/problems in fields other than education.

The methodology of this research aims to enable a qualitative viewpoint with respect to the effects that 'autonomous initiatives' have on students. The notion is that these experiences will push the boundaries of the student, leading to new perspectives – a process of self-reflection, 'the role of self' experienced through working with others. The authors argue that this process of engagement has potential to increase students' understanding of the scope of design, as a method which can also be used during the process of career structuring. Konrad and Traub (2009) argue that it is the experience of 'doing' that leads to a greater appreciation of one's culture, which sponsors an increased empathic attitude towards others. They suggest that 'doing' is the material basis of self-recognition, a process that leads to conscience, or noticing and understanding one's identity through increasing awareness of the things and people that surround one.

Experience which increases awareness, Meyer and Land (2005) argue, can be considered as a 'conceptual gateway' or a 'portal' that leads to a previously inaccessible learning outcome – a 'threshold' to new perspectives (p. 373). They suggest that although a portal may at first be 'troublesome' it will lead a student to a new way of thinking. They affirm that as the student gains experience of these portals an alteration of their perspective – "a repositioning of the self" will occur (p. 374). The opportunity given to a student to run a project initiative, the authors argue, provides such a threshold.

The ability to subjectively evaluate a problem is essential to design (Cooley, 1991; Dreyfus and Dreyfus, 1986; Wagner, 2001). Polanyi (1958) describes experience as a 'tacit awareness' of a material world. He suggests that an expression of experience is the ability to judge subjectively and explains that this awareness or ability *is* experience. Kierkegaard [1813-1855] also affirms that subjectivity reflects an individual's personality, determining their unique qualities, which enables individual identification to be separate but connected to all others (Howard and Hong, 1975).

These perspectives demonstrate that increasing the extent of personal experience is relevant to ‘design thinking’. This study is based on a project that was devised and planned and moreover uses ‘design thinking’ as a tool of enterprise.

Twenty-three students of design education at the Angewandte were encouraged to initiate a project which would facilitate and require design thinking. From 2007 to 2008 they worked together and developed the concept of design°mobil. In 2008 design°mobil (now an association) was launched by four of these students. Two of these are now full time teachers, the other two are undergoing their one-year teacher training placements. It currently employs the user-centred ‘real world’ design model to educate the complexity of product development. Emphasised are cultural considerations; i.e. a systemic cross-linked strategy linked to all areas of life.

Essential to not only design is an awareness of the user’s needs, or consumer insight. A teacher for example, who also wishes to also take on the role of an explorer will, together with his pupils, make discoveries. Von Foerster and Pörksen (2008) argue that this leads to an atmosphere of trust and cooperation. design°mobi l uses this model to work through ‘live’ design projects. By partnering the participants in their search for ideas, teachers make an exploration of a theme and thus also become ‘the user’.

Gaining a wide-ranging experience, the authors argue, provides prospective teachers with more (design) credibility. This enables them to empower *their* students through demonstrating the value of experience and consequently increase the scope of their teaching.

Method

Project 'design°mobil' reflects a methodology that is reflective of a philosophy which has resulted in an infrastructure that provides students with the opportunity to work autonomously within their *own* projects. design°mobil typically represents one of many similar projects conducted over many years at the University. Results from the other projects tell a story similar to the one described here. Other projects were based on an identical approach to design education and would verify the findings within this paper.

The objective is to determine any alteration in student behaviour toward learning which can be attributed to their taking part in these projects. A student who takes the opportunity receives a grade for the project work; this grade is counted toward their final completion result. The projects are designed to be as unrestrictive as possible, nonetheless a framework guides students, and this is described in the three stages below:

Stage 1
Initially, at the beginning of their study programme students are provided with information, which explains the support available for a 'student initiative'. Below are the salient points of which students are made aware:

- The University has a system which encourages students to develop their own ideas
- Supervision and advice regarding project management are provided
- Students are provided with psychological supervision
- Students are tutored in design, didactics and science
- Organisation skill training in the University is provided
- Financial assistance is available from the University both for direct expenditure and extra living expenses incurred. Structuring a case for State or corporate funding is also offered

Expected learning outcomes:

- Business administration – tools needed to put into effect the entrepreneurial spirit
- Gaining confidence in organising and communication skills, including speaking to an audience
- Increasing knowledge of and ability to culturally interact – finding a common language
- Marketing and product development awareness
- Furthering of individual specific abilities by collaborating with others

Stage 2
Students bring their project ideas to their tutors for consideration. These are based on team projects that will be linked with a concept or organisation, which is or will be situated outside the University. A 'new' element needs to be displayed in this concept. The students are also required to show sufficient and applicable research. Students are coached during an iterative defining process; nonetheless, before a project is launched, it is incumbent upon the student to clearly define the function of their initiative, their individual objectives and its potential benefits to others.

Stage 3
Once the project is up and running, students will attend regular meetings with those lecturers involved in the project in order to discuss progress. Projects are not given a start and stop date; however, students are required to present their conclusions before the end of their study programme.

Project designmobil
The aim of designmobil is to use workshops to teach design in schools and other institutions. The association provides service to the following groups: children both within a school project or other institutes, young people (youth groups etc.), those in secondary and tertiary education, further teacher education programmes, adult education and 'non school' organisations such as companies and museums. Design thinking is taught both theoretically and through a hands-on approach – 'making ideas real'.

The project's functionality is to stimulate public awareness of design and provide 'creative empowerment'. This is achieved through teaching an unorthodox method of thinking through 'doing' – a direct hands-on approach to contemporary design issues. The concept of material culture is explained and uses various materials to provide greater comprehension of their functions.

A workshop is typically one day, but can also be a half or two days. The students generally work in pairs.

The ecological footprint of designmobil has been discussed at length. Finally, it was decided that designmobil should operate out of two 'Samsonite' suitcases and the proprietors should mainly use public transport.

Results and analysis

This chapter provides qualitative information relating to project design°mobil. Accounts from the four students currently involved as teachers, and observations made from their tutors are given.

Over a period of a three years design°mobil has con ducted:

- 50 school workshops
- 30 workshops for children and teenagers who are not in the school system (5 to 16 years of age)
- 18 further education seminars
- 9 events (lectures, workshops) for adults

A school workshop will typically consist of 15 children from the age of 9 to 20 years. Further education seminars generally have an audience of around 15 teachers. A adult workshop will also normally consist of around 14 in number.

Below is feedback obtained, for the purposes of this research, from the teachers and also observations made by their tutors:

Feedback and quotes from students

- From the outset of the project they enthusiastically described how they felt as they embarked on their ‘journey of discovery’

- Self-reliance was clearly developed resulting in a willingness to invest time (and private money) above the call of duty – thinking as an entrepreneur

- The learning process in respect of systemic problems in education connected with culture became apparent

The following information is derived from verbal conversations and is not verbatim, but for ease of explanation it is presented as quotations:

- “My future as a teacher I now see brighter, knowing that a career in teaching need not necessarily be only within the school system”

- “I have a sense that my input which is to provide a service which accompanies a student on her or his individual learning path is valuable”

- “I have an increased ability of self-motivation, this is reflected onto my pupils and other learners”

- “The experience has boosted my credibility as a teacher”

- “I now am "fearless" when dealing with new situations and issues – this has enabled me to be more flexible in my teaching”

- “Systemic contradictions within the school system, for example restrictive ‘free-thinking’ are mitigated by our approach”
- “I am not the motivator, motivation is derived intrinsically from the stimulating atmosphere of freethinking”
- “I feel a sense of pride from working on my own enterprise”

Observations from the students’ tutors

- An increase in self-confidence becomes apparent
- Increased reliability regarding deadline conscientiousness
- An increased ability to communicate with those from different backgrounds
- A flexibility (paradoxically) coupled with boldness during the project
- An increased empathic attitude toward their tutors
- Subsequent to the launch of the project, those involved showed a greater capacity and enthusiasm for learning
- An increased willingness to take risks
- Expanded negotiation skills

At the beginning stages of the project there were some difficulties experienced. There were differences of opinion among the students regarding who should be credited with which idea. It was also observed that, due to lack of managerial experience, students’ ability to direct focus toward matters of finance were lacking. A requirement for tutor/practitioner assistance with experience in this regard became apparent. This was later implemented.

Nonetheless, these results demonstrate a clear advancement in the learning ability of those involved in the student incentive.

Only a small minority of students enrolled in the art and design education course have so far become involved in such projects. Nevertheless, their enthusiasm for their course and for their future work is shown in the results above, they indicate that this minority, have found advantage in their part in the student incentive.

Discussion

design°mobil uses craft and design as a media to te ach ‘free-thinking’. These initial results indicate that the skills used for the development of this enterprise, and those which the teachers use to teach the message of freethinking are linked.

Projects outside the usual curriculum, is no new concept. The focus of this research however, is on a method, which provides the students of design education with the opportunity to *autonomously* run a project. Within the knowledge of the authors, this approach is unique in Austria. This, the authors argue, widens students’ scope of learning to include areas, which may later contribute to their strength as a teacher.

They admit that this route may not be for all; for some, they believe, the drive to become a teacher might be to have a secure job. Nevertheless, for those who consider teaching to be challenge, the innovation of an entrepreneurial adventure is likely to be considered a valuable part of their journey to become a teacher.

The authors argue that the findings of this research provide justification for further stages in greater depth, over a wider spectrum of teaching subjects. They affirm, that any data, which will quantifiably attribute benefits, similar to those described in this paper, to adopting this approach, may prove strategic in the future structuring of the curricula of art and design education.

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