FLUX: Design Education in a Changing World

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Ria (H.M.) van Zyl
Senior Lecturer
University of Pretoria
Department of Visual Arts
Pretoria
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ria.vanzyl@up.ac.za

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Design management education: the intersection between design and business

Abstract

Students from various disciplines have been exposed to design thinking and praxis over the last decade at the University of Pretoria. Students from publishing, journalism, marketing, management, communication, multimedia (engineering) and a variety of other disciplines enrolled for design modules at under- and postgraduate levels. Learning is extended to include collaborative projects between design students and students from other disciplines.

This paper contextualises interdisciplinary education that is aimed at the prospective design manager or design client within the framework of design theory and application. The growing debate on the nature of design knowledge on the one hand, and the development of design management as a new and discrete discipline on the other, serves as a backdrop.

The design client plays an integral role in the design process. However, many enterprises in South Africa allow managers with limited design knowledge and understanding to make design decisions. Purchasing design is often regarded as merely a procurement activity, and design is purchased on tender at the lowest price with little regard for process or consequence.

Case studies presented in Design Management Review *and other literature confirm the economic success and impact that result when design decisions are made by managers with an understanding of the role and value of design. However, very little opportunity for the training of design managers in South Africa exists, and this presents a challenge for design educators in a country where entrepreneurial success is often regarded as the only way to achieve sufficient economic growth.*

Design management is not yet offered as a qualification at the University of Pretoria, but various service modules offering design management content are becoming increasingly popular amongst students from other disciplines. Such interdisciplinary education presents different and new challenges in curriculum development and teaching methods, and this paper concludes with personal observations and examples of student participation.

Key Words: *design management, design client, interdisciplinary education, collaboration, design value*

Introduction

The information design course at the University of Pretoria, South Africa, is well known and recognised for teaching excellence throughout its 34-years of existence. The information design offering developed from a field of specialisation – forming part of Fine Arts – into a four-year undergraduate degree, and now extends to Master's and Doctoral degrees. In addition, students from various other disciplines have been exposed to design thinking and praxis over the last decade at the University of Pretoria. These students are from publishing, journalism, marketing, management, communication, multimedia and other disciplines. They attend formal modules at under- and postgraduate levels, and also take part in collaborative projects with design students.

This paper contextualises this interdisciplinary education by focusing on the modules presented at Honours (fourth-year) level, and more specifically the modules intended for students who might ultimately play a role in the design process as design clients or design managers. Design management is not yet offered as an independent qualification at the University of Pretoria, but these interdisciplinary elective modules offering design management content are becoming increasingly popular.

Such interdisciplinary education presents different and new challenges in curriculum development and teaching methods, and this paper contextualises these modules by looking at the nature of the

academic offering and outcomes in terms of disciplinarity. The paper concludes with personal observations and examples of student participation.

The design client and the need for design management
Case studies presented in *Design Management Review*, a journal published by the Design Management Institute (DMI), and other literature confirm the economic success and impact that result when design decisions are made by managers with an understanding of the role and value of design (Design Management Institute; Borja de Mozota, 2003:81-142). However, very little specific opportunity for the training of design managers in South Africa currently exists, and this presents a challenge for design educators in a country where entrepreneurial success is often regarded as the only way to achieve sufficient economic growth.

It is a well-recognised fact that the design process usually begins with a client expressing a need for design. Although design as an entrepreneurial activity or designer-driven project sometimes occurs (i.e. design without a client), design – and especially visual communication design – generally remains a business-to-business professional service.

The design client is part of the design process, not only as the initiator of the project but also, and very importantly, as the decision maker, playing an integral role in the design process. Within the client organisation are a number of individuals who are more involved in the design process than others, taking on various managerial roles involving decision making, leading and control. Certain people in a design-client firm are usually tasked with the role of managing the design process, and they can be referred to as 'design managers'. Although job offers calling for design managers do not yet exist in South Africa, design management skills are often mentioned in the recruitment advertisements for brand managers, marketing and communication staff, research and development teams and project managers. Nevertheless, many enterprises in South Africa allow people with limited design knowledge and understanding to make design decisions.

Purchasing design is still often regarded as merely a procurement activity, and design is often purchased on tender at the lowest price with little regard for process or consequence. The design process is included in supply-chain management structures without regard for or understanding of the process. Various reasons for this may be proposed, included a lack of exposure to and knowledge of the value of design. A shortage of training and skills development might also contribute to the still-limited understanding of the design process on the part of people in the business world.

There is another reason that possibly influences the way in which clients appoint designers in South Africa: after the fall of apartheid and the ushering in of a new democratic dispensation in 1994, South African businesses were required to promote the meaningful participation of black people (Balshaw & Goldberg, 2005:18). The government's Broad-based Black Economic Empowerment (BEE) initiative measures a business's contribution to BEE across elements such as ownership, management and employment equity. Organs of state (i.e. national, provincial and local government) and the public sector are undoubtedly some of the largest purchasers of design in South Africa, and these prospective design clients are bound by BEE legislation to certain codes of procurement based on BEE principles. Private companies and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) are encouraged to follow suit if they want to become part of the service provision chain (Balshaw & Goldberg, 2005:19-21).

The result is that the complex tender-driven procurement process is managed by people whose specialty lies in preferential procurement, finance and law, and who often have limited or no design understanding. Unfortunately, the need for design knowledge and skills on the part of these design buyers often becomes evident when design outputs do not meet expectations or requirements.

One of the most important decisions a design client must make is the selection of a design firm that is suitably equipped and trained for the design task. This could be one of the reasons why many design clients in government – and even in the private sector – still ask designers to free pitch, in other words, they ask several designers to present final designs with the intention of selecting and paying only for the best design. Alternatively, designers are often asked to enter a seemingly endless stream of design competitions. Although both of these methods are considered by government and the private sector as 'safe' ways of appointing designers, the result is often that design is produced with little insight and no mutual development between the design client and the design firm.

Lack of design-management competency not only plays a role in the appointment of design teams, but is also evident in other ways. In many cases, a variety of people are involved in design decision-making, often without realising it: according to Gorb (1990:8), these people can be regarded as 'silent designers'. These silent designers are unaware of what design management entails, defined by Bruce and Bessant (2002:1-2) as the "management of the design expertise needed to develop attractive and profitable product (manufacture) and processes (service) and deliver them to the customer in an eye-catching way (retail), and [these design managers] recognize that the interface between design and business is not an easy one".

Peter Phillips, author of *Creating the perfect design brief* and a practicing design manager, points out that people often ask him what he, as a design manager, actually does. Phillips mentions how difficult it can be to explain his role in an enterprise, not only to the general public but also to other business managers (Phillips, 2004:111-120). Phillips quotes an article written by Earl N. Powell, previous president of the DMI, as containing the most succinct description of the role of a design manager: "the development, organization, planning and control of resources for the user-centered aspects of effective products, communication, and environments". This definition allows for the complexity of design management, broadening the range of activities beyond the mere management of a process or creative team.

Powell (in Phillips, 2004:113) explains that there are two sides to effective design: one is the design-client organisation's awareness and understanding of the power of design for competitive advantage, and the other consists of professional design groups with a core set of values, skills and attitudes. It is clear that design management remains an interdisciplinary activity including both business and design. Topalin (2002:14) points out the value of learning on the job, but also the need for formal training in special design management skills as a way to raise standards, help build confidence and strive for improved performance.

The nature of interdisciplinarity
Before we can understand what interdisciplinarity means, we need to look at what constitutes a discipline. Lattuca (2001:3-4) describes a discipline as a culture with a shared set of meanings or understandings; a field or subject; and knowledge, methods and theoretical approaches that cannot be separated from their practitioners. She proceeds to quote Bauer (in Lattuca, 2001:35) in stating that 'outsiders' cannot properly practice an intellectual discipline, "just as foreigners find it difficult to assimilate into national culture".

Interdisciplinary versus multidisciplinary
Teaching along disciplinary lines already begins at school level, with each subject area clearly demarcated. This demarcation follows through to undergraduate and postgraduate levels, and even into fields of research specialisation. For example, students enroll in various electives in the fields of Social Sciences and Humanities at undergraduate level, and the subjects are mostly offered in their discrete disciplines without any form of cross synthesis.

Interdisciplinary activity and teaching take place when two or more disciplines borrow theories, concepts and methods from each other, with some form of synthesis or integration as output. This is different from multidisciplinarity, where people from different disciplines work together – each with their own expertise – without any synthesis.

Lattuca (2001:116) proceeds to differentiate between different types of interdisciplinarities. Informed interdisciplinarity can be regarded as partial- or crossdisciplinarity; it is instrumental in nature and involves the intentional borrowing of methods. True conceptual interdisciplinarity, on the other hand, strives for systematic integration and obscures the separate contributions of the individual disciplines. Lattuca (2001:3) points out the shift towards interdisciplinary scholarship, moving from being instrumental at first, towards a second level involving the deconstruction of disciplinary boundaries, and finally towards conceptual disciplinarity.

Both inter- and multidisciplinarity differ from transdisciplinary activity, the latter taking place in those cases where theories universally transcend disciplines and where teaching takes place in a setting of shared theories, concepts and methods across various fields of study. Transdisciplinarity can be regarded as a super-discipline, with general systems theory being an example (Lattuca 2001:82).

However, a discipline also have sub-disciplines, in the same manner in which a culture is not homogenous. This is evident in the various sub-disciplines of design, many of which are represented at this 2007 DEFSA conference – such as interior design and architecture, visual communication design and industrial design. All these disciplines share a common epistemological base, with networks of individuals interested in related ideas and problems. Lattuca (2001:24) stresses that the various bodies of knowledge, as well as the related people (also termed the discourse community), constitute a discipline and disciplinary boundaries.

Teaching in an intersection

In the following section, three currents modules offered by the University of Pretoria, as well as the use of collaborative projects as a teaching method, are briefly introduced. The modules Design and Production 1 and 2, and Branding and Visual Identity, are offered as examples of interdisciplinary teaching. A project with students from the fields of design and direct marketing is discussed as an example of multidisciplinary collaboration.

Design and Production 1 and 2

The Design and Production 1 and 2 modules develop in students the analytical and practical skills needed to manage design and production at both the project and strategic level. The modules are suitable for students planning careers in a broad range of industries as project and design managers; commissioning editors; account executives; buyers; packaging consultants; print technologists; creative consultants; sales, brand and product developers; and marketing, communication and advertising executives.

The modules introduce students to the design discipline, as well as to the terminology and contexts necessary for the planning and management of the design, production and technological processes that a project passes through during its development from concept to final product. The focus falls on the management of visual communication design as a sub-discipline, but reference is also made to similarities and differences between the management of visual communication design and other design sub-disciplines.

Students explore all the phases of the design process in the most 'hands-on' and practical way possible. This includes the one area of design still eluding many design managers, namely the creative or visual exploration phase. This phase involves creative brainstorming and the use of very rough visualisations in order to develop ideas. The ideas are then short-listed and presented to peers. This process may be very familiar to those designers accustomed to using the visual language as a problem-solving tool, but non-designers experience these activities as being totally new and somewhat frightening. However, the majority of students are astounded by the results of such 'design thinking' activities.

A brief introduction to the communicative functions of visual design, design element and principles is also presented, with the aim of developing students' analytical skills. The course content is supported with research projects that address selected themes such as design for development, information design, ethics and accountability.

Whenever possible, students are challenged to use visual language – as opposed to verbal language – for assignments. For example, when exploring visual language, students are required to use poster presentations to communicate research findings. When analysing design and other organisational problems, they are encouraged to use diagramming skills. This provides those students who never truly considered the importance of design and the visual language with an opportunity to experience it hands on. Students are also exposed to a selection of computer software and production issues.

Design and Production 1 and 2 conclude with an entrepreneurial project in which students must plan and develop a design solution of their own choice, prepare a full design brief and budgets, and attempt to prepare some form of prototype.

Branding and Visual Identity

The Branding and Visual Identity module examines the role of visual communication in the creation of brand, product and corporate identities. Students are informed of the myriad of ways in which identity and brand design extend throughout the organisation and influence the manner in which the

organisation, service or product is perceived. Visual developments, strategies and case studies are critically examined.

Students are challenged to conceptually develop and explore brand identities, and these projects include not only visual communication design but also interior design, architecture and product design. The role of visual branding as part of entrepreneurship is a key focus, exposing students to the challenges of branding as they apply to start-up and entrepreneurial businesses in the small, medium and micro enterprise (SMME) sector.

Collaborative projects
Collaborative projects are carried out regularly between students of information design, publishing and business, offering hands-on experience. One such project involves the Honours students in direct marketing, and the fourth-year-level information design students. The project partner and sponsor for the last few years is Cell-C, the South African mobile service provider.

Design education – as an applied discipline – is known to be project driven, with a lecturer briefing the students on the projects (either simulated or real-life) they are expected to complete. In the Cell-C project, the direct marketing students themselves, instead of the design lecturer, carry out the tasks of briefing designers and setting the project outcomes. This creates a real-life scenario involving the presence and interference of a 'client', together with the resulting realisation that the project cannot be completed in any manner other than through collaboration. (More information on using projects as a teaching method can be found in Henry, 1995.) The direct marketing and design students are divided into sub-groups, and are expected to handle challenges by themselves – including the inevitable problems that arise when students from different faculties and backgrounds work together. Lecturers play a guiding role in the process, but do not interfere unless necessary, and time for self-reflection is allowed in the project.

Although some students experience the project as being very challenging, they are quick to acknowledge the value of this type of collaboration. The direct marketing students – in this case acting as first-time 'design managers' – often struggle to come to terms with expectations and boundaries. Planning a design brief and conducting research for the design are also activities that they have never previously been required to do. On the other hand, the interpersonal skills of the design students are put to the test, since they are expected to explain design processes and market their design ideas to 'design managers' with no previous exposure to design and designers. However, conflict between the students generally fades as soon as the visual prototypes begin to take shape.

The designs must fulfil the strategic objectives set by the direct marketing students, and are then presented to the Cell-C panel. There have been cases where Cell-C has decided to use the design projects, and one of the projects – *Swartskapie* – won a 2006 Loerie Award, which recognises creative excellence in the fields of advertising, communication and design.

Through such collaborative projects, students are offered an opportunity to better understand their own discipline through working with those who often question their assumptions, methods and ways of working. Although collaborative projects are fundamentally multidisciplinary, some interdisciplinary integration and understanding takes place in that ideas are synthesised and project outcomes are informed by more than one discipline. According to Ind and Watt (2006:41), collaboration is the norm in design management, and creativity and productivity are optimised when there is respect and trust among teams.

Conclusion
The three modules discussed in this paper, as well as the collaborative projects, have seen an increase in student numbers from approximately 10 to 12 publishing students a decade ago, to between 120 and 150 students from a variety of disciplines. It is important to note that all the students who enroll in the modules have a thorough undergraduate background in their own discipline, and therefore regard these modules and projects as an opportunity to gain additional knowledge and skills development.

Many of these postgraduate students work full- or part-time and realise the contribution that this type of training makes to their performance in the workplace. They also often use workplace examples for assignments, illustrating the applicability of the content. The course content is regularly evaluated

through student and industry feedback. Industry participation – such as in the form of guest lecturers from various related sectors – is encouraged, as it ensures that the content remains relevant and adds value to the learning experience. Production suppliers, such as printers, welcome the opportunity to offer their assistance though inviting students to fieldtrips and offering advice. In light of the establishment of Sector Education and Training Authorities (SETAs), some of the course content has also been modified for sector-specific training, and this was received with great enthusiasm.

Teaching across disciplines is by no means an easy task. A lecturer working in interdisciplinary spaces needs an understanding of the various disciplines involved, as well as a respect for the differences between the disciplines. On a personal note, I doubt that I would have been able to handle the complexities involved without continually expanding my own knowledge base of other disciplines. There can also be no doubt that my 15 years' experience as both a designer and design manager proved invaluable.

Although the field of design management is slowly gaining recognition as a discrete discipline, its theoretical basis is still in a development phase – as is evident from the modules discussed in this paper. If one were to differentiate between interdisciplinarities as Lattuca has done (Lattuca, 2001:116), these modules would still be considered to be informed interdisciplinary in nature, but are beginning to develop into true conceptual interdisciplinarity with proper integration.

Research in interdisciplinary areas is known to be more complex than research in a well-established discipline. This is especially evident in South Africa, where research in the various design disciplines is only now beginning to gain momentum – and with still too few researchers and Master's and doctoral students producing accredited research output. However, at the University of Pretoria an increase in enrollments for design modules, as well as a growing interest in design management teaching and research, is being witnessed and developed at postgraduate level.

It will take time to build the necessary capacity to fulfill the needs of this growing area of demand, and to research and develop theoretical resources suitable to the South African and African context. The sharing of teaching experiences in this paper reflects the beginning of a larger vision; one that cannot be achieved without sharing and working together across disciplines, and developing much-needed design management skills and knowledge. This can only be in the interest of South Africa and Africa, where each and every entrepreneurial success matters.

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Biographical outline

HM (Ria) van Zyl

Ria van Zyl is head of Information Design at the Department of Visual Arts, University of Pretoria. Her position involves co-ordinating, management and development of course content for various subjects including Information Design, Multimedia, Professional Practice Management, Production and Design Management, Branding and Visual Identity. Prior to this appointment she was co-owner and manager of a design studio in Cape Town and Bloemfontein, specialising in corporate design and packaging. She also spent time at Woolworths in the capacity of Packaging Co-ordinator and Technologist.

Field of Interests: interdisciplinary collaboration, design and production, designer-client relationship, strategic design and brand management, design theory and research, development of the professional practice of design.