

## **Playing with Design – Preparing Designers for the Global Market**

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### **Introduction**

Inspiring and encouraging creativity in the young, nurturing imagination and enthraling them in the global world of possibilities is our task as parents and educators. We all use stories to encourage children to play and use toys to help them recreate imaginary worlds and to generate new ideas. We draw on our own cultural heritage and experience and rediscover for ourselves the worlds of fairy tales and superheroes.

As lecturers at The University of Northampton, we are using this child's world of imagination - created through drawing and play, illustration and toy making - to teach not only design but also a wide range of skills that should enable students and graduates to find new opportunities in global markets.

"Live" client projects as they are called, with manufacturers and distributors of toys and games coming into the studio to brief students, has benefited all those involved the University, students, charities involved and the UK toy market.

Some clients come with a problem to solve and hope that the students will bring them a new outlook. Others want to share their knowledge and experience of the industry with a younger generation. Other could be accused of primarily only wanting access to new ideas at a very low initial outlay. Whatever their reasons the experience of working with industry is vital.

The firms and organisations involved have been drawn from the local community surrounding the University, the UK as whole and overseas. On the whole, their motives have been philanthropic or actively seeking the knowledge and expertise built up at the University. The UK government is encouraging these sorts of partnerships, following on from along tradition dating back to the work of the Royal Society of Arts in the nineteenth century and the setting up of

the arts school network after the Great Exhibition of 1851 when the promotion of design education and improved product design went hand in hand.

But at the University of Northampton we have learnt from the toy and play based “live” projects in particular. They instil the notion of playful creativity, which enhances students’ design work. The ability to cross the boundaries that exist between generations and cultures seem to lessen when one has a real challenge but can approach it with an open and enquiring mind. It is the toy projects that have been particularly helpful. What do we mean playful creativity? Design often involves toying with something, exploring possibilities, making scaled models, acting out roles, sketching an idea out or “toying” with a concept.

“Improvisation, composition, writing, painting, theater, invention, all creative acts are forms of play, the starting place of creativity in the human growth cycle, and one of the great primal life functions”.

(Nachmanovtich, 1990)

We are not the only ones using play to inspire creativity it has been a trend amongst some designers in the last two decades influencing their products as well as their research methods. Play has also become more important in office management with games and play areas featuring in office interiors. The role of play in primary school education is well researched (Moyle, 1994) but writing on the topic at University level has yet to be adequately explored.

Northampton has a long history of involvement with metal toy production, but as Kenneth Brown (1998) argues in his article, toy design in the UK has been undervalued and low investment in design could it be argued be one of the reasons why the manufacturing industry in the UK has almost disappeared. Whether there are opportunities locally or globally, we have found that toy design is important to the work we do.

In short, we want our students to work hard at play. Let us look at some the projects to explain what we have learnt.

**Sue Ryder**

Sue Ryder is a charity that has a series of retail outlets that are used to raise funds for its network of care homes. Randle Turner was the leading academic on a Knowledge Transfer Partnership (KTP) (Schaber et al, 2008) with the charity. These are government-funded schemes where graduates work in companies and organisations, with the support of a University to embed new skills and expertise in the organisation and transfer knowledge from the University to, in this case, the trading arm of a charity. Linked with these projects the graduate designer (Associate) has come in to work with undergraduates on “live” projects based in the University.

Stuart Betts was the Associate involved his initial project involved improving their dolls house range and designing a special toy castle, which was to be sold through a promotion with a major newspaper. He had to work with buyers in the UK buyers and manufactures in the Far East. The design had not only meet the safety standards but the ethical and environmental concerns linked good retailed by this sort of social enterprise.

Stuart came into the product design department and worked with a parallel project asking students to design an Art Deco Dolls House. (Schaber et al, 2010). The students learnt a great deal about designing toys in the commercial market. They were able to explore issues about materials and sustainability. The importance of communicating to manufacturers not only in a different country or culture, made them more careful in their assumptions about how their drawings would be understood but a toolmaker In China. The live project was so successful that he has returned two years later to brief them on series wooden toys and textile for the charity.

The KTP was award winning nationally and Stuart has continued to work for the charity designing new products such as electric guitars for the charity.

### **John Crane**

This started out as a live project rather than a Knowledge Transfer Partnership and was introduced to the University by one of the members of staff.

The firm was taking on a new managing director and the project provided an opportunity to pass knowledge and experience between these two men as well as inspire a group of second year students. The students designed produced a wide range of concepts from children's playgroup seating to a variety of vehicle-based toys.

It was at this point that a KTP was recommended and a graduate has been with the firm for about nine months, during a time of substantial change at the company. The Associate has joined at period when production and distributions arrangements have been changing, and the Product design department at the University has been able to learn from his experience, to improve the way designers are trained whilst at the University.

### **Santander Bank**

Vicki Thomas teaches on both the BSc in Product Design and the BA Illustration courses at the University as well as working with illustrators and designers through a specialist design consultancy, designing gift products.

As a future employer, she learnt that toy design usually, forms only a small part of an undergraduates industrial design experience; at most one project in three years' training. Designs on display at degree shows or in portfolios, often showed detailed research but limited this often focused on child development theories or a reworking of toys they had played with as a child. Most graduating students seemed very narrow in their vision.

The Consultancy also has a need to recruit illustrators to work on toy and gift collections. Similarly, on the illustration courses, a proportion of students are often keen to produce a picture book, inspired similarly by the books they saw as children. But they often do not consider the intellectual property, the play value of the book and how it will be understood in another country or culture. It is often a personal playful project fulfilling a personal aspiration. Publishers like MacMillan run annual picture book competitions, which can inspire some students, but the student's view of the market and the reader is very limited.

In the Consultancy we sub-contract creative work to a range of graduate designers and professional illustrators. But it has become clear that they too, lack skills and knowledge. Often this is because they have specialised in one area of design and do not have the knowledge or aptitude to broaden their skill base.

Within a very short time of starting the Vicki Thomas Associates in 1984 I was widening hobby-based skills in dressmaking and woodwork to undertake a specialist toy design course part-time. It was necessary to fill in some of the gaps in the design teams' skill base. Resulting projects include, cloth book dummies for a publisher, a doll based on book character, soft toy backpacks for a TV merchandising programme.

In the development of courses, we have sought to prepare students better and to learn from this commercial experience. Good toy design is interdisciplinary and we are enabling our students wherever possible to work with other departments such as, graphics and fashion, but also English, education, health, waste management and leather technology. Not all the projects are toys but designing ranges for children, but they have often proved the most challenging and valuable.

Toy design provides insights for communities of practice ranging from education and child development, knowledge and brand management, to regulators of conformity and safety standards. We have found Toy design brings particular issues to the fore which may not be considered as fully if one were only to design purely functional items for adults.

As an integral part of the live projects described, a series of lectures and seminars are also held for each group. We look at a whole range of relevant topics, under a professional ethics overarching theme covering; marketing and advertising and how it industry sells to children, standards and materials and the requirements of our laws and sustainability issues of the importance of intellectual property and its exploitation, the history of childhood and development of educational models and the role of the toy in education. Preparing students to work in a global market place means that we are

increasing also exploring cross-cultural issues in these sessions and have found that more research is required.

A visit with the Illustration course to the Bologna Book Fair in 2008 has led to a larger research project, initially funded by the Santander Bank. Our illustration students' work seemed to fit visually with published outside the English-speaking world, and yet our students on the whole had very little experience of other cultures and commercial opportunities outside the UK for their skills. We are now about to start a larger networking project called "A Thousand Words", looking at how illustration crosses cultural boundaries. The Santander research indicates that it is not only illustrators in the UK, whose work could speak to a global market and there should be more opportunities to learn and work in different cultures. The design research conference provided an opportunity to learn a great deal and invite the participants to explore the issues further through the planned website and events when the second project starts in 2012, subject as ever to funding.

For researcher and writer Dan Fleming (1996) argues the underlying story or narrative used in much toy product development, is challenged through play by the participants. Many designers and illustrators are not taught about these stories, their knowledge of them is assumed to be innate cultural knowledge. They may have heard these on their parents' laps, at school, on the small screen, through games and films. They often end up re-interpreting classic tales. But generally they learn these stories from the media, publishing, film or television. These organisations today are large western dominated global conglomerates (Kline, 1993). In short, many of our students' views are limited and they need to be encouraged to challenge these narratives through play, to share those from other cultures and be encouraged to create their own narratives. Some say there are only five stories, just retold in different ways others claim there are far more and are actively seeking to find and share them. (Story Museum, 2011).

They need to appreciate and understand the value of their creations and how intellectual property is exchanged internationally. Far too often copyright

protection is seen as a constraining factor in the sharing of new ideas. They need to appreciate the value of their work and that of others, especially in a global context. The image on a puzzle has to be understood by many to be successful globally, but it can also still be rooted in a distinct cultural heritage. Images on toys should encourage a child or adult to want to pick it up and start to play in their own part of the world.

## **Conclusions**

Our experience through case studies demonstrates that by focusing on designing for the next generation, design students get timely exposure to ethical issues, resource management and the global market. The concern for the environment is more obvious and urgent. The particular manufacturing processes, involving handwork and craft production on the one hand and volume plastics production on the other, makes ethical discussion highly relevant. These issues are presented in seminars and faced in their studio work for actual clients.

The distribution networks associated with the production of books, toys and games are undergoing change. There are key debates about how goods ought to be sold to children. The case studies have provided students with opportunities to consider what will be required in the next decade, in world of the Internet and worldwide media.

We captured the learning through feedback and mapped the client interaction and situated learning with factory visits and attending trade fairs. We reviewed the collaboration with partners, drawing from expertise residing within the University.

In this paper we have shared our playful approach to designing. The process has affected not only what we teach but also our plans for further research and collaboration.

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