

Mind the Gap – Bridging the Divide Between the Worlds of Design Education and Commerce

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“Mind the Gap” is a cry that is well known by travellers on the London Underground railway system, it warns passengers of the danger of falling between the train and the platform at some stations. In this paper, the phrase warns of the divide between design education and the commercial or “real” world.

The invitation to come to Ufa was made when staff from your University attended a Teaching and Learning Conference at The University of Northampton. This paper will describe and share with you some of our experience of working with commerce, industry and social enterprises, in order to narrow the divide between the academic experience and the world of the making a living as an artist and designer.

The University of Northampton has a School of Arts, where we teach a wide range of courses including English literature and Performance, Fine Art, Media, Graphic Design, Illustration, Fashion, Textiles and Surface Pattern, Product Design, Interior Design and Architectural Technology. There is also School of Applied Science with courses in Computing, Engineering, Leather Technology and Waste Management. There are other schools of Health, Education and Business Studies. In short, the Academic World is divided. When speaking of Oxford and Cambridge Universities, these divides are referred to as “ivory towers” not only dividing disciplines but also dividing the “town from the gown”; the residents of the locality are seen as separated from the staff and students. Northampton is a local University serving the needs of the region and has grown and developed from local technical schools started to train people for local industry a century ago. It has a history of serving the local industries such as engineering and shoe making.

Most of my teaching is on the Product Design degree course, which attempts to provide a curriculum that prepares students well for a professional career as an industrial designer creating products for mass production. The course is based in the School of the Arts but the award is a Bachelor of Science and staff links are still strong with the School of Design and Technology (now Applied Science) where it started. Collaborative student projects between departments within the School of the Arts are relatively rare. It takes an effort for a student on product design course to use an over-locking machine in the Fashion department. These divides, between Art and Science and the separate crafts, in Art and Design education are found throughout Art Schools in the United Kingdom. Some colleges have moved to very open plan facilities with students from different subject mixing, but there is often a loss in turn of specialist “craft” teaching and resources. Some courses have lost studios and workshops as the computer-aided design has become more dominant. In Product

Design we have retained a dedicated studio base but workshops are now shared. We have just started a new MA in Design will be multi-disciplinary and project focused. This may stimulate more cross-disciplinary work. But it will require new teaching approaches and self-motivated post-graduates.

What are we doing in our own tower of Product Design to help make our teaching more relevant and in tune with the needs of industry and the community? As with this conference we invite outside experts and practitioners and this month we have been asked to nominate a new guest list. These sorts of events can be inspirational for individuals. We, also have a gallery that has a program of exhibitions mainly of art and design, from staff student and invited guests and is open to the public. Last year John Wood showed a retrospective of his own career working as a consultant designer, with a specialism in plastics products. Next year the product design team is working on an exhibition about Designing Toys, drawing on the expertise of local industry past and present.

A number of staff have their own artistic practice and bring their work into the studio, the gallery and collaborate with outside exhibitions. Designers, like John Wood, share examples of past projects and consultancy work. This helps students understand the experience and expertise of the full-time staff. In this we are following on from a long tradition of art and craft training, a kin to the master passing on skills to an apprentice. But some members of staff are too involved in teaching and course management to continue creating new work and working outside, so they are not sharing current practice but a lifetime's experience. At times there can be a gap between their experience and current practice in industry.

Art schools have sought to widen outside contacts, by having part-time and short-contract staff and they come into teach specific skills or run projects. Research by the Crafts Council has indicated that over the years this developed into an almost symbiotic relationship between some specialist crafts and design teaching. Part-time teaching would form one funding stream for some areas of craft production. This is gradually changing with funding cutbacks in Universities. Designer-makers, as the craftspeople have become known, have had to develop other income streams; they have more commercial practices, possibly compromising their artistic vision, seek new forms patronage from for examples wealthy individuals or architectural and interiors practices serving property developers or they set up their own craft classes and design schools outside of the existing state funded education system. But as far as design education is concerned the gap has widened.

There are also teaching staff, like myself, who have fractional posts. I teach at the University half of my time. I was employed, in part, because I run a specialist Design Consultancy – Vicki Thomas Associates – when I'm not teaching. Working under a fractional contract is the same as a full time post with all the obligations and responsibilities on both parts the academic and the University. I teach mainly modules covering design in context covering historical, social, political and economic aspects of design. I help students with research for their studio projects and supervise dissertations.

The Consultancy is unusual as it specializes in creating products that are gift, products created to be special to express social relationships and mark special occasions; presents, gifts, presentational objects and playthings. Its practice cuts across the traditional divides of the art school and has teams of designers working in new areas to their original training and across disciplines.

The business grew out of a degree in Sociology at the London School of Economics where I read the work of the French sociologist Marcel Mauss (1925) and in particular his "Gift Exchange" theory developed in the 1920's. In it he argues that gift exchange is a social process found in all societies that generates a series of social obligations. For my master's degree in The History of Design and the Decorative Arts at the Royal College of Art/Victoria and Albert Museum, I researched how manufacturers had commercialized this process in the nineteenth century and twentieth centuries (Thomas, 1984). On graduation in 1984, I put up an exhibition about my research and had a number of designers asking me to collaborate, a number of retailers asking me to act as a buyer, as well as publishers and manufacturers sharing and discussing my findings in their trade associations. The organizers of a new design led gift tradeshow in London called Top Drawer, then in its second year, asked me to organize a stand for new Art School graduates work and the feed back from the commercial buyers was positive; "there was no one bring young talent into the industry" said Anita Ruddick of The Body Shop and Morris Janis, Vice-President British Jewelry and Giftware Federation reviewed my research (Janis, 1984); "seeing the wood for the trees" he argued that the research had something distinctive to offer the industry. By January 1st 1985 I had set up my Consultancy.

Today, there are specialist shows, like New Designers held each July in London, that introduce design graduates to industry but it is a stand alone event which industry representatives have to visit with a view to employing graduates, whereas the Top Drawer event took the graduate designers' work into the commercial market place. The Princes' Trust and Design GAP are other organizations, that set out to do help young graduates start their own design and craft related businesses and provide them with an opportunity to show at commercial trade shows. At Northampton we take new graduates' work to New Designers on a regular basis. We integrate business planning and training into the courses, to enable students to have the business skills to take up employment, work for themselves as consultants to industry or set up their own manufacturing businesses.

The research I undertook in the gift sector indicated that the successful gift companies in the Twentieth Century were often led by a partnership of a creative designer and a marketing or business graduate. Certainly, in those days the business element in design education was often limited to training undergraduates to work in their own specialism. This still happens to some extent today, when Fine Artists learn about the way Galleries work and graphics students prepare folios. The way they present this work is now moving to websites and tablet computers, but they are selling themselves to a limited

sector of the market in my opinion, because it is “craft” based and focused on their national market with limited global aspirations.

At the University informal discussions with staff on the Illustration BA about my Consultancy work and a visit to the Bologna Children’s Book Fair in Italy, has led me to contribute to their professional practice modules, but alongside Fig Taylor. Fig provides the students with, the more “traditional”, industry specific training, covering illustration work for editorial, publishing and advertising. I introduce them to the world of gifts including greetings cards, packaging, toys, wall art and tabletop design and most importantly to the importance intellectual property rights and licensing in these markets.

John Holt, the course leader of the BA in Illustration, travelled to the Bologna Children’s Book Fair and we realized that the student’s style of work had more appeal to overseas markets non-English speaking countries. This has held to an initial research study funded by the Santander Bank, on how illustration crosses cultural boundaries and how better we can prepare designers to work in other countries as well as for their home markets. The project is called “A 1000 Words” and we plan to form of network of illustrators, academics, librarians, publishing firms, government bodies all involved in promoting and distributing illustrated images globally. We have found that we are not alone (Wigan, 2009) in being aware of the global context of illustration today but little published is that does more than share images. It would be good to have your contribution to the discussion and to share the work your staff and students create with a wider audience in mind.

It would give me an opportunity to learn more about how the design and illustration markets are developing here and how images are being shared. Through the Consultancy I represent Mabel Lucie Attwell’s Illustration work. She was a very successful commercial artist working between 1900-1964 having her work reproduced on a wide range of products as well as publications (Henty, 1999). On her death she left her artwork and copyright to a limited company Lucie Attwell Ltd. We are involved in designing and creating opportunities for her work to be republished and re-presented to suit today’s market. Two Russian publishers have reproduced her work in the last couple of years; Studio 4+4 (2010) in Moscow producing a book of Alice in Wonderland illustrations and taking the rights to reproduce three of her classic Fairy Tale books. In her own lifetime she travelled to Rumania to illustrate a fairy tale written by the Queen of Romania. Some of her illustrations are being reproduced as greeting cards by Karto in Finland, with distribution rights in Latvia, Estonia and her figurines based on her drawing sold well in former East Germany. What makes her work appeal to buyers and consumers in these markets? Learning from this artists work will benefit the students I teach and the designers I represent.

We have found the gap can also be filled by having collections for students to study and use in the University. At Northampton we have a Poster Collection – the Osborne Robinson Collection. It was a gift from a local theatre set designer in the 1970’s and it contains posters dating from the 1890’s. It is used as originally intended to inspire students. Projects have been run recently with graphics and

interiors students using the posters in new work. Currently, fifty Polish posters of in the collection are on tour to other Universities and galleries in the UK. They were all created between 1945 and the 1970's and were commissioned by State organizations to promote tourism, opera, theatre, health and safety and sports zoos, circuses and exhibitions. The students not only at our institution but also across the country are learning about exciting design work, which was created under different social and political circumstances. In Poland, in these decades, films and theatre productions from abroad were represented very differently visually. In short, we are preparing students to adapt their skills, to create the best artistic work for the needs of their own era and social circumstances. Today we work in a global market but it is one where they need to know about the differences as well as the similarities in culture and economies.

We also have "live" projects in the studio where firms brief a group of students about the design work they require. It maybe exploring a new process, they may want a set of fresh new ideas to stimulate their own creative teams or need to respond to a buyer's request or a competitor's new range. Some firms get involved just because that want to give students that vital industrial experience and they want to contribute to design education. We have had projects designing medical equipment, shoes for the poorest school children in India, dolls houses for a UK charity, products made using under-used rotational molding equipment, picnic ranges for melamine producer and wooden toys for an importer with production based in Thailand. The projects have been very varied and several were introduced through staff involved in design outside the University. The students have been given the opportunity to visit shows rooms and production plants when possible or they have learnt first-hand about designing for production in the Far East, where drawings and models are key to transfer the idea into a finished product.

On the whole we find these more valuable than entering design competitions where the feedback and working relationships with real clients is more challenging and inspiring. National and international design competitions such as the annual Royal Society of Arts design competition do have a place in the curriculum, as commercial sponsors support the briefs, but they simply do not give the students the direct involvement we have found so valuable for all involved.

The British Government has encouraged this type of direct knowledge transfer and an apprentice type scheme, called Knowledge Transfer Partnerships (Schaber et al, 2008). This scheme places a graduate, known as an Associate, to work within a firm but provide a link to the expertise in the University and visa versa. In our case their role is to embed design development and design management processes into the organizations, where they had previously relied on freelancers or suppliers for new product development. These projects have been very successful for the Product Design department, with projects on train seating, picnic ware, charity merchandise, wooden toys, leisure games machines, outdoor play equipment, signage systems and dispensing machines. There has been an emphasis on toy, gift and leisure products and this has led to further research (Schaber et al. 2010) and development of teaching methods using toy

design as a focus. In fact we gave a paper (Schaber, et al, 2011) on this teaching and learning experience last year, at the Conference where we met your team from the University here in Ufa.

One aspect of using toy and gift projects to train designers is it encourages them to think about social and ethical issues. When designing products for the next generation they have to do far more than appeal to the child. The products need to be sustainable, be ethically produced, meet international safety standards, they have to educate and stimulate imagination and creativity, win the enthusiasm of the parent or grand-parent as well as be fun and functional. They are often designed in one culture, made in another and distributed worldwide. They often relate because of merchandising and licensing to international brands developed for film and television. Some production in the long term may come back to the local, but such work has to be informed by the global network of ideas that the next generation accessed on through the Internet. The University has to have an international focus it has to be multicultural and interdisciplinary in its approach. Northampton is certainly taking up the challenge and their support for this visit is part of that initiative.

The University of Northampton is thus seeking developing very positive links with like-minded institutions and commercial organizations globally. We have some specialist design areas such as leather technology because of the town's traditional shoe industry and engineering capabilities from toy production through specialist lift courses to support for the local automotive design linked to the Silverstone motor racing circuit. Such courses attract international students and Erasmus funded exchanges. We are building on these contacts with collaborations in the Art and Design School with courses in Netherlands, China and Spain already under discussion. Students from those countries are coming to do an additional year with us to get a British degree or seeking to get a postgraduate qualification.

Despite all these efforts at Northampton, overall there is still a gap because of the way design education is still structured as it is focused on traditional industries and local employment markets when production, distribution and the employment opportunities for graduates are global. Increasingly students will be travelling internationally to learn and we will need to be flexible, develop and change what we do to meet the needs of the next generation. In some areas we have gone backwards, when we first started the Product Design course the students had the opportunity to learn a foreign language. But at that point the focus was on employment opportunities in Europe with the European Union. Times change and so does the emphasis, but often not quickly enough, sometimes it feels like University structure is too cumbersome.

We all need to be aware of the gap between design education and a changing world. In this paper I have shared some of the ways we try to bridge the gap at The University of Northampton, using tried and tested methods such as employing staff with commercial experience. But also actively working directly with enterprises and building networks of global connections that are

cross-cultural and cross-disciplinary. Working with commercial and social enterprises and sharing the knowledge gained with academic partners like yourselves are both key to closing that gap and educating the next generation to be ready to design for of tomorrow's world.

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