

Muneera Umedaly Spence

AIGA: Revolution
Philadelphia

15 May, 2005

Graphic Design: Collaborative Process
A course on collaboration, theory and practice

Knowledge of collaborative problem solving is critical in today's highly complex information culture. The pace of the development of communication, technology, and interdisciplinary and/or multi-disciplinary projects has forced creative collaborations as a method of achieving dynamic progress based on performance imperatives and ethics. Today's designers are crossing boundaries and have become part of highly creative teams that often include such diverse groups as engineers, artists, architects, product designers, and countless other specialists with complimentary skills. It is the purview of this class to offer theories of team development, workable strategies for creative collaborations, and experience of collaborating both with other designers and external collaborators in the community with practical communications/design needs.

This article will focus on the nature of the course, theoretical elements, incorporated, constructs of the practical collaborative paradigms developed, examples of problems presented and student work, evaluation mechanisms, and finally course findings both from faculty and student points of view.

Nature of the course

Graphic Design: Collaborative Processes was designed into our new curriculum in 2000 at Oregon State University under the rubric of a "Process" course. My colleagues and I realized the need to include a course in this framework and depth as a junior year capstone experience. This course is designed to take on the aspect of educating the graphic designer in the role of collaborator including the traditional focus on conceptual and visualizing skills of the individual designer. The syllabus is built around outcome statements that help in managing expectations and leaning objectives. The conceptual foundation for this class is to emulate a modern-day studio environment of an interdisciplinary nature in order to tackle the ever-increasing complexity of problems that Graphic Designers take on. It also addresses a realization of the global environment and complex communication issues that arise not only in design but also interpersonally in this post-modern paradigm.

It is not just working together but learning how to form highly competitive creative Teams that is essential.

For the learning to be concretized, an experiential mode of learning is endorsed. Through this method students can formulate a deeper personal understanding, and comparison of the functionality of four types of collaborative paradigms. Supportive systems, theories, and methods are presented, designed to diffuse apprehension, build trust, and understand conflict resolution methods in the collaborative process in the following ways:

- › To connect with a robust personal experience, students need to engage well tuned and reflective observation skills while sharing personal variations in thinking, learning, and working styles so that the interactions are made visible.
- › To demystify root causation of group functionality, students need to develop and use a variety of supportive team-building systems and collaborative methodologies from theories presented.
- › To understand the complete nature of a particular project requires collaborative critical thinking and collaborative creative problem solving methods, as well as a re-definition of the process (time management) best suited to the final realization.
- › To learn collaborative presentation methods, students need to address issues of shared, non-ownership vocabularies while navigating the transmission of deep content to an activated audience.

Course content: Theoretical elements

Understanding of self and others is engaged by the revelation of individual thinking, learning, working and communication styles, as well particular concepts of respect and trust, are essential beginnings to the transparency of difference and ability to manage expectations. 1

In order to engage in disclosure of thinking styles, the concept of the Thinking Styles Grid based on two perpendicular continuums; visionary/detailed and external/internal, is explained. Students are invited to plot their individual places on the grid after thoughtful consideration. The impact is always profound. Once the whole class is plotted and revealed, communications methods between particular pairs of people (represented by points on the grid) are discussed in any number of scenarios. 2

Similarly, differences in learning styles including, auditory, visual, and kinesthetic learning approaches are discussed. Crucial to the teams' ability to perform is an analysis of working styles of the individuals in the collaboration. Understanding that people are most productive in a variety of environments including a range from working in quiet/non-active spaces to people who need the explosive interaction of dynamic interactions. Understanding this particular preference can enable the group to agree on working accommodations, reducing frustration and conflict.

Communication styles can be the factor that leads to misunderstanding and conflict. Addressing differences on the continuum of strongly indirect to equally strong direct communicators and looking at appropriate situational communication styles can reveal difference and making understanding and accommodations possible.

Issues of respect and trust can be addressed by focusing on the methods individuals use to address these critical if nearly intangible concepts. Understanding that people either, expect to build from zero, give all and then chip away, or some other individual scenario in between, can level the playing field of interactions and reduce opportunity for conflict to materialize. 3 Discussions in this arena can facilitate audience participation and interaction during presentation modes.

Navigating these processes of understanding differences enables individuals in the class to learn how to accommodate for and create environments to maximize collaborative potential.

We build an understanding of the theories presented in the text books that focus on understanding the nature of collaborations including team basics (see team basics diagram*), team building, team performance, team obstacles, and reinforcing cycles. 4 Pragmatics of conflict resolution methodologies, meeting methods, consensus building mechanisms, decision-making processes, and reflective processes has been developed to support the collaborators. Additionally critical thinking mechanisms, group dynamics in creative problem solving methodologies, and collaborative presentation skills are discussed to add depth to the understanding of group dynamics.

Historical examples

Expanding on the experiential mode of teaching/learning, exposure to the phenomenology of historical examples of great and problematic collaborations are great teaching tools. We watch the PBS Frontline special on IDEO, San Francisco, an extraordinary collaborative company, and reflect/discuss elements of collaborative methodologies, sensibilities, and processes that they use.

The textbooks that are used in this class namely: **The Wisdom of Teams**, by Katzenbach and Smith and **Organizing Genius: The secrets of Creative Collaborations**, by Bennis and Biederman document and explore the pragmatics of an intriguing range of examples of creative collaborations to from Disney, PARC (Palo Alto Research Center), Apple, to Lockheed's Skunk Works' secretive groundbreaking technology. 5 These texts help to focus the pragmatic aspects of the tools an indispensable set of collaborative tools such as Understanding Teams, Becoming Teams, Team Leaders, Obstacles and Endings, Getting unstuck, 6 and avenues for Exploiting Potential including good summaries in Take Home Lessons. 7

Collaborative paradigms

Pragmatic application of different types of collaborations

Changes in-group constituents and formulations permits the class to experience first hand, the different resulting dynamics. The groups meet with faculty in short group sessions to focus the collaborative strategies and build a clear understanding of the factors emerging in the team dynamics.

Team formulations will be based on the following four models: Linear collaborations (exquisite corpse), a random model and assessment of personal strengths and acuity, a collaborative model based on common interests, and finally a team organized with/among team leaders. Each model builds experience in particular aspects of team dynamics and realizations building to the culminating quintessential experience of experiencing leadership and the active follower.

Problems and student work

Each collaboration includes complex visual and communication problems that need cutting-edge and innovative solutions. Each new group/team formulation will focus on a particular communication or design objective, which will result in the development of a complete set of visual solutions. The group/team is responsible for the project presentation to the class.

Projects need to be complex, high-bar standards, both interdisciplinary and multi-media, besides the mix of audience groups for the collaboration to become creative.

Linear collaborations focus on the experience of focused, silent, knowledge building in a narrative form based on assigned reading. This project is called, "The power of process, thinking, being". It typically includes the application and combination of four voices. The first being the linear collaboration and the voices of the individual collaborators (usually 5-6). The second is a reflective voice addressing the learning in the process. The third includes the voice of a visiting lecturer (Martin Venezky, Mikon van Gastel etc), and the fourth voice is the students reflection of the IDEO Frontline Special video. An essential aspect of this problem is experiencing and communicating lateral thinking processes, also being able to visually formulate a piece that formally communicates these typographic elements. This project is completed individual in a week! (Show examples)

The second collaborative paradigm based acuties in a random model, is usually based on a project brief that is merely a point-of-departure. This year the imperative was, "Promote Oregon Tourism". The teams were to research, ideate, and bring to a realization their campaigns with at least as many avenues of deliverables as there are members in the group. These teams are given three weeks to complete the project. (Show examples)

The third collaborative is based on the overlapping interest of the individuals in the team. For this collaboration to be effective, a variety of "Real" projects are collected so that a synergy can be created around a particular topic. The students also work with a "Community Collaborator" or client. They are presented with strategies for client interactions and communications based on the thinking style and project definition. They accomplish a set of communication goals for the client in three weeks and present to the client. (Show examples)

The fourth collaboration is one based on the inclusion of a leader dynamic. Lectures are presented directed at exploring leadership models and styles. The full class assists in choosing the leader from amongst them using a series of freewrites and silent voting mechanisms. The leaders are then brought together to assess the abilities, acuties, thinking, and working styles of the individuals in the class and are then directed to formulate (as equal as possible) highly competitive teams. The project for this four-week collaboration is to create a working board game based on collaboration and creative thinking. (Show examples)

The speed, complexity, meaningful purpose, and openness of the projects are essential for a true creative collaboration to be realized, supporting independent thinking, and creative problem solving ensuring "buy-in" by the collaborators.

Evaluation mechanisms

The evaluation for this course required indepth consideration. The grading mechanism is complex but can be accomplished with clarity essential to ensure that the next collaborative experience begins on a positive note. There are four corner stones to this process delineated in a clear syllabus that is an accurate representation of all considerations taken into account. (Managing expectations)

1 Project grade is an average of 60% group grade and 40% personal grade. Group grade is assessed competitively with other groups in the class (only one group gets an A) in terms of the research, concept, process, and final realization.

2 Personal grade is responsive to assessment of professionalism and an indepth written self and peer evaluations based on the following questions.

What was your role in the collaboration?

For what aspects of the solution do you feel most responsible?

How did you feel that the group responded to each other's ideas? Please give examples.

What grade did your group deserve for the project?

If the group effort added up to 100%, apportion each person in your group, including yourself, a percentage of the credit.

What grade did you deserve for your part in the collaboration

How do you think your group did relative to the others in the class?

Were there any particular aspects of the workings of another group that interested you?

Were there any particular aspects of the collaborative nature of any person in the class that interested you?

Can you delineate the roles in certain successful collaborative groups in the class?

3 Assessment of the process book in three parts: Documentation of the collaboration methodology and process, documentation of the project process including research, formal exploration and concept development, and finally documentation of the project realization

4 Final individual exit interviews to assess cumulative learning

Course findings: Faculty

- › The optimum group size is 3-5 for fast paced projects in a Liberal Arts University setting.
- › The discovery phase set the level of understanding
- › Difficult challenges, balanced with flexible realization expectations are important.
- › Performance based. The bar high needs to at a high level.
- › Short amount of time and increased stress needed to ensure collaboration.
- › Strategically placed informative lectures, directed, freewrites, and reflective analysis kept the focus on the balance between theory and practice.
- › The students seemed to consolidate learning from previous courses in the Graphic Design major and move more freely between mediums.
- › Articulation of their collaborative process, search methodologies, and project realization made learning clear.

- › High level of expectation in both ethics and level of work.
- › Highly charged competitive and positively charged environments work well
- › Open-ended assignments based on important issues aroused passionate responses resulted in strong conceptual work.
- › Leaders styles were more thoughtful instead of, the expected, directive role.
- › They pooled the individual strengths to build overall brilliance.
- › Shared presentations well while making them complete and entertaining.
- › Open media responses for the students to define
- › Peer evaluations presented a significant motivation to do well.

Course findings: Students

- › Work with community collaborators gave them a “Real World” experience.
- › Felt and acted mutually responsive and responsible.
- › Worked harder and had more fun in the process than they expected.
- › Were able to learn from, support, and challenge each other.
- › They kept each other on schedule working on time-management.
- › Could compare the collaborative paradigms and formulated opinions of why and when to choose one or another type of organization.
- › Learning to work with each other focusing on personal strengths and acuties, brought out the best in each other.

Whether they loved or hated the course all felt that it was important.

Course findings: About the work

- › Work produced was more conceptual and multi-faceted
- › Completed assignments on time
- › Mediums used ranged considerably
- › Presentations were expressive

Conclusion

I have enjoyed formulating this course and exploring the potential teaching and learning environment created by the dynamic simultaneity of engaging theory and practice, building upon one another. I have collaborated with Joann DeMott in formulating and adapting collaborative processes that she has used in her role as a Facilitator and Training Consultant to many universities, US Navy, and other entities too numerous to note. Teaching this course for the past four years has been my delight and we hope to complete writing the textbook based on this course this summer.

1Thinking Styles and Collaboration. DeMott, 2

2Thinking Styles and Collaboration. DeMott, 4

3Thinking Styles and Collaboration. DeMott, 8

4The Wisdom of Teams, Katzenbach, Smith, 8, 27, 149, 175

5 Creative Collaborations, Bennis, Biederman, 31, 63, 117

6 The Wisdom of Teams, Katzenbach, Smith, 11, 85,130, 149

7 Creative Collaborations, Bennis, Biederman, 196