

STORIES OF DESIGN SUCCESS

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores how we, as design researchers, practitioners and educators, view and define design success in the context of design education. Within our work as design educators, we often describe a successful design student as *“those that produce work which is of real distinction, showing originality of concept, interpretation and realisation as well as an outstanding grasp of the context in which their work is placed.”* Thus, this success is recognition of an unusual combination of talent, commitment and critical/contextual knowledge. The paper adopts a novel approach to success, however, in that it explores the notion of success from the personal accounts of a number of recent design graduates. Rather than relying on the conventional etymological, pedagogical or practical definitions of the term success, the paper seeks to provide first-hand case study stories of what it means today to be a successful designer. Data concerning the graduates' formal educational success is contextualised and amplified by a preliminary analysis of results from semi-structured interviews. The paper seeks to explore their personal agendas, motivations and approaches, comparing their perceptions with those of their peers and tutors, and how one can help foster and engender positive models of personal development and self efficacy.

Keywords: Design education, design success, reflective stories

1 INTRODUCTION

Success is a subjective term often used to mean a favourable or desired outcome or in relationship to an individual's personal wealth or eminence. From a design perspective, however, success relates to products and processes turning out well – that is, the attainment of a particular desired object or end [1], [2]. Moreover, design success can be considered from many different viewpoints – from technological to emotional, from functional to social, and from psychological to economical. The authors have previously investigated the relationship of a student's design success and their individual cultural capital [3] and this groundwork has been the motivation for further research.

2 DEFINITIONS OF SUCCESS

The dictionary [4] defines success, from the Latin *successus*, as:

1. “The favourable outcome of something attempted.”
2. “The attainment of wealth or fame.”
3. “An action or performance that is characterised by success.”
4. A person or thing that is successful.”

Thus, success can be seen as something involving an aim or objective (*e.g.* solving a particular problem), the accomplishment of that particular aim or objective in the manner desired, leading to a favourable outcome (*e.g.* realised product).

Success in education in general and in design education specifically revolves around an alpha-numeric evaluation system. Therefore, it is typical for design students (particularly in the UK) to be continually assessed on their success or otherwise using a scale similar to that shown in Figure 1.

GRADE	DESCRIPTION	DEGREE
A	An 'A' grade is awarded to students who produce work which is of real distinction, showing originality of concept, interpretation and realisation as well as an outstanding grasp of the context in which their work is placed. It is recognition of an unusual combination of talent, commitment and critical/ contextual knowledge.	<i>A1 – First Class, Top Rating</i> <i>A2 - First Class, Mid Rating</i> <i>A3 - First Class, Low Rating</i>
B	A 'B' grade represents work of high merit and is not given lightly. It shows some originality and good interpretation and realisation skills, with a firm grasp of the context underpinning the work.	<i>B1 – Upper Second Class, Top Rating</i> <i>B2 - Upper Second Class, Mid Rating</i> <i>B3 - Upper Second Class, Low Rating</i>
C	A 'C' grade represents good work and the majority of students might reasonably be expected to produce work that fits into this category. A 'C' grade is a commendable result.	<i>C1 – Lower Second Class, Top Rating</i> <i>C2 - Lower Second Class, Mid Rating</i> <i>C3 - Lower Second Class, Low Rating</i>
D	A 'D' grade represents work that is a clear pass, although below the average attainment.	<i>D1 – Third Class, Top Rating</i> <i>D2 - Third Class, Mid Rating</i> <i>D3 – Third Class, Low Rating</i>
E	An 'E' grade represents work that falls short in several areas of a clear pass for an Honours award.	
F	An 'F' grade represents work that falls short in all areas.	

Figure 1. Alpha Numeric "Success" Scale

3 PERCEPTIONS OF SUCCESS

Psychological studies of success and failure in our society reveal that one of the most important characteristics of successful people is "accurate perception" [5]. This paper is based on the notion that the key to success for design graduates is the ability to accurately perceive what is required within a variety of contexts. Thus, the paper will investigate what is a student's perception of the skills necessary to be a successful designer? What is the industrial perception of the skills necessary to be a successful designer? Does academia and industry agree on the way forward? And can we define a consensual definition of what constitutes student success?

The authors' definition of 'skills' is essentially referring to the attitudes, skills and knowledge that designers need to be effective and therefore successful in their roles. Writer Shel Perkins [6] defines the essential skill sets for designers as being: "talent, technical skills, people skills and business skills."

To determine what defines a successful student designer and graduate, it is essential to identify the views of the 4 key stakeholders - society, industry, staff and most crucially students, and blend these potentially disparate perceptions into a consensus for change.

3.1 Society's Perception

Society typically regards designers as creative individuals who are involved in identifying problems, reflecting on these issues, experimenting with form and materials, and ultimately proposing solutions that will address or alleviate some or all of the problems identified. Design is about intention [7] and as Richard Seymour, of the design consultancy Seymour Powell, once stated: “*Anything that is not nature, is design (or designed).*” [8]. UK society generally views design as one of its national strengths. In many of the creative industries, the UK is an acknowledged world leader. The UK's record in design and innovation over the years from the industrial revolution through to the jet engine and television is exemplary. The UK continues to produce a disproportionate number of the world's ideas. The concept of the worldwide web originated with Sir Tim Berners-Lee; 80 per cent of the chips in mobile phones manufactured in the Far East are designed in the UK; the designer of the product that has probably had the most impact on any company's fortunes, the iPod, was a Briton, Jonathan Ive; when the new A380 Airbus recently took to the air, it did so not only on UK-designed (and built) wings and engines, but with the whole cabin interior designed by a UK company [9].

3.2 Industry's Perception

Designers have proved remarkably adept at constantly evolving their practice and skill-sets to adapt to the changing needs of Industry. This process has accelerated as we move away from an age of mass production to one of mass customisation, where manufacturers tailor production to satisfy individual tastes. Designers are now set the task of stimulating and meeting ever more sophisticated and complex consumer demands, and the skills traditionally perceived to guarantee success are arguably in danger of becoming outdated.

Many studies have considered the relationship between design and commercial success. The strongest of these provide empirical evidence on the link between design and commercial performance. Gemser and Leenders [10] study of Dutch firms found that the integration of design into 'New Product Development' projects has a significant and positive influence on company performance (profit, turnover and export sales). This phenomenon is also seen within a UK context with Bruce *et al* [11] demonstrating that 60% of 178 UK funded design projects could be defined as commercially successful (measured by positive financial returns on investment). Recent research for the Design Council [12] showed 63 design intensive companies outperformed the FTSE by more than 200 per cent over 1994-2004, demonstrating the enormous benefits of design in achieving commercial success.

Given the impact that design can have on profit margins it is unsurprising that industry has become increasingly vocal in demanding that academia produces design students who have the required skill sets. Extensive research by the Creative Cultural Skills unit and the Design Council in the form of interviews with practising designers has revealed in detail the actual skills that design employers are looking for and issues that currently exist. The skills employers say they are looking for from designers in order to become successful can be categorised into three areas:

Pure design skills

- Ability to be realistic in their ideas
- Empathy with clients/consumers
- Creative spark
- An 'eye' for good design
- Curiosity and passion for design
- Basic drawing skills
- Core software skills.

Workplace skills

- Ability to articulate ideas
- Ability to take criticism
- Team working skills
- Ability to work to deadlines.

Discipline-specific skills

For example, rendering for product design

While recent surveys such as www.keepbritshdesignalive.com suggest that Design employers are broadly satisfied with the quality of design graduates, there has been a growing concern that the rise in student numbers in higher education is leading to a dilution of standards and quality. The most common is that undergraduate courses are not linked closely enough with practising designers and that, partly as a result, they fail to fully develop students' understanding of how to apply their skills in a commercial context. Saperstein [13] has proposed a list of the key Industrial determinants of graduate success:

1. Technical competence
2. Flexibility
3. Teaming
4. Communication skills
5. Ethics

But are these skills clearly seen within the assessment criteria of academia?

3.3 Staff Perception

Assessment within progressive UK educational design programmes is based on the communication of a deep understanding of the design process and design issues. Assessment involves a diverse range of presentation models such as formal vivas, group discussion and crits, self-assessment, poster presentation and public exhibition, discussion and dissemination [14].

Assessment is an integral element of undergraduate and postgraduate courses, rather than merely 'bolted on', so as to show students' the outcomes of their learning in a constructive manner [15].

To avoid the pitfalls of subjective marking, students undertake learning plans and discuss the specific project outcomes they intend to meet, and how they will demonstrate this. This enables a staff team to provide objective feedback on their performance - and crucially, to help students identify their strengths and weaknesses.

Given the vocational demands of design education, it is good practice to ensure that the assessment criteria are understandable, explicit and transparent to the design industry as well as the students and staff. This is reinforced through the use of external industrial critics who actively observe and contribute to the assessment process.

It is clear that professional designers need to develop assessment criteria, which will enable them to further society's understanding of design and its relationship to the world in general. As such the benefits of enabling students to author their own assessment criteria has been widely promoted [16]. While students are often driven by a desire to know whether they are performing better than another student, it is an essential pedagogical desire that they learn how to reflect upon their mistakes and successes and continue to develop and refine their design abilities. Recent educational theory and training has promoted the use of learning outcomes as a key device to define and measure student success, and crucially provide a template onto which students can map themselves through the Solo Taxonomy method [17].

Such an approach has been found to enable students to measure their achievements and encourage a deeper learning approach appropriate for reflective practice [18], and move them from a 'multi-structural' approach to a more 'relational', or 'extended abstract' model of learning and critical self awareness.

3.4 Students' Perception

Six recent successful design graduates were interviewed, in a semi-structured manner [19], in an attempt to reveal and reflect upon their views on what personal and design knowledge, skills, and

techniques are necessary to be a successful designer. Moreover, the students were asked to describe their personal agenda(s) and motivations during their time as a design student and also to compare and evaluate their perceived success with that of their peers. The full list of questions asked during the semi-structured interviews is given in Figure 2 (below).

STORIES OF ACHIEVEMENT
<i>How do we define student Design success?</i>
Name:
Age:
Gender:
Design Qualifications:
Employment:
On a scale of 1 to 5, how successful do you feel you were as a student of design (Select One only)?
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 1. not successful at all 2. had some successes and failures 3. average success 4. very successful 5. exceptionally successful
On a scale of 1 to 5, how successful do you feel you are today (Select One only)?
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 1. not successful at all 2. had some successes and failures 3. average success 4. very successful 5. exceptionally successful
1. How would you define design success?
2. Can you explain your personal agenda(s) in relation to your experiences as a design student (i.e. what were you trying to achieve)?
3. What design skills do you feel are required to be successful?
4. What personal skills do you feel are required to be successful?
5. What were your key motivations in your time as a design student?
6. What were your major approaches in your time as a design student?

7. How would you compare your perceptions of your success with those of your peers?
8. How do you feel we (as design educators) can help foster and engender positive models of personal development and self efficacy in design (<i>i.e.</i> encourage more design success for our students)?
9. As a successful design graduate what advice would you give to other design students?

Figure 2. Student Design Success Interview Questions

4 SIX STUDENT STORIES OF ACHIEVEMENT CASE STUDIES

Six recent design graduates have been interviewed¹ in an effort to reveal first-hand what it means to them be a successful designer today. These interviews focus on the design graduates' personal accounts of their and others' success stories. Figure 3 provides some personal data of the interviewees involved in the study.

Ed	29	Male	Product Design	Upper Second Class Degree	Freelance Designer
Mark	25	Male	Industrial Design	Upper Second Class Degree	Education
Jane	31	Female	Fashion Design	Upper Second Class Degree	Education/ Freelance Designer
Deb	22	Female	Product Design	1 st Class Degree	Retail
Kirk	28	Male	Furniture and Product Design	1 st Class Degree	Freelance Designer
Anne	24	Female	Industrial Design	1 st Class Degree	Design Manager

Figure 3. Design Graduates' Personal Data

4.1 Graduates' Defining Success

In response to the first question "How would you define design success?" the graduates all focussed on the commercial aspects of design:

[Jane] "My definition of success is commercial success – having your design out there and there being a demand for it."

[Ed] "Success is getting something to market – then you are a designer. Once you become a brand yourself then you are very successful."

[Deb] "Success is about getting your work out there and for people to debate about it – that is success in itself."

[Kirk] "Doing what I set out to do and realising dreams."

[Anne] "If a 'designer' can work in a commercial context and resist the pressures of the industry, its unpredictability and its fluctuations, I would rate this as being successful... If a 'designer' can work for himself or herself, or within a consultancy where design is the integral part of the role and design is valued as it should be I would also say that this is successful."

4.2 Personal Agenda

Each graduate had their own agenda in relation to their student experiences and what they were trying to achieve:

[Jane] "I want to be a self-employed designer working from home and around my lifestyle. I want to be more refined, more polished and professional. I need to catch up with technology and get a better idea of the industry – especially with design research and the processes involved."

¹ The names of the students have been changed.

[Deb] *"I feel now that I set my personal expectations for myself too high. I wanted to be a successful designer that everyone loved. Although through practising design I have learnt that this will never be achievable."*

[Ed] *"I was trying to move from a 2D background into the world of 3D."*

[Mark] *"I had a year out between my 3rd and 4th year, and this really helped me take the time to gain some experience and identify my strengths and weaknesses."*

[Kirk] *"From day one my plan was to get as much out of my time as possible, there were plenty of other things I could have been doing instead. I wanted to spend time among others who had similar motivations and drive."*

[Anne] *"As a design student, aware of the current climate of the industry, my goals were to gain as many transferable skills as possible and to gain as high an academic achievement as possible, not to close any doors of opportunity and endeavour to open as many as possible."*

4.3 Design Skills

In terms of design skills required to be a successful designer, the design graduates listed a number of personal qualities:

[Ed] *"You need to be able to think for yourself, yet be ready to accept other influences."*

[Jane] *"Ideally – talent, drive, vitality, awareness, etc. In reality: fierce ambition, balls, putting in the hours (dedication), sheer graft, understanding of which boxes to tick."*

[Deb] *"Communicating an idea – sell, sell, sell!!! Being open to influences. Having confidence in your ideas."*

[Mark] *"Have the broadest knowledge possible in as many things as possible, in the design field and in everything else. Never be afraid to mess up, and never be afraid of getting a bad review."*

[Kirk] *"Open inquisitive mind and a desire to question everything."*

[Anne] *"Having an understanding of the manufacturing processes and the suppliers needs is a 'design skill' that is invaluable."*

4.4 Personal Skills

Similarly, in response to the question concerning design skills (above) the design graduates emphasised specific personal traits in their responses to the question - what personal skills do you feel are required to be successful?

[Deb] *"An open mind but one with confidence and attitude. You need to have the opinion – fuck everyone else, I'm going to do what I want to do because I like it. Although you need to be open to criticism and reflect on it."*

[Mark] *"Be open. Confidence and a certain degree of arrogance outwardly (but the most important thing is to know when to be and when not to be). Be responsive to others and their ideas, never be afraid to say 'that's crap' but you must have something to say after that, don't just slate something and walk away - discuss it."*

[Ed] *"Confidence without arrogance. A positive nature and a will to work hard."*

[Kirk] *"Motivation, hard work and belief in yourself are everything; add some luck, gentle persuasion and pinch of talent you could be there."*

[Anne] *"Without passion for what you do, the products will never even meet the most basic needs to suit the brief."*

4.5 Motivations

The design graduates each listed a number of key motivations in their design studies:

[Mark] *"Grades, maybe a little naively. I needed something to measure myself against and grades seemed to be the easiest way to do it. I think I missed out a little because I was so focused on that."*

[Jane] *"I need to be creative and have my own identity in this lifetime. I want to have my own quite small design company that I can control."*

[Deb] *"People around me in the studio encouraged me to work harder. My main motivation was to succeed and surpass my annoying narrow-minded fellow students."*

[Ed] *"My key motivation stemmed from a love for design...enjoying working through problems and getting recognition for success."*

[Kirk] *"A chance to surprise myself."*

[Anne] *"Striving to have as strong a start as possible in the job market was my motivation."*

4.6 Personal Approaches

The successful design graduates stated a variety of approaches during their studies:

[Jane] *"I looked at trying to disturb people and use colour, light, scale and space to express myself."*

[Mark] *"I tried to outdo myself from the project before, and also outdo the others in my class."*

[Ed] *"My approach was to enjoy what I was doing. You must enjoy it and want it."*

[Deb] *"...to experiment and explore all the options, and become my own designer."*

[Kirk] *"I made it my mission to grab every chance however small with both hands."*

[Anne] *"I tried to approach each brief with a different approach, as in essence most briefs required the same deliverables and outcomes. By trying to tackle and respond to briefs in different ways to best meet those deliverables I could find creative strategies that worked and that best suited me."*

4.7 Peer to Peer Success Comparison

Perhaps the most revealing accounts of the design graduates' achievement stories are to be found in their responses to the question about their perceptions of how their success compared with that of their peers. For example:

[Ed] *"I have success in that I work freelance as a designer and I am part of a design collective group. I have exhibited my work at various events and therefore have done more than most of my ex fellow students but I am not yet where I want to be."*

[Deb] *"I succeeded way beyond that of my peers. I worked harder than I ever have and it paid off in the end. I have received a lot of media coverage, won awards for my work, and been selected to exhibit within various design exhibitions. Also graduating with the only first class degree in the class, a university medal and faculty award was a bonus. Therefore, I feel I have succeeded way beyond my peers."*

[Jane] *"I find a lot of work around me quite crap. I'm not saying that I have currently done amazingly better but I get pretty angry at other design graduates that are producing total rubbish. I consider myself to have the potential to do well (ideas, etc.) but I'm lacking the drive, hard work and presentation side so I'm in the 'not very good' category right now."*

[Mark] *"Some of the people from my graduating year have gone onto great things so I feel, comparatively to them, I am not very successful. However, the lines that they took I feel would not suit me and I would not be happy in those positions. However I would not mind having the opportunity to try. I wouldn't know till I had, whether I would like that or not."*

[Anne] *"I think my peers would view me and my career as being successful from a design point of view as I won a series of national and international design awards at college and since graduation I've been constantly employed in 'good' design roles."*

4.8 Achieving Future Success

The penultimate question probed the design graduates to reflect on their own experiences and consider how we, as design educators, could encourage more success for future design students. The responses were:

[Deb] *"Give students the opportunity to explore their personal boundaries within the design field. Allow them to think for themselves."*

[Jane] *"I think having successful designers and entrepreneurs giving talks would be brilliantly useful."*

[Ed] *"To encourage successful students you must let them think for themselves. Encourage them to explore and make mistakes. Also engender a positive can do attitude. Let them believe they can achieve."*

[Kirk] *"Possibly student's need more chances to define their own personal goals. What are you in it for? What do you want to get out of this time at college? What do you want to stand next to at the end and say 'this is me'?"*

[Anne] *"I think design success should be supported by building-in areas of the new design role, as it has developed over the years, for example, perhaps more emphasis should be put on understanding of costs and financial pressures on products and designers."*

4.9 Graduates' Advice

The final question asked the design graduates what advice they would offer to prospective design students. Their answers were as follows:

[Ed] “Choose to be your own designer/person. Listen to others, make your evaluations then make a decision and be positive. Defend your work when you have to with reasoned argument.”

[Deb] “In order to succeed in this profession you have to be prepared for a lot of let downs and criticisms. Use these experiences as a way of pushing forward and moving on to the next stage.”

[Mark] “Work bloody hard, once you think you have finished, you haven’t, start again and do it all over. Sketch and keep sketching, build a vast library of design books with pretty pictures in them. Look at design outside of your chosen specialization. Go and build the thing - experiment!”

[Jane] “Don’t expect the mountain to come to Mohammed. That is, at this level you’ve got to make big personal efforts to go after your goals.”

[Kirk] “Hard work is key, if you’re not up for it ask yourself why, preferably sooner rather than later.”

[Anne] “A designer’s success is not quantified by which of the national galleries work is exhibited in, how much you earn, the macho view of how many hours are spent in the office, the value of design classics you own or how many walls of your house are laden with design books. Success should be accredited to those who work in design and can leave at the end of a working day having made decisions and maintained the integrity of a brand or a product for the cause of ‘good’ design and look forward to the next day.”

The final measure reported here is how each design graduate rated themselves in terms of (1) how they rated themselves as a student of design, on a five point scale (1 being not successful and 5 being exceptionally successful), and (2) how successful they feel they are today as a practising designer. Figure 4 illustrates the results from this part of the interview.

Name	Success as a student	Success as a designer
Ed	3 – average success	2 - some successes and failures
Mark	3 - average success	2 - some successes and failures
Jane	2 –some successes and failures	2 - some successes and failures
Deb	5 – exceptionally successful	3 - average success
Kirk	4 - very successful	4 - very successful
Anne	3 - average success	2 - some successes and failures

Figure 4. Design Graduates’ Success Rating Responses

5 CONCLUSIONS

During this paper the authors have proposed that the perceptions of what skills are necessary to become a successful designer differ greatly between students, staff, society and industry. With such a contradictory perception of success, it is therefore unsurprising that many students feel lost upon leaving the 'ivory tower' of academia, and fail to live up to their promise. These differing perceptions may also contribute to the difficulty in ensuring that graduate designers are equipped for the future, and the constant paradigm shifts in the discipline. For example, if we take the results illustrated in Figure 4 we can see that the *average success rating as a student* is just over 3 compared to an *average success rating as a designer* of 2.5. This downturn in the students’ personal perception of their success might be partly due to the ‘comfort zone’ nature of their educational experience. That is, most students are embedded in the culture of the educational design studio for 3 or 4 years and they become familiar with their surroundings and their peers. This is in stark contrast to the more demanding nature of their experiences within the commercial design industry where they have to establish themselves into the philosophy and organisational structure of the business.

Recent paradigm shifts such as environmentalism and the service economy have been driven by social and industrial factors, with academia and students reacting to external pressures. But how as teachers, researchers and practitioners can we ensure a more proactive approach? The authors argue that by taking stock of these six personal accounts on the nature of design success is a good starting point. It is

acknowledged that the survey of only six individuals is not enough to draw any valid conclusions but the results do provide some indicators of graduate design students perceptions and accounts of success. Figure 5, below, provides a number of indicators of graduate design students' notions of success, with a measure of quantifiable data, that may contribute to design success in undergraduate education.

Characteristics of Success	Responses (%)
Design Success Definition	Commercial success (83%)
Personal Agenda	Successful designer (33%) Skills (33%) Experience (33%)
Design Skills	Open to influences (50%) Ambition (17%) Broad Knowledge (33%)
Personal Skills	Confidence (50%) Passion (33%)
Motivations	Employment (33%) Fellow students (33%)
Personal Approaches	Enjoy/ Explore (33%)
Peer to Peer Comparison	4 of the 5 thought they were more or the equal of their peers (80%)
Future Success	Think for themselves/ Creative freedom [to make mistakes] (60%)
Advice	Hard work/ Effort (100%)

Figure 5. Student Patterns and Indicators of Success

Determining a common definition of success that is accepted by academia, industry, and the community at large is a starting point. By developing assessment methods to enable student's to take control of their lifelong learning, academics such as the authors of this paper hope to ensure their students continue to write their own personal stories of achievement, and redefine the future of design.

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