

SUPPORTING DESIGN COMMUNITIES: DESIGNERS' PERSPECTIVES

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ABSTRACT

Localised un-structured design communities can benefit the designer and the design process [1]. To explore the concept of community and its impact on design, a series of semi-structured interviews were conducted. The interview responses were given by designers from a range of design disciplines and were aimed at understanding generic significance and implications of design communities. The interviews were carried out within informal settings with the intention of building up conversation through a flexible question format. The answers given addressed the issue of designer interaction with regard to past experiences and education, current processes, resources and influences used, and the industry as a whole. The un-prescriptive nature of the interviews was sought to facilitate more realistic, un-biased opinions from design professionals. The aim of the paper is to reveal the opinions of designers and the examples they give to suggest that un-structured communities are beneficial to their career. Furthermore, examples are given of the impact educational, local and international communities can have. This paper describes the importance of creative centers, be it educational or local, in forming links with international centers in order to facilitate broader global communities and networks. By using local networks of creativity the student and professional designer has access to networks in an international context.

Keywords: design networks, community support

1 INTRODUCTION

In this paper the concept of design communities is understood as collaboration between persons where “teamwork is not an explicit requirement”, where collaboration does not necessarily need a “shared goal” and where “un-structured collaboration – minimally requires an open exchange of ideas and issues between participants” [p188, 1]. This paper also considers design communities that transcend an organisational framework. Such communities exist between persons who know each other historically, maybe through school or previous employment. These communities are used by the designer in generating solutions to pre-determined, possibly wicked problems [2], in an evolving process of analysis, synthesis and evaluation [3]. That design process should, as Goel [4] maintained, be open to continuous development. Craig and Zimring [1], whose work is built upon in this paper, further argued that “un-structured interaction can potentially produce the same effect” [p190, 1], by continually opening the designer to the consideration of others. Un-structured design communities can be seen therefore as beneficial to the design process. Empirical studies have shown, for example, that corrective and reflective speech between peers improves idea and concept generation [5]. Similarly Okada and Simon [6] demonstrated that group activity was superior to

individual activity in relation to arguments and ideas generated, as they were more greatly developed when discussed within a group. It should be noted, however, that some factors can influence the impact un-structured group interaction can have. Diehl and Stroebe [7] concluded in their research, that three issues could have a consequence on brainstorming groups. These are evaluation apprehension, free-riding and production blocking. Evaluation apprehension results from persons feeling insecure in providing ideas when they are being judged or within groups with persons they perceive as having a greater ability. Free-riding may occur if a person does not feel they need to contribute and can simply sit back and use the ideas generated by others. Production blocking may result as a consequence of not having access to communicate concepts as others may dominate the group discussion [1]. Although these factors are important facets to understanding un-structured collaboration, they specifically refer to student group work. Collaboration between peers in an educational setting is an interesting case in point in it's own right, as students are often in a situation where their grades are marked against that of their peers. In this paper we look at professional designers, and while their work maybe compared to other designers who are within the same creative community, the assessment is more implicit.

2 METHODOLOGY

During the summer of 2005, eight people participated in in-depth interviews. The interviews lasted approximately an hour and had a semi-structured format. Most of the interviews were carried out in the workplace of the architect/designer, although some were carried out in social surroundings (cafes). The interviews were organised into 1) the background of the designer/architect 2) what they did on a day-to-day level and 3) the future and their aspirations for themselves and the industry. Although the interviews were semi-structured and had a format to them, off topic open discussions were encouraged. The disciplines of the participants were purposefully wide ranging, although they were all within the creative domain. The decision to question a selection of people from different subject backgrounds was based on a desire to see if the differing participants gave similar responses. The selection procedure was based on references from colleagues and friends and this is noted as a caveat to the research. The disciplines that were represented were architecture (3 persons), graphic design (2 persons), product design (but who had also completed some interior design projects) (1 person), jewellery design (1 person) and animation (1 person). All participants were based in Scotland, U.K. Two of the eight participants were based in Edinburgh, one was based in Dundee and the rest were based in Glasgow.

3 SOCIAL INFLUENCES

The following interview analysis is grouped into two themes, workforce resource and sources of information. Other aspects of social influence are, of course, of relevance but have been excluded from this paper for the sake of brevity. The interview questions themselves did not ask explicitly how each designer was influenced by their peers. The analysis of the interview data looked at each interview as a whole and sought out references to social influence.

3.1 Workforce resource

3.1.1 Internal

Those who worked within companies (5 from the 8) expressed to some degree that they used their colleagues as a resource. One architect stated that:

“There are members of staff who are more experienced from a technical point of view or who end up doing more warrant applications for example and are up to date with current legislation. We also send them on courses so we try and keep them up to date with current legislation”

3.1.2 External

Those people who were interviewed and who worked interdependently expressed that they used their contacts to provide additional services that they couldn't provide on their own. The following is a quote taken from the product designer. He is responding to a question about describing his work and he talking about the fact he does a wide range of creative projects.

“Because it's a small company, primarily me, I keep my overheads down by having a pool of staff/people. Which means I can put together a really strong team of the best design professionals in a project and it works for me. It works for them too, they're all like-minded, smaller companies that are easy to change and shape and adapt for various clients needs... If it's a project that has a strong graphic input, I'll bring in a graphic designer”

3.2 Sources of information

3.2.1 Knowledge

All of the designers interviewed stated that they learn from the people they work with or the contacts they know. Acknowledgement of this was recognised at various points in the interviews. One architect was asked how her work had changed over time and she responded:

“I think the older you get, the less afraid you are to admit when you don't know something. Starting in practice there's often a tendency not to speak out if you don't understand the problem, or part of the brief or whatever. Through time and a little bit of experience you know when to ... voice or to know where to look for information or who to ask for assistance”

Similarly when the product designer was asked the same question he commented:

“Initially I had to learn on the job, but now if I don't know, I've got quite a good database of people I can phone. If I have any problem, I can put my hand up and say I don't know and seek advice from others”

Another architect commented that when beginning a design from scratch, it's useful to use *“other people's work as a resource”*. He went on to say that it's useful to get opinion from other people who may have done similar work before, and can advise on *“the issues”*. He perceived that it's *“good to keep your feet on the ground, to get advice early on. Especially engineering advice about products and specialist stuff”*

3.2.2 Reflection

When asked how her work had changed and how she could see it changing in the future. The animator responded that she could see her work becoming more team based than individual.

“It [the work] wasn't just for myself and I guess in the early stages it was purely a self

instigating thing of work and research and I didn't need to show anyone the path I'd gone through. And then once I'd realised that this was quite important and a lot of practitioners don't really extrapolate how they've done it and it's quite a mystery how you get to the end product and that changed, I think, in me."

This can be seen as implying that when the animator looks back and reflects over her work, there is a need for, not only herself, but for others to understand the paths she has taken and why.

3.2.3 Inspiration

One of the graphic designers stated that the people who they work with on a day-to-day level, inspire and influence what they do. He gave the following example:

"People around you have an effect on how you do your work. I was working on a project with [name removed] and he was doing the web stuff and I was doing the graphics for it. I overheard a conversation between [name removed] and [name removed], and they were talking about something totally off topic and anyway it got me thinking."

4 IMPLICATIONS

Considering the responses given by the designers, it can be seen that they perceived social influence as a beneficial factor to their design work. Some designers overtly verbalized the importance of peers in their work and spoke of how design communities came about and how they can be supported.

4.1 Education

Community based support has been shown to provide essential assistance for the learning experience [8]. It can be seen not only as a useful factor while involved in the education process but also as the creator of a community. The jewellery designer, for example, felt that education was a significant factor in an organic design network. When asked what would have helped in her past career, she commented:

"Well in Glasgow, I know definitely that there's a really good Masters of design course at Glasgow school of Art. It attracts international students from all over the world and a lot of them tend to stay in Glasgow after that and keep in touch. I did a master of design at Glasgow school of art and there was only 6 of us on the course and only two of us are now in Glasgow and we were both Scottish and we stayed and we stayed in Glasgow and everyone else has gone back home. I think it could be like if the arts schools had really good masters courses and maybe there is now, but I'm not really sure and I think that would kind of help"

4.2 Local communities

The local community was seen by many designers/architects as important to their design career. All the designers/architects interviewed were based in Scotland, and many of them expressed the importance of this. For example, when asked how the industry as whole may develop, the jewellery designer commented that craft specifically in Scotland was really developing:

"I think in Scotland generally, or perhaps I'm at that stage in my career, but it's getting a lot more attention. To be a craft person in Scotland just now, it has a high

reputation. In 1996 when I was doing my jewellery degree, there was a real pressure to go to London, but now it's good to be in Scotland"

The jewellery designer went on to talk about the importance of local creative centers for helping to support design communities and also to form international links:

"There are a lot of good makers just now in the craft side, on the design side, the Lighthouse has been really good for me. Because I've been involved in the Scottish show which went to... and took 13 Scottish design companies last April and took us to Milan and then to London as part of Designers Bloc"

4.3 International communities

Many designers commented the importance of being aware of work in other countries and the international marketplace. The jewellery designer noted craft in Scotland needs to develop internationally and be influenced by what is happening internationally.

"My work is all like hand made, and I would hope that people would appreciate more hand made things. I think that when you go to other places all over the world, there are so many places that are making really lovely hand made things and that's something that not quite come to Scotland yet"

Indeed, the product designer also commented that when looking back over his career he now looks at the international marketplace and the influence of international shows:

"A big shift has been to look at an international marketplace. Looking at product design as an example and going to international shows and looking at trends within the shows"

Similarly one of the architects was acutely aware of the architectural industry in China in comparison to that of Scotland:

"Compare here to China. The speed at which they build. 3 guys on 3 computers for a multi-storey flat...[whoop noise]"

5 CONCLUSION

This paper has highlighted the views of various designers and has shown how important they perceive social design communities to be. The designers gave examples of how communities can be seen as useful in many ways. This paper looked specifically at the use of a community as a workforce resource and as a source of information. The issue of local and international communities is also discussed. If it is assumed that these communities should be encouraged, the designers themselves provide an interesting insight into how this can be achieved. Social networks amongst the designers interviewed could be seen as often stemming from educational settings such as school or university. Similarly formalised creative centres were seen as a mechanism for bringing creative people together. Formalised creative centres such as the Lighthouse in Glasgow were specifically referred to by most of the designers based in the Glasgow region of Scotland [8]. These centres are often formed from a pre-existing community, but they also encourage external membership and open a community to others. Linking formalised centres and educational establishments with others in different geographical settings forges networks in an international context, a situation that a designer may not have access to otherwise.

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