



Integrating real-world social design projects into graphic design higher education

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Abstract

This paper explores the pedagogical benefits of engaging graphic design students in real-world social design projects which are integrated within module delivery. Students worked on a creative project with an external third sector organisation and used a range of strategies to co-design zines with stakeholders. Data was collected through short evaluative surveys with the students and organisational staff at the conclusion of the project. The findings reveal the wide-ranging benefits of this activity which include developments in self-empowerment, personal growth, heightened confidence and increased perceived agency and aspirations in participants. It also exposed some of the potential challenges in social design projects such as increased timescales and greater logistical, facilitation and resource commitments.



Introduction

'Good design has the power to transform the world, bad design can cause harm.' Design Council (2023)

Researchers and critical writers have been emphasising how social and cultural considerations are shaping the graphic design discipline for some time (Barnard, 2005; Bowers, 2011; Drucker, 2009; Eskilson, 2007; Harland, 2016; Heller, 1988; Hollis, 1994; Triggs, 2009). The calls for change towards social responsibility (Harland, 2011, 2016; Mau, 2004; Rodgers & Bremner, 2017), human-centred (IDEO, 2015; Stafford, 2023), participatory approaches (Manzini, 2015; Sanders & Stappers, 2008) and inclusive and equitable practices (Lupton et al., 2021) in design research continue to impact upon and shape the graphic design discipline and profession and therefore the way that graphic design is taught in post compulsory education. Graphic design must continue to serve the needs of business and commercial contexts, as this is essential for effective communication with audiences and for the dominantly capitalist society that we live in (Berger, 2009; Harland & Meron, 2024; Heller, 2020; McCormack, 2005; World Economic Forum, 2017; Yakob, 2021). Yet there are sustainable, ethical, participatory, socially centred and inclusive approaches which can be incorporated into practice to mitigate against some of the potentially harmful consequences of design activity; often described using the umbrella term 'social design' (Ann-Noel, 2023; Lupton et al., 2021; Manzini, 2015). These external contexts motivated the decision to integrate social design within curriculum delivery where external projects are the focus. This is because all students, not just from the design disciplines, will need the knowledge and skills to drive positive social and environmental change which respect, yet begin to transcend, commercial interests to address real-world issues. A creative social design project was developed with Knowsley Council and their Oasis centre which provides short breaks for young people aged between 8-19 years old who are experiencing social and emotional difficulties and who may be on the brink of being in care. The project focussed on the creation of zines during a series of workshops delivered at the university and aimed to capture the lived experiences and voices of the young people.

Background Context

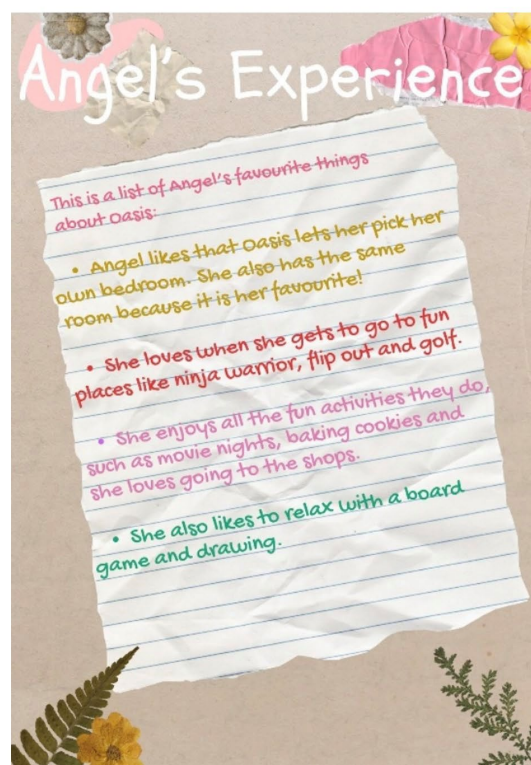
The pedagogic approach featured theoretical and practical facilitation training for the students which combined the social design methods **design thinking** and **open design**. Design thinking was chosen as an approach which provides a framework to solve real problems whilst placing people at the centre of the process (Tselepis & Lavelle, 2020).

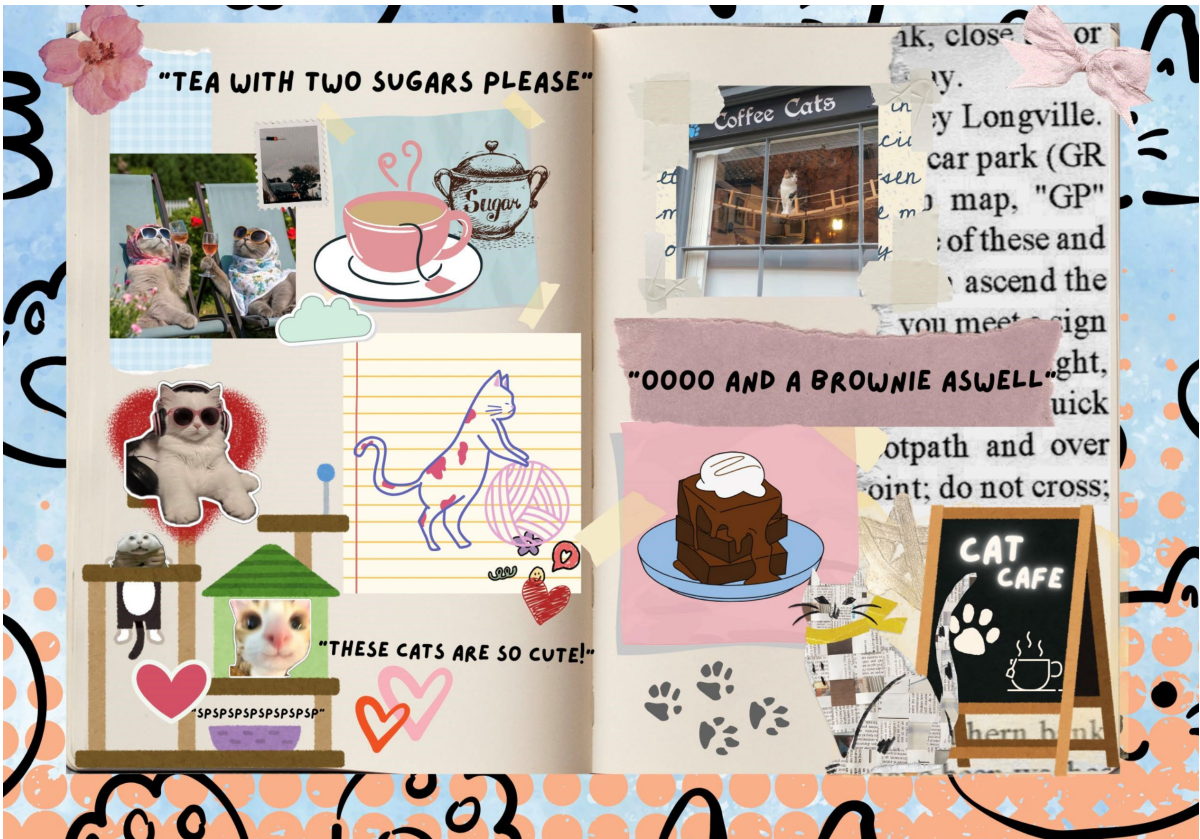


Complimenting the design thinking approach, open design aims to counterbalance traditional power dynamics between designers and their audiences (Cruickshank & Atkinson, 2014). Acknowledging that design thinking has been viewed with some contention in design research (Ackermann, 2023; Kolko, 2018; Roberts, 2023), the method was still selected owing to its accessibility benefits which encourage rapid prototyping and experimentation, and toolkits which can be used by novice student designers and non-designers. Additionally, design thinking works well with cross-disciplinary and cross-functional teams made up of individuals from diverse cultures and backgrounds (Tham, 2022; Tselepis & Lavelle, 2020). Students and participants (the young people and Oasis staffing team) were paired together on this basis for the training sessions and the design workshops.

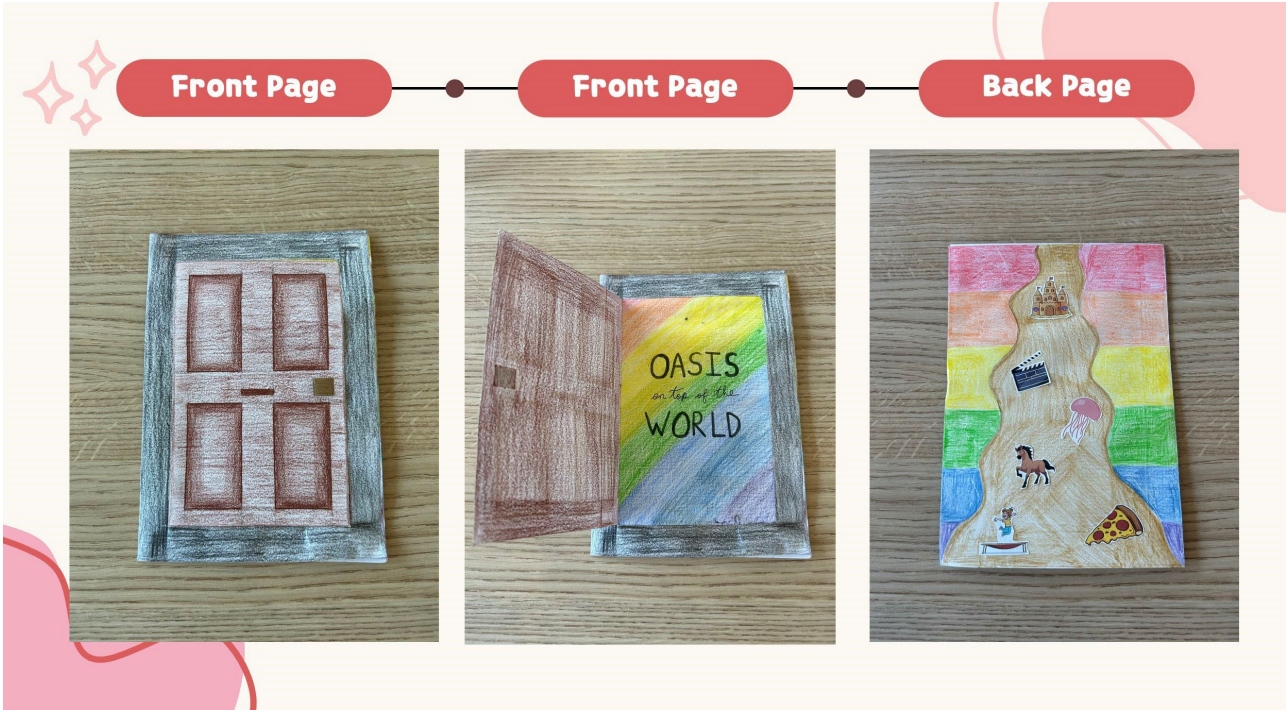
The workshops were structured to buddy up two students with one young person into a 'group'. Each group were tasked to develop ideas for, and produce, a zine which expressed the experiences of the participants whilst using the Oasis centre. A blend of hand-rendered art techniques and computer-generated creative designs were used in the workshops, led by the inclinations of the students and participants. Creative freedom of expression was promoted and errors like spelling mistakes were deliberately ignored. By training the students to train the Oasis staff and young people in the use of the open-source visual design platform Canva in the workshops, the young people and staff at Oasis were able to participate fully in the design process and then apply these skills beyond the workshops in future projects independently. Below are some examples of the creative work that was produced using Canva:







And additionally, work that was produced using more traditional art and design techniques:





Student facilitation training took place over four weeks as part of module delivery before the workshops took place and a five-stage model of **empathise-define-ideate-prototype-test** was used from the Interaction Design Foundation (Dam, 2025). This emboldened the students to be responsive and adaptive to the needs and contexts of the participants during the design process. The main adaptations the students made related to participant attendance being unpredictable. The benefits and challenges are discussed further in the proceeding sections.

Perspectives of Oasis Participants

A short qualitative survey was completed by the Oasis staff at the conclusion of the project. 75% of the staff had not previously worked on a live project with a university or educational organisation, making this a new experience for most of the team. 100% of the staff selected said that they would 'definitely' want to work on future projects with the university. The main perceived benefits of the project related to the role that creative expression played in the development of personal confidence and self-esteem in all the participants along with raising the aspirations of the young people. Another benefit was practical and soft skills development such as team working and communication and learning how to use Canva. Some of the challenges experienced by Oasis staff related to the logistical organisation and coordination of the project, mainly with transportation and staffing, and the cost implications



of this for the organisation. Another identified challenge was that most of the young people initially experienced challenges settling into educational settings and new situations.

Perspectives of Student Participants

A short qualitative survey was completed by the students at the conclusion of the project. 80% of the students had not previously worked on a live external project and none had used social design approaches before. Students identified that using social design methods was more collaborative and made designing a more personal experience because the pace of working was much slower, allowing for more time to develop designs and 'have fun' during the design process. Students viewed social designing as a driver for success with increased motivation, because they wanted to make the Oasis staff and young people 'happy'. Other identified benefits were heightened confidence especially when interacting with new people; improvements in abilities to develop and communicate ideas; and gaining project planning experience. Some identified challenges were around managing and facilitating the creative process, supporting others to learn how to use the technologies to design, and the workshops having to be held in the early evenings to work around the school day. All students said that they would consider working on social design projects in the future.

Perspectives of Academic Staff

The integration of social design projects within module delivery is essential for student engagement and successful outcomes. This provides the students with structured sessions and activities, and the time and support that they require from academic and technical staff. By nature, social design projects are often initially unclear and vague and time and resource intensive; meaning that given the option, students tend to select commercial projects which provide them with the structure and clarity to work more efficiently. The main benefits were higher than average grade profiles, and the personal and academic development observable in the students. Additionally, the positive impact of their work is far reaching and gives students a sense of empowerment and satisfaction. The main challenges for academic staff related to the planning and logistics of the social design project. The pre-project administrative burden is significant, along with establishing and maintaining external partnerships and relationships. As this project involved working with vulnerable young people, the ethical and regulatory considerations were unexpectedly challenging, delaying the project start date by three months. Being able to be adaptive and flexible is therefore essential when working on social projects.



Discussion

All participants said that they would consider working on social design projects again in the future. There was a stronger desire from the Oasis participants where 100% of staff strongly agreed; but of the student group, 60% said 'yes' and 40% said 'maybe'. Under analysis, student participants felt greater responsibility and pressure as facilitators to ensure that the process went well. This new way of working for the students involved using different design methods and close working with the beneficiaries of the design, which differs considerably from more traditional and commercial ways of working on graphic design projects where the main interactions are between business clients and designers. Some students said that they preferred commercial projects because they had more control over the process and outcomes. Other students preferred social design, and some said that they enjoyed working in both commercial and social design contexts. It will be important to design curriculum approaches which allow for students to experience both ways of engaging with real-world projects.

Conclusion

Whilst social designing is not the preferred option for all students, the wide-ranging benefits from the project considerably outweighed the challenges for them. Similarly, whilst the resource and logistical implications were high for the Oasis staff, the project had significant gains for them and the young people they support. From the academic staff perspective, there was also a significant additional time and resource commitment to co-ordinate and facilitate external social design projects and to train students to co-facilitate and work effectively with external participants. Additionally, the management of the relationship with external partners is viewed as critical to the success of the project, because everyone involved must have a shared vision, and realistic expectations of what can be achieved, often with constrained time and resources. Mitigations should be put in place by ensuring that projects are co-designed with stakeholders, are realistic and deliverable, meet everyone's needs, and are meticulously planned, allowing for contingencies.

Most participants expressed growth in confidence throughout the project. In particular, the development in self-esteem and aspiration for the young people was identified as a significant, yet unexpected, benefit. It will be important through projects such as these to consider, and be mindful of, access and routes into education and employment for young people whose aspirations are raised and critically, to identify, develop and suggest progression avenues into study or employment through further research. The learning from



this social design project will be taken into future funding bids which would aim to scale up this type of activity at the university. Funding would potentially enable the employment of an administrator to oversee the logistical aspects of social design projects, freeing up the academic staff team to focus on the creative delivery.

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