Chapter 8

Levering Critical Collaboration: The First Year Interdisciplinary Design Experience

Alexandra Lara Crosby
University of Technology Sydney, Australia

Adam C. Morgan
University of Technology Sydney, Australia

ABSTRACT

This chapter presents an intervention in Design Thinking, a first year interdisciplinary design subject at the University of Technology Sydney. Over two iterations of this subject, researchers reframed the ‘group work’ component as critical collaboration, drawing from the momentum in the design professions for more participatory and collaborative processes and the increasing acknowledgement of design as being critical to sustainable human futures. The online self and peer assessment tool SPARKPlus was used to change the way students approached collaboration and then reflected on it following their experiences. In this model, self and peer assessment is used as a leaver to encourage critical thinking about collaboration, rather than as a hammer to enforce participation.

INTRODUCTION

The process of synthesizing ideas from disparate disciplines is unfamiliar and uncomfortable. But it is precisely in that discomfort that the seeds of creativity lie, and if the group can continue to play the believing game—not insisting on certainty, closure, or judgments—participants may ultimately move to new truths and imaginative solutions (Strober, 2010, p. 165).

It is widely accepted that design involves interdisciplinary collaboration, whether a visual communicator is working with a programmer, a fashion designer with a photographer, or a product designer with a team of engineers. Due to the changing nature of social problems and the complex range of responses that are required to make sense of them, design is becoming increasingly interdisciplinary and collab-

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-5225-0726-0.ch008
Levering Critical Collaboration

In higher education, “newer perspectives of learning have begun recognising that learning is less a solitary act and more about the collaboration with others to pool knowledge, experiences, skills and tools” (McMahon & Amatullo, 2013, p. 1) as traditional, individual-focused methods are being challenged. How to best teach design collaboration, however, in a way that is at once caring and critical, remains somewhat of a wicked problem.

This chapter explores how design curricula can address the complexity of learning critical collaboration. We argue that the consideration of critical collaboration is important in the creation of a learning context that is more accurately representative of the dynamic role of design professions and that provides opportunities for increased inclusiveness. We use the term critical collaboration to draw together the learning processes of critical reflection and collaborative design. In our case study, this is achieved through the design of an online self and peer assessment integrated with a reflective writing task in a first year interdisciplinary design subject.

Within the interdisciplinary design studies program at the University of Technology Sydney, where the authors work, this emphasis on critical collaboration has enabled an opening up of the curriculum to include previously neglected aspects of design thinking such as the understanding of place through the Aboriginal notion of country (Crosby, Hromek, & Kinniburgh, 2015) and the gender bias of discourses on creativity (Potur & Barkul, 2009). We argue that genuine and critical collaborative scenarios create more authentic learning environments for design students to explore challenging concepts and to take the necessary creative risks to develop as designers and social risks to develop as human beings.

As the research for this chapter, we have been reframing group work as critical collaboration in Design Thinking, one of the first year subjects in the interdisciplinary design studies program that includes a three-day design camp on Cockatoo Island in Sydney. Firstly, we encouraged a change in the way the students approached their group assessment by priming them for critical collaboration and using the design of a manifesto as a preparatory studio exercise. Secondly we used SPARKPlus, a tool for self and peer assessment to improve the way students reflected on their collaboration following the camp. In an effort to act as facilitators of critical collaboration, rather than enforcers, we have also shifted the way we use the online platform–from a hammer to a lever, by allowing for students to comment on their direct experience of interdisciplinary design. This paper evaluates the effectiveness of this intervention over two iterations of the Design Thinking subject in 2015.

The chapter is structured in four parts. We begin with a background that covers the concept of critical collaboration in relation to interdisciplinary design studies; an explanation of the first year subject within which we work; and a discussion of our self and peer assessment practices with a focus on qualitative online feedback. Secondly we present the intervention. Here we provide a short description of our method describing the interventions we made in the subject of Design Thinking as well as the way we collected and analysed the results. This section is divided by the two iterations of this intervention. In short, our project has been to align the criteria for assessing collaboration with the student experience of doing it; to prime students before their experience of collaboration and reflection; and to observe and analyse the results of this change over two semesters. Thirdly, we provide a discussion of the results collected, focusing on the way students have articulated critical collaboration and providing an example of a group’s learning path from manifesto to reflection in the form of a vignette. Finally, summarised by two recommendations, we discuss the implications of these data in relation to critical design, by focusing on the student voice, the interplay of design educators with a tool such as SPARKPlus, and the expanded notions of design that are implicated in the teaching of design for the future.