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Who is the Designer?: An Experience of Collectivism in Basic Design Course

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Abstract: *This study focuses on a specific Basic Design exercise, which has been conducted for four following semesters in the Department of Industrial Product Design at Istanbul Technical University (ITU), Turkey in 2010-2011. In this exercise, students were expected to design a Jury Invitation (card) collectively specialized for the specific semester. The exercise has four main phases to which students followed: Generating ideas in the form of models individually, voting, redesigning the top four or five collectively, and finalizing and reproducing. In this study, we aim to discuss the process of this exercise and the outcomes of it in the light of collective design. So, it can be considered as an endeavor to experiment collectivity rather than conventional individualistic approach in basic design education.*

Keywords: *Basic design, Collective design, Design education.*

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Introduction

Over the past decade, there have been changes in the conception of the designer's role. The popular understanding of designer is closely linked with the designer's signature on the product. The name of the designer might even affect the perception of the product itself, considered and used as a tool in marketing. This can be regarded as the continuation of the general understanding of the position of the artist in society as celebrity similar to any other profession related with creativity and originality. Classical example is the names of designers like Ross Lovegrove or Philippe Starck, who have become inseparable from their products. Therefore, the products are often marketed with their name, which is an entity contributing on their symbolic value in the market (Figure 1.).



Figure 1. Products of Ross Lovegrove (<http://www.rosslovegrove.com>)

We are now in the era of the name and individual style of designer being disappeared. Especially designers working in R&D departments together with the other disciplines are working with teams in which individual dominancy in design process decreases. The new concepts of co-creation, co-design and participatory design affect this disappearance where even consumers/users engage in the design process as a part of the team.

Design education in classical sense; however, generally supports the individualistic approach due to some practical limitations such as difficulty in assessing and forming a team in design project fairly, also because of the aforementioned general culture based on the designer's role similar to that of a celebrity. This situation sometimes leads to a selfish and isolated process of design, contradicting to the designer's role as designing for the others not for him/herself which creates an ironic scene.

In the context of this study, a new process of design to the first year design students is introduced to increase their awareness about collective designing and responsibilities of designer in the early phase of design education.

Basic Design

Basic Design is a fundamental introductory course in the first year of the curriculum in art and design education. The scope of this course is on visual perception, principles of basic structures, form-function relationship, and color perception-these principles are found in the early sources of Rudolf Arnheim (1971).

It is regarded as 'indispensable' by many educators, and acknowledged as the most significant course of the first year of design education (Özer, 2004). The formation of the Basic Design concept is highly related to the perception theories of Gestalt, which shaped the curriculum of Bauhaus school (Denel, 1981).

However, in recent studies on Basic Design education, the validation of Basic Design principles is questioned in contemporary design education (see Boucharenc, 2006 and Blachnitzky, 2011). According to Boucharenc (2006), Basic Design education is still a very significant element in design education curriculum in most of the countries. More specifically, Blachnitzky (2011) explores whether there is agreement in first year design educators regarding basic design principles (two- and three-dimensional basics, shape, colour and experimentation with materials) especially in European Universities. Since human sensation remains the same, in today's design education it is still valid to teach students these principles to improve a common visual language, to practise their perception, and to develop a specific way of learning.

As a support the approach presented in the paper, some of the educators believe that teaching design basics in general is not sufficient and propose that real-world design projects should also be engaged in Basic Design (Blachnitzky, 2011).

Basic Design can be regarded as a lonely path for young designer candidates, because one has to find the "right" solution without any intervention or extra guidance from the tutors, such as bringing examples to class, because it is defined as a "problem solving" process. Also one has to forget what s/he already knows and fight with his/her prejudices. Mostly short exercises and problems are given for discussion on the principles of design.

To overcome this cliché and to train students to work in teams, we conducted an exercise to introduce a so-called real-world project to Basic Design students. In this study, we aim to discuss the process of this exercise and the outcomes of it in the light of the term collective design.

The issues of co-design and teamwork

Co-design and co-production are affluently discussed in today's marketing research and design research. Both are used for engaging user/consumer into value creation. Kleinsmann (2006) describes co-design as "the process in which actors from different disciplines share their knowledge about both the design process and the design content." By the help of different perspectives of different actors, co-design is an effective tool to generate especially conceptual ideas. In these design processes, designers both contribute to and benefit from the design process itself. Therefore, the designer has a critical role in this team as a researcher, creator and moderator.

Even if co-design is related to the role of designer in interdisciplinary teams, this study aims to carry the issue of co-design to design education with different agents and ideas in the classroom abstracted from interdisciplinarity per-se.

One of the most important differences between individual designers and teamwork is on understanding the problem. Whereas the former is able to shape his/her "idiosyncratic" understanding, the latter one must find "shared" understanding (Cross N. and Cross A.C. 1995). This difference both causes some barriers and also offers some potential in terms of creativity.

Goldschmidt (1995) conducts a comparative study based on process of a single designer and a team; and summarizes his study as in the following:

He [single designer] oscillates between overviews and technical details, between functional aspects of the design product and issues related to human factors. He thinks of features, product identity and aesthetics along with stiffness, strength and ease of production. Team members do the same, but they can let a colleague answer a question they raise, or pick up someone else's line of thought and build on it. The single designer has only him/herself to rely on, and he/she must act as a team and give all the answers while also asking all the questions... (Goldschmidt 1995, p. 208).

When the number of members in a team is increased -as this study discusses-, these differences become more dramatic and observable. This is significant from the design education perspective to be aware of all possible aspects of design process and parameters and discuss and elaborate them in the class.

An experience of collectivism in Basic Design course

In collaboration with the final project of the Basic Design I and II courses, students were asked to design an invitation (card) for the visiting jury members of the final jury to be put into their post boxes in the university. The students were highly motivated because it was going to be their first 'products' that would meet with somebody else's needs apart from the studio tutors as a mimic of end-users.

Description of the exercise

This study focuses on a specific Basic Design exercise, which has been conducted for five following semesters, in 2010, 2011 and 2012 in Basic Design I and Basic Design II in the Department of Industrial Product Design at Istanbul Technical University (ITU), Turkey.¹ 45-50 students took part in each exercise. Students were expected to design a Jury Invitation (card) customized for the visiting tutors, specialized for the specific semester.

The requirements of the exercise can be summarized as:

1. *Concept*: The invitation should be appealing enough for a call. It should reflect the idea that this is an outcome of the learning of Basic Design course.
2. *Functions*: It should have basically three functions: transmitting a message (date, place, name of the course, inviting expression), being put in a postbox (collapsibility/adjustability) and being kept as a desktop object (appeal).
3. *Dimension*: It should be suitable for the dimensions of postboxes of the jury members.
4. *Graphic design and typography*: The message should be clear enough to read and understand.
5. *Basic Design principles*: Harmony, rhythm, unity, variety, repetition, balance, order and color choice should be considered.
6. *Reproduction*: The invitation should be easy to reproduce. According to a guideline, each student should be able to make a copy.

Therefore, the invitation includes mainly following information:

- Call text such as "We would like to see you in our Final Jury."
- Date and place
- The name of the course Basic Design I/Basic Design II

¹ The authors of this paper are also the tutors in the project.

Phases of the exercise

The exercise has four main phases to which students followed: Generating ideas in the form of models individually, class voting, redesigning the selected top four or five collectively, finalization and reproduction (each student in the class produce one copy).

In the first phase, the students were expected to develop ideas considering the requirements that were explained in the previous section.

In the second phase, all developed ideas were presented on a table where all students and tutors had three stickers to attach on their favorite projects. They were allowed to attach more than one sticker to one idea, which allowed dramatizing and ease rating the results (Figure 2).



Figure 2. Pictures from voting, 2010 Fall Semester

After determining the top four or five projects and having a class discussion on them, in the third phase students had to work on them and improve the most popular

ones by considering the requirements and critiques again. They were expected to work in groups of 4-5 and come up with three alternatives by reconsidering the principles in the class discussion. After the alternatives were voted in the class again, the project to be produced was selected.

Third phase is the most important one, where the real designer of the project disappeared and different points of views find its place in the project. Therefore, the designer of the project became anonymous and from then on it becomes the “property” of the class. This made the students to cooperate and to feel connected to the object they are developing. By the help of this process, they perceived the project as a reflection of their class. The end of the phase was where the tutors withdrew their critics gradually and left the class alone to develop their own invitations (Figure 3).



Figure 3. A group of student working on invitations, 2011 Fall Semester

In the last phase, a volunteer group of 5 to 6 prepared a guideline for their classmates to finalize the invitation and make it standardized. They used social networks such as Facebook as a platform and an accelerator to communicate. The comments on Facebook were in ordinary language² and were included in this study to reflect some of the details and insider motivation of this phase. In the Facebook group, comments can be classified as in the following:

Proposing and selecting alternatives: While they were discussing on Facebook, at certain points the members were proposing alternatives. Moreover, they had to select and discuss on these alternatives. They were mostly about colors, materials, and fonts of the invitation. Briefly, the decision making process was like proposing, discussing and eliminating alternative design solutions. Some students' comments on proposing and selecting alternatives can be seen below:

“Shall I color the triangles? What about using our previous thin black material?”
“We can decide on which is easier”

² Facebook comments are translated from Turkish to English.

“Instead of sticking black cardboard, let’s find black sticker.”

“Using sticker is more practical but how can we do this?”

“I prefer it parallel to the base.”

Discussing on timing, dimensions, production places and cost: In Facebook group, the students also discussed on realization process of the invitation. They often asked when they should finish the invitation, how its dimensions should be, where they would print it and how much it would cost. Here are some related students’ comments:

“I can go and ask to the place in Beşiktaş. Maybe they are printing cheaper.”

“If it doesn’t cost a bomb, we can handle it.”

“Let’s get a price. Then we can decide.”

“The cheaper it is, the better it is.”

“Is there a possibility that it will cost more than 1 TL? If so, then let’s forget about.”

Reflecting emotions: Since the group was responsible for the finalization, they shared their feelings in this group. They feel pressure because of the deadline pressure, the lack of tutor’s critiques and the idea of collective work. These emotions can be observed from their comments below:

“I have stomachache because of depression”

“Why our tutors don’t think about this?”

“Don’t you sometimes sit and cry?”

Discussing work distribution among members: Every group project has its drawbacks especially in terms of work distribution. Likewise, Cross N. and Cross A.C. (1995) states that “Working as a member of a team introduces different problems and possibilities for the designer, in comparison with working alone.” In this particular case, volunteer group taking part in finalization phase experienced some problems regarding this issue. The issue of work distribution can easily be understood from the comments:

“All of the stuff is left to you. Nobody cares. You are a group on your own.”

“I am getting crazy because of this unresponsiveness. I expect some sensibility.”

“Nobody is making comments.”

In the end, each student had to submit exactly the same invitation by following the instruction in the guideline. This phase was also crucial since the students firstly experience the terms such as standardization and mass-production that are highly related to the field of industrial design.

In one of the processes, a template is prepared and shared with the class so that students produce the invitation card accordingly. One of the main considerations in the design of the invitation is that it was based on the A4 format strictly, so that almost no parts are disposed (Figure 4).

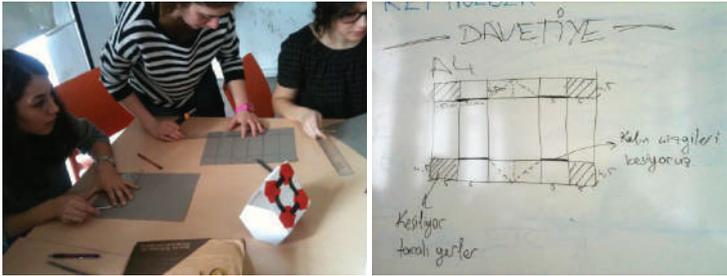


Figure 4. A group of student working on invitations and the template, 2012 Fall Semester

Outcomes of the exercise

After analysing the outcomes of the exercises in different semesters this project is assigned, it is seen that interestingly almost all share some similar characteristics, some of which were sought in the design brief (Figure 5-6-7-8).

Form: Classes in different semesters prefer similar basic forms such as cubes and prisms, as they are easy to work with and suitable to the principle of collapsibility and adaptability. This may be because of the directions and considerations about easy-to-define forms during the semester.

Playfulness: Students from different years take playfulness as the core concept of the invitation. They usually like the idea that the invitation card can also be played with instinctively. Therefore, the target group (jury members) can spend time while they are discovering the invitation. That's why; all invitations can get into at least 2 different positions by folding or rotating. These positions also provide to fit into jury members' post boxes and to stand on their desks.

Material choice: Each invitation has the same materials like paper or cardboard. The students prefer to write on it, use stickers or print. It may be partly because of the material use during the semester.

Graphical understanding, typography: The students use basic sans-serif typefaces. They conduct these typefaces by considering the surfaces of the invitation. We tried to direct student to use an existing type to apply on the invitation rather than create a new type from scratch for the quality of the finished item.

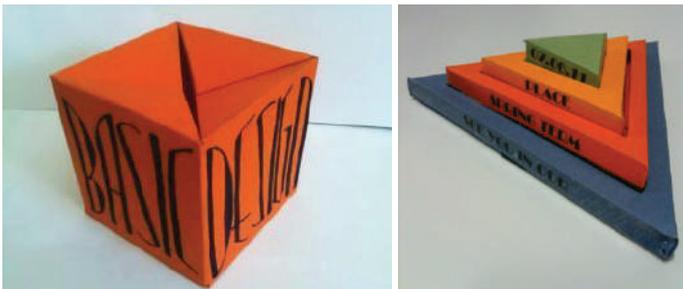


Figure 5. 2010 Fall Semester (left) - 2011 Spring Semester (right)



Figure 6. First project (top) - After designing collectively (bottom), 2011 Fall Semester



Figure 7. 2012 Spring Semester

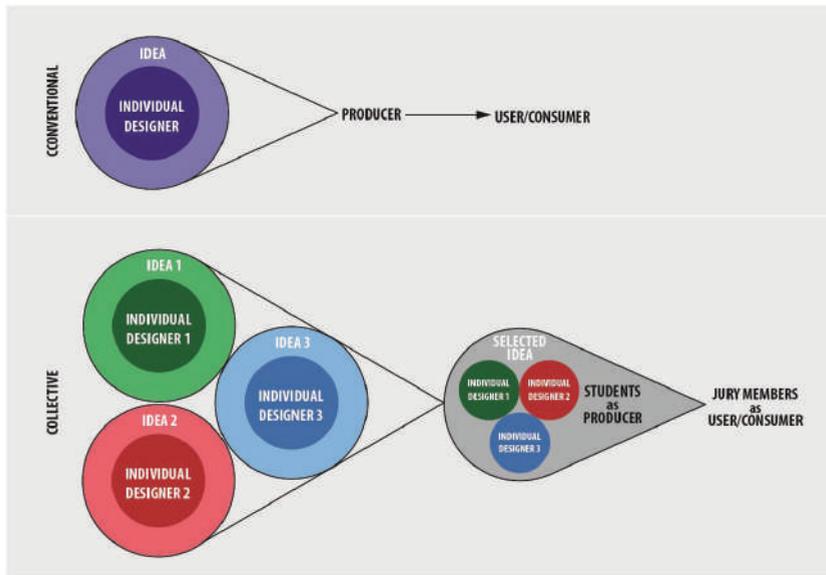


Figure 9. Distribution of roles

In conventional process of design, we can say that there is a simple direction from designer to user/consumer. Designer's decisions are transferred to producers and after production, marketed to users/consumers.

In the process of this exercise, the role of designer and producer is combined. That is, design students taking part in the project act as both designer and producer. In the first part of the process, student acts as an individual designer, when developing the first invitation for voting. In the second phase, the top choices among other alternatives are developed collectively. After the completion of the collective processes of designing and producing, invitations are presented/marketed to jury members considered as user/consumer. In this project, tutors also act as organizer, moderator and controller of the process. (Figure 9).

Moreover, this study can be considered as an empathetical effort for today's design students, most of whom will work in teams rather than alone in their professional life (Tzeng 2011). The study on strategies of teaching industrial design to the (inter)net generation suggests that "Collaboration enables their 'collective intelligence' to emerge through the pooling of knowledge, research, arguments, and insights from diverse groups of people." (Tzeng 2011, p. 40). In this sense, this paper reveals a Basic Design exercise that cares for today's design students' characteristics and also makes use of it in a positive manner.

Such exercises are also helpful to give an insight about the importance of contextual information for the purpose of design education. The classical approach of basic design course usually coming up with abstracted and idealized problems and solutions is cracked with a contextual perspective in this exercise. The invitation card for the jury is an exercise students feel close and warm and adopted very easily as it is an event which they feel and actually they do belong to.

Erasure of the real personality who initiated the design idea and other personalities who work on an idea that they have not generated is significant in this exercise. The

elements of co-creation or co-design is also applicable in different methods based on drama techniques, persona building, ethnographic approaches in different levels and styles. All these methods could and should be wisely transformed and transferred to the context of basic education with a good reading and analysis of the “contextual” data.

All the processes and methodologies in the project are developed to serve to reach “better” design solutions. However, “better” here does not refer to an objective but a collective and contextual quality to be reached. In this sense, in the early phase of design education the quality of the collective process completed in a democratic and harmonious way is more significant than the final product itself.

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