

Sep 24th, 9:00 AM

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### Citation

Sharman, I.J., and Patterson, Z. (2013) “Not two weeks in a place tidying-up the paper drawer” – an employability agenda case study, in Reitan, J.B., Lloyd, P., Bohemia, E., Nielsen, L.M., Digranes, I., & Lutnæs, E. (eds.), *DRS // Cumulus: Design Learning for Tomorrow*, 14-17 May, Oslo, Norway.  
<https://doi.org/10.21606/learnxdesign.2013.134>

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## “Not two weeks in a place tidying-up the paper drawer” – an employability agenda case study

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**Abstract:** *It seems improbable that a student might graduate from four years of full-time education with an honours degree and, simultaneously, three years of work experience. Yet this is the premise of the Design Agency Project at Edinburgh College of Art, University of Edinburgh. It celebrates four years within the BA Graphic Design programme so 2012 provides a natural opportunity for reflection, marking the graduation of the first cohort introduced to the project at the commencement of their studies.*

*Annually, the students of the programme’s senior year form several design agencies. They brand and advertise vacancies, for which students in junior years are interviewed and appointed. The university’s human resources and enterprise departments provide guidance. The agencies operate as profit generating companies with provided briefs and self-initiated commercial work. Each agency has an established industry expert as mentor. All undergraduates are allocated one day per week to work on the project throughout the academic year.*

*This paper presents the project as a case study, with viewpoints from lecturers, students and industry mentors. The project is timely since employability has gained traction as a measurement of HE performance outcomes, yet the term itself remains nebulous. Specific case study may elaborate.*

**Keywords:** *Design Agency Project, case study, ECA, Edinburgh College of Art, Edinburgh University, graphic design, employability, mentoring, pedagogy, industry.*

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## **Introduction**

The Design Agency Project is a highly collaborative, cross-year framework that exposes undergraduate students to employability issues within the field of graphic design. It was introduced in 2008 within the BA (Hons) Graphic Design programme of the Edinburgh College of Art, University of Edinburgh in Scotland. Almost five years later, the first cohort of students who experienced the project throughout their studies has graduated, and a further fully-immersed cohort is nearing the conclusion of the programme.

Self-selecting teams of senior year students form their own graphic design agencies, which they name and brand. They advertise vacancies for junior roles, for which students from junior years of the programme apply and are interviewed. The university's HR Department provide guidance about employment obligations, whilst enterprise departments assist with advice about business formation. So each agency has students from across the years of the graphic design programme, and they are strongly encouraged to physically locate together on the day per week dedicated to the project (though they are free to collaborate outside of this time).

Individuals established design professionals volunteer as a dedicated mentor to each of the agencies, and each manages this relationship in their own way. Task briefs are provided for agencies, and they are encouraged also to seek-out profit-generating work. Agencies are free to invest or disperse profits as they wish, though part of the programme involves generating funds for the Lake Victoria Disability Centre in Tanzania.

## **Aims**

This paper aims to present the Design Agency Project as an individual case study, with viewpoints of numerous stakeholders – the graphic design lecturers, students, and the industry professionals who act as their mentors. We illustrate the observed behaviours and captured perspectives of the project's actors in an attempt to “make sense of, or interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them [with] a wide range of interconnected methods, hoping always to get a better fix on the subject matter at hand” (Denzin and Lincoln 1994).

In other words we do not attempt to draw definitive quantifiable generalisations here about wider deployment, but to extract the qualitative meanings for the participants within the project. Bassey (1999) cautions:

Case studies are, of course, studies of singularities and so the suggestion that findings from them may be applied more widely may seem somewhat contradictory, if not invalid. (Bassey 1999, p.xi)

But we hope that where we may have inferred a pseudo-claim-to-truth ('fuzzy generalisation'), that the reader can take it in the spirit of Bassey's mitigation:

It is argued that, in any case, qualitative 'fuzzy generalizations' are more honest and more appropriate to much research in educational settings than are definitive claims for generalizability because of the complexity that is usually involved. In other words, in schools, doing x rarely invariably results in y. (Bassey 1999, p.xi)

We do not, however, abdicate commentary on the qualitative data, since we still aim “to construct a worthwhile argument or story” (Bassey 1999, p.65). For that reason, our exposition may appear to veer towards Bassey's designation of 'evaluative

case study’ which “set[s] out to explore some educational programme, system, project or event in order to focus on its worthwhileness” (Bassey 1999, p.63). But whilst there is an element of summative evaluation, it is mostly framed here within individual commentaries and observations. So Yin’s (2003, p.46) term ‘descriptive case study’ provides perhaps the best nomenclature, since he relates perfectly our desire to seek a balance to “mediate between trying to describe “everything” and being too sparse” (Yin 2003, p.49). We take on board his advice that “repeatedly referring back to your rationale for selecting the case study being studied may provide some guidance for staying near a golden mean” (Yin 2003, p.49).

Our rationale comes from the key anniversary of the project. The first graduates that have experienced the project throughout their higher education have now entered their working environments: we seek to appreciate some magnitude of its effectiveness by summarising its *effect* on its actors and agents. The project has been shortlisted in the UK for the ‘employability’ category of The Guardian University Awards 2013 (Guardian News and Media Limited 2012). Whilst it is gratifying to acknowledge external recognition, it is nevertheless important for us to relate and sense from within what the project’s contribution is towards that highly politicised agenda, since it was not conceived from a political stance but as a pedagogic approach.

Perhaps it would be naïve to separate the two, since employability has recently gained traction in higher education as a measurement of performance outcomes. For instance, the UK’s Higher Education Academy’s 2012 Thematic Seminar series (The Higher Education Academy 2012) requests proposals exploring employability as one of its three key targets for UK funding. The Scottish Funding Council (responsible for securing coherent provision of further & higher education in Scotland) has ‘Employability and Skills’ as its first listed outcome (Scottish Funding Council 2009, p.20). It maps that as directly contributing to 11 of 16 generalised national performance outcomes (The Scottish Government 2012) which outline what the Scottish Government wants to achieve for the nation. Nevertheless the term can appear nebulous and difficult to anchor to specific approaches. This is illustrated by the 2012 update to the ‘Pedagogy for Employability’ guide (Pegg et al. 2012), in which an additional wider definition is added:

Employability is not just about getting a job. Conversely, just because a student is on a vocational course does not mean that somehow employability is automatic. Employability is more than about developing attributes, techniques or experience just to enable a student to get a job, or to progress within a current career. It is about learning and the emphasis is less on ‘employ’ and more on ‘ability’. In essence, the emphasis is on developing critical, reflective abilities, with a view to empowering and enhancing the learner. (Harvey 2003)

It is hoped that focussing on this particular example of how “we best integrate and balance different ways of teaching and learning that promote both effective learning and employability for students” (Pegg et al. 2012, p.4) might provide some clarification. The case study is intended as a contribution to the employability agenda by illustrating the organic genesis of a project that reconciles some of the inherent dilemmas of embedding pedagogic approaches that have (later) been identified as conforming to that agenda within an academically and creatively respected higher education institution.

In neighbouring England, concurrent with The Design Agency Project, Stockport College’s Thoughtful Six Project (Corazzo 2009) had relocated a commercial agency to

the college's design department. There, six students were selected to work with the agency for six months as a kind of 'internal work placement'. Whilst there was a shared desire to engage industry employers, the two projects were independent and had significant differences in relation to the locus of power, 'real life' ambitions, scope of student numbers and duration.

## **Research methods**

This paper amalgamates research conducted independently by the co-authors, though thematically collated here with a unifying narrative. This has heightened the sense of a "wide range of interconnected methods" espoused by Denzin and Lincoln (1994), and permitted us a metaphoric 'triangulation' in drawing together a narrative of the dual packages of enquiry. Many of the methods are the collateral of activities within the project (i.e. they were not intended primarily to form a study), and that is the prime motivation for our designation of the case study as 'descriptive' rather than 'evaluative'. Nevertheless, we hope that the narratives and perspectives presented paint a worthwhile picture.

### *Video Interview and Sketching*

Semi-structured video-recorded interview was conducted with the programme leader, during which she was asked to sketch various thematic aspects of the project whilst narrating their meaning – edited version available as Sharman (2012, 7:59 - 9:01 mins). Those sketches are presented in this paper, and quotes from that interview are attributed using 'ZP'. In the interests of transparency, it should be stated that the programme leader is a co-author of this paper, but that the interview took place between the co-authors prior to their collaboration on this paper with no intention of later collaboration. We hope that the collaboration has nevertheless provided a useful juxtaposition of 'viewing angles'.

### *Observation*

Observation of the college's graphic design studio was conducted by locating a research station within the studio. This is a desk from which the (PhD student) researcher conducts everyday study, but which is adjacent to the studio desks of the most senior students of the undergraduate graphic design programme. This has permitted observation of key points in the programme, and of the ongoing ambience of the physical setting and sense of its everyday to-and-fro.

### *Student journals & vivas*

Formative evaluation was evident through each year of the project from extracts of students' ongoing reflections contained within journals maintained by them during the entirety of the time with their respective agencies. These journals are dedicated to their Design Agency Project work, and kept in confidence by the students except when shared with tutors. This is where the student can most emphatically express their identity as 'student' rather than 'employee', and this has led to free and honest commentary by them on the operation of their individual agencies and the relationships within them. They are able to dissent privately even where they have followed majority decisions, though this was in no way intended to replace face-to-face discussion within agencies.

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### *Summative student questionnaires & workshops*

More formal summative evaluation was conducted through year-end questionnaires and workshops within the organisation. These were where students were able to express their wider hopes, wishes and concerns to someone outwith their agencies (or department). This also facilitated a provocation for the students to maximise the potential of the project for their own goals and benefit. Vivas of fourth year students provided an additional opportunity for summative reflection.

### *Student artefacts*

Students naturally produced artefacts, and these often acted as formative intermediate and year-end summative graphic reflections of their processes and learning. Some of those outputs are presented here (Figure 5 demonstrates a particularly apt example). The quality of individual design skills is not explicitly assessed, but rather conformance to the formal metrics of the learning outcomes that are set for every module undertaken at the college. The students are provided within an extensive project brief that develops throughout the year’s iteration of the project, together with learning outcomes. These documents are available by contacting either author.

### *Extracts of ad hoc communications with mentors*

The project leader has extensive ad hoc communications during the year with the industry mentors for that year. These are mainly by email, and provide a good record of developments and mentor perspectives. There are also individual meetings with mentors at the commencement and conclusion of each academic year that yield further insights. Extracts of some of those ad hoc and unprompted communications appear in this paper where they provide a particular perspective of the project and the sender has agreed to publication.

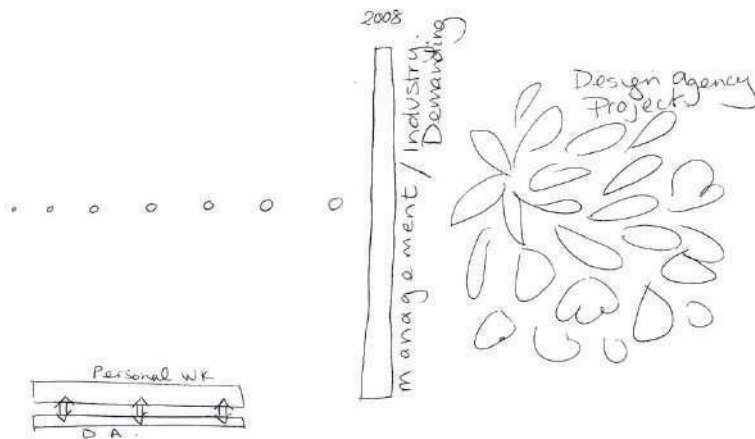


Figure 57 - Sketch outlining the phases of the Design Agency Project drawn by its creator during video interview. Referring to the circles centre left: "These are little... seeds... growing and ideas starting to formulate, but at the time having no vision that this was coming."

## Project formation and intention –

### What problem did it solve and how did it begin?

In interview, Zoe Patterson (project creator) explains its origins. There were two major factors for its creative ignition. First, there was fuel in the form of a particular example of established good practice that students had enjoyed:

The reason why the Agency Project came about? Lots of different reasons: we'd... been running something very loosely connected to team-building and introducing students to the new semester for probably twelve years. And it was working so well... that I thought 'Well there's something bigger there'. (ZP)

Conflicting political and pedagogic ideologies created environmental conditions, which provided a motivation for change:

Alongside that, the new management at the art college about four years ago [were] very keen on... final year students not being such commercial designers... a theme of study rather than short deadlines or commercial projects. And yet industry – out there – was asking us to deliver students who would answer the phone, know what a time sheet is, work to deadlines, all these sort of production issues. (ZP)

There is an honest assessment of the original rationale for the project by Zoe, who suggests that it is only hindsight that permits attribution of contributory factors:

This is me post-rationalising, because at the time I didn't realise what I was doing. Bringing that all together so that we are nodding in the direction of management... but then working in teams, in design agencies to nod in the direction of what industry wanted... And students themselves wanted both – I don't think we could... have one without having a complaint about the other. (ZP)

There is clear 'ground-level' evidence here of Pegg et. al's (2012) suggested need to "integrate and balance of different ways of teaching and learning".

"We tested it for a year. And the last three years it's been running... so the graduating fourth years are the first year group that have been through every year." (ZP)

The indication of testing indicates reflexivity by the educator. The start of the edited form of the definition of 'educational action research' offered by Carr and Kemmis (1986) hints that the Design Agency Project may provide an illustrative example:

Educational Action Research is used to describe a family of activities in curriculum development, professional development, school improvement programs, and systems planning, and policy development. (Carr and Kemmis 1986, p.164)

Figure 1 shows a sketch produced by Zoe Patterson during her interview. As she draws, she orally relates how the students across the year groups were initially annually collaborating in a one-week exercise. She draws increasing sizes of dots to indicate these exercises having developed by ad-hoc iteration:

These are little... seeds... growing and ideas starting to formulate, but at the time having no vision that this was coming. (ZP)

In other words, whilst there was a repeated classroom exercise with solid intention that received positive feedback, there was no contemporaneous intentionality:

There was no parameter, it was just open... because I thought as soon as you're assessed on it... people can get slightly scared, and it stops them being experimental. (ZP)

And this is where the formation of the Design Agency Project diverges from the definition of educational action research:

These activities have in common the identification of strategies of planned action which are implemented, and then systematically submitted to observation, reflection and change. Participants in the action being considered are integrally involved in all these activities. (Carr and Kemmis 1986, p.165)

The Design Agency Project *was* action-based with participant observation and reflection – but not *systematically* so. This elaborates too our categorising of this case study as descriptive rather than evaluative, albeit there are voices of judgement here.

Despite a lack of intent to systematically test and inform theory, it is clear that those annual exercise nevertheless informed development of the Design Agency Project: "so without me knowing it, these are the little seeds; little ideas" (ZP). The on-going present-day development of the project is discussed later, but it is important first to detail the earlier imperatives.

In the sketch (Figure 1), Zoe adds an elongated vertical block, tagged '2008 management' explaining how she had been somewhat resistant but pragmatic about new developments:

This big brick wall came up... management [saying] that we needed to... shift our philosophy... [They said] it looked too commercial. (ZP)

Zoe extends the 'management' label on the wall, adding 'industry demanding':



Alongside that, you've also got industry demanding business-savvy students... it's two parts of the same problem... So I don't think that these two things are against each other. It's just... coming up with a good compromise. (ZP)

One of the mentors emphasises the industry perspective:

We see a lot of graduates who just aren't really prepared. This project is a chance to help the students understand what a design consultancy is looking for in a graduate and their portfolio. (Mentor B)

Whilst innovative and sudden in its scaling, this was in no way a revolution nor abandonment of what had gone before.

That brick wall... didn't really stop the seeds of this project, because I just manipulated that then... I see it as... organic. (ZP)

Zoe elaborates that this organic compromise took into account the issues of the other stakeholders, but that these coalesced to students' benefit:

I think what that's done is it's satisfied this demand [indicating 'industry demanding']; it's satisfied that vision [indicating 'management']; but more importantly than that... it's enriched the students. (ZP)

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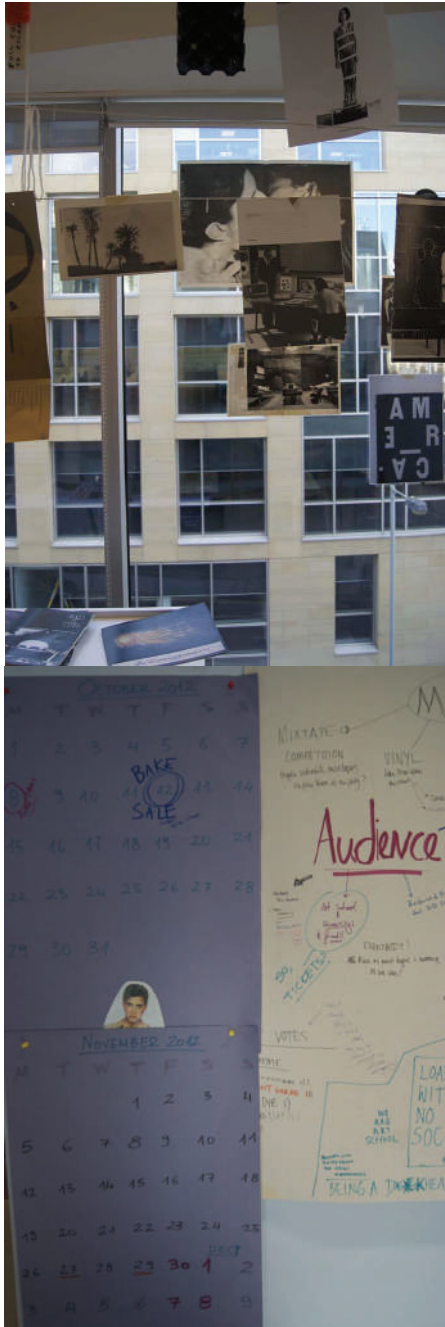




Figure 2 - The graphic design studio for the Design Agency Project at Edinburgh College of Art.  
Source: Ailie Hutcheson, 4th Year Graphics, Edinburgh College of Art.

## **Project operation –**

### **What does it feel like and what has it achieved?**

Zoe Patterson elaborates (Figure 1) with two rectangles linked by bi-directional arrows, representing respectively the Design Agency Project and the students' own personal work:

They dovetail well together... this would be the Design Agency Project underpinning... their own personal work. So [each of the] years have got their own work... but together they do the Design Agency Project. (ZP)

This provides an important feature of the project: that there are group tutorials and critiques that respect the year divisions, but there is also another cross-year flow of students amongst agencies. The agency's students visit each other's desks. This provides a non-'policed' vibrant environment for which the students are responsible (and which follows student norms where it is very peaceful prior to 10am, but busy well into mid-evening).

Though in a modern office-type building with walls of windows, it feels eclectic and grungy. Desks and walls are festooned with work and inspirations, blended with agency outputs – even hanging on makeshift 'washing lines' (Figure 2), stuck on windows, and acquired boards. Maquettes and other three-dimensional experiments lie about – the students appropriate this space with gusto.

The project ethos is infectious – so even year-group work is arranged into shrine-like displays with neither inhibition nor self-consciousness. In other words, there is a natural process of exchange and critique across all work. Zoe Patterson provides an analysis of this observed cross-pollination and prolificacy:

I think this personal work... would not have much merit without the strength of the Design Agency under it because we are graphic designers – it is vocational... So to me, they work well together, and that's what a degree course should be about. (ZP)

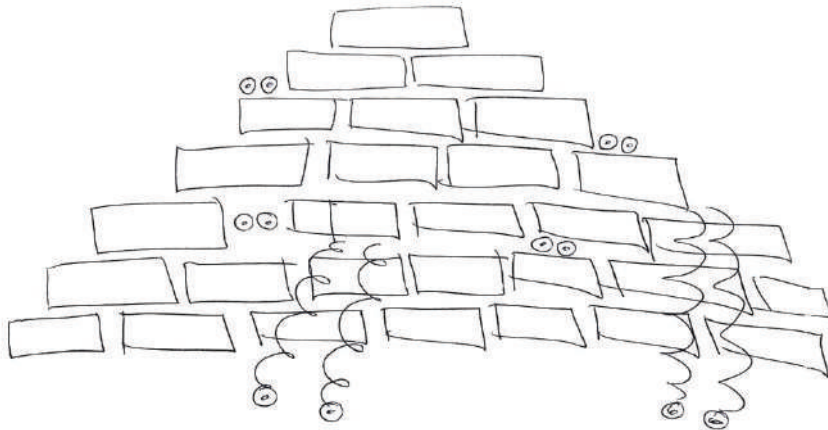
One of the mentors to the project describes the sense of creative energy that results from this harnessing of tensions:

Mentoring for ECA was genuinely thrilling for me, such an exciting opportunity to engage with and nurture young designers [with] explosive and infectious energy. (Mentor A)

Previous inferences about student and educator positions are now made more explicit as Zoe Patterson draws a sketch of the overarching ethos of the project (Figure 3) in which the students are drawn looking 'out' from behind a protective wall:

The brick wall that we were sort of faced with, with what management wanted, what industry wanted, what the students want, and as a staff member what you see as your vision for your course... how can we play those together and balance it? ... So to me that's them looking out... on springs... so they're already out there, but with some protection for some of the students.

This is pointing to one of the dichotomies of the employability agenda – how to expose the students to work-like scenarios and skill sets whilst retaining the safety of the academic environment:



It's a safety net for our weak students [too]... They might be creatively not as strong as others in their peer group, but as managers – as organisers ... they shine.

(ZP)

A student reflects on the benefits of having a framework from within which they are able to experiment safely:

The agency project is simply a learning curve. It is important to make mistakes, and more important to learn from them, as real working life is not plain sailing. (Student E)

So the student goes further than extolling *toleration* of mistakes to advocating that mistakes are *important* to the learning process. Zoe Patterson takes up this notion too:

We'd rather them make all their mistakes here – would an apprenticeship allow that? I don't know... Here, they can test what a design agency means. (ZP)

Corazzo (2009) supports this finding with a student's perception of a benefit of its project's on-campus location: "here I still feel connected – it's like having a little safety net" (Corazzo 2009). Nevertheless, Zoe was probed how tolerance of (even desire for) mistakes dovetails with an academic assessment process:

It's not a maths situation where everything is right: there's got to be

*Figure 58 - Sketch by Zoe Patterson during interview of ethos of project. It illustrates the eyes of students looking out 'at the world' from behind a protective pyramidal wall, with some on springs "already out there".*

experimentation, there's got to be failures... I guess in some ways the failures are successes. The students... [where]... there's been no bumps along the way –

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boring! They’ve got... nothing to write in their reflection other than “life’s great”. The ones that have had to fire someone – dealing with all those issues: you can’t teach that; they can only do that to each other. And I think the learning in that is what we are looking for, their reflection on what’s happened, and how they overcame those issues. That’s what we’re looking for: not how great a piece of work they’ve done. (ZP)

A student elaborates on the development of resilience:

I have realised that in real life as well as in work, you cannot always pick or edit the people you work with. The agency project has merged university life with the real working world, giving pre-insights into how agencies actually work. (Student F)

But the educators too require belief that the students are resilient enough for the inevitable relationship challenges familiar to those in employment:

We have been a mixed bag of a group, plenty [of] different personalities that haven’t clicked straight away but have slowly managed to work as a team. (Student E)

This provides cues to students’ consideration of dimensions of team working (particularly for graphic design, where parallel creative projects are the norm):

Learning time management; it is important personally as well as in an agency; balancing agency time and other project work. (Student E)

Students recall multiple developmental creative tasks: “Our mentor agency... set us a project to rebrand a group” (Student A); and “We learnt practical tasks such as working a blog and how to apply a vinyl to a surface” (Student E); whilst another student proudly cites an extensive varied list of clients within the year. And a mentor of the project confirms the sense that the students have a raw creativity, providing too an indication of the strength of identity formed within the different agencies:

[I] was delighted to be asked to step into this project... We have the stamina to go the distance and our agency... [students are]... young, enthusiastic and have bags of creativity. (Mentor D)

And yet, an otherwise creatively competent and confident student reflects that those attributes of creativity are nevertheless not solely sufficient:

Before this, I viewed myself as unmanageable, not very good with authority and certainly not a team player... I was dreading being part of an agency and receiving tasks from other people. Throughout my life... I have struggled to ‘behave’ myself, finding it difficult to work with others and respect authority.... The Agency Project has changed this. I believe this has developed me as both a person and a team member, and now feel confident that I would fit into most workplaces working within teams and under management. (Student F)

The matter of team working, and the protection and support that comes from their senior peers is discussed by a junior student:

The creative directors [senior students] have been open to all our suggestions and our input is important to them. Creative directors have [also] been supportive through personal projects we were given and are very approachable; they made it



clear from the start that we can talk to them about anything we need help with. (Student E)

So the cross-year fertilization is pastoral as well as creative, and is not contained just to the agency project but is 'leaking' into the other elements of the programme. The 'Top Ten Skills Value Audit' (Table 1) conducted with the 2011 graduates reflects these peer-working and leadership skills. It lists the skills and facets of the project which students mentioned most.

Figure 59 - Graphic design promotional materials produced by various student agencies

Table 1 - Top ten most frequently mentioned skills value audit from 2011 graduates (these are not ranked in relation to each other – the numbers are for referencing purposes only)

1	Fun
2	Saw the other side – saw the viewpoints of tutors, employers and other students
3	Agency acted as a shield – allowing taking more risks
4	Understood the importance of 'selling skills'
5	Junior years ability to look ahead and see standard of work in future years
6	Sharing of skills and knowledge between peers

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7	Increased confidence in presenting, dealing with people in different areas of industry and the workplace
8	Engendered greater valuing of work, and how to price it
9	Learned leadership skills and how to give advice
10	Appreciated the difficulty of delegation

This demonstrates a wide variety of skills most frequently mentioned by students, and it is notable how many are related to enterprise/ problem-solving issues such as risk-taking, selling, presenting, networking, pricing, leadership and delegation. 2, 5, and 6 all support earlier student observations that the cross-year-group methodology is having a powerful propagative effect. But the first listed item presents a philosophical matter - is 'fun' a skill? Perhaps, as Mary Poppins suggested, the skill is to "find the fun" (Sherman and Sherman 1964) in which "Snap! The job's a game." It suggests that, however categorised, fun through on-going immersive engagement and experimentation (with toleration/ encouragement of mistakes) is an important element of this programme.

But it is not just skills development that is recognised by students. The mentors, well respected within their field, hold an established network of contacts, and one of the students relates the benefits of this:

We've also made contacts with designers and makers... which has been an invaluable experience. [Student C]

The mentors and their respective agencies value that opportunity too:

The agency project is almost like a dating agency, whereby design agencies can meet and get to know the students, and if things go well, start a permanent relationship! (Mentor C)

This mutually beneficial opportunity for exploration between student and agencies is underlined by a mentor from one of the larger agencies involved in the project:

In the previous two years that we have participated in this project we feel we have... been able to contribute to the student's understanding of what agency life is like... in return we... get to know the students [and] offer placements to some of those students, one of whom is now part of our permanent staff. (Mentor B)

The student responses demonstrate the reflexive environment of the project, where the students reflect not only on outputs but also on processes. Each student keeps a personal journal for the project that is shared only with tutors, so can share freely. It is seen in the student reflections here (and graphically illustrated in Figure 5), that they readily identify where things can be improved, and take responsibility for both symptom and solution:

We get to make the big decisions; but with this freedom comes a lot of hard work and responsibility, which mirrors the reality of graphic design. (Student A)

The theoretical responsibilities (to which the institution's HR department introduces the students) are developed throughout the project, so that these are viewed in a much more powerful wider societal context later:



I have learned that every individual... should be allowed equal opportunity to make their opinions both heard and valued. Making a conscious decision to sit back and listen to everyone's thoughts and ideas... I would have not gained this without being part of an agency. (Student F)



Figure 5 – “If at First You Don’t Succeed...” produced by Fetch Agency. Reflexivity in action as this agency produces a graphic design output containing the problems they encountered, and their solutions.

## **Conclusion – What has been learned and what's next?**

It was not our intention to draw pedagogic generalisations from the Design Agency Project. It is offered as an example of outcomes that conform to a wide employability agenda within a higher education institution. We should caution that this was an art and design college in which self-reflection and critique are established norms. This institutional philosophical and pedagogical stance repeatedly surfaces in analysis of the project. The openness to new methods, experimentation and reflexivity has permitted the project a level of traction here that may not be achieved elsewhere without friction. One of the staff members underlines this essential facilitative element:

The teaching process being developed within the design agency project is on going - the practice of reflection, experimentation and consolidation is highly fluid. It is vital, particularly in the teaching of such an experimental area, which is at the forefront of visual communication, to be reflective about one's experiences and to be receptive to new ideas and approaches. (Staff member A)

In this spirit of dynamic evolution, drafting of this paper has provided the authors an opportunity to reflect on the meta-outcomes of the Design Agency Project, and there are a number worthy of further exploration. The paper has particularly highlighted for us gaps in data through lack of systematic collation. This meant that we had no option but to position this case study as descriptive rather than evaluative. A dedicated researcher is currently addressing that situation. Initial goals in this respect are:

- To initiate contact with the qualitatively significant 2012 graduates, inviting each to contribute about their experience of the programme. We hope this will inform a systematic analysis as part of a longitudinal study into what happens after graduation;
- We are to canvass participating members of the Design Business Association for insights about the project;
- We will examine the effectiveness of the established learning outcomes which support the project, being open to opportunities for improvement in the authenticity of assessment;
- We wish to examine how we might evolve a deeper/ broader analysis to establish whether there are wider lessons – in particular to probe further what problems this approach presents;
- We need to understand better what the project yields for mentors, and how that might be better inscribed within the project.

The evolution of this project demonstrates that there is a role for educators' autonomous risk-taking in design education methodologies. This project was conceived of as neither a contribution to the employability agenda nor did it fulfil the rigours of action research. It evolved from a series of small annual interventions in the curriculum to generate energy and familiarity between students (and years of the programme) at the commencement of each year. It was an extended yearly 'ice-breaker' prior to commencing the 'real learning'. But the recognition of the student benefits in this accident was so compelling *and* the autonomy of the programme leader wide enough to permit its integration into the wider curriculum.

It is possible that the process of formal application for funding to evolve or to study the project at its early stages may have ironically quashed its potential. And yet, we must contrast that with what has been described as the 'sprinkling of magic dust' on the project. It has been cited several times by institutions concerned with progressive design education, and shortlisted within the top three in the UK for the Guardian University Awards 2013 'employability' category. There are good and solid points made in its favour, but its alchemy is currently strong enough that we fear dissenting voices may have been quieted, and valid opportunities for improvement may be missed.

In other words the project benefited from the freedom to evolve without being tied to educational funding or pedagogical imperatives, but equally is now hoping to reap a reward from more systematic reflection in-situ. It may now even qualify as educational action research. There should be pause for reflection about trying to force lessons or pedagogic outcomes on educational projects at their inception – particularly doing so by concentrating funding on topics such as 'employability'. Perhaps those specific lessons are more likely to emerge through a wider initial remit – for instance, funding opportunities in a 'wildcard' category.

Whilst the most frequently mentioned skills (Table 1) are important, the prime interest for us is turning its indicative perspectives into more systematic findings by deeper and expanded probing. Nevertheless, even now the role of enjoyment emerges as an interesting indication because 'employability' (fuzzy though it may be as a term) can attract a reverence that strips it of this important element. We may be providing a sense of being 'employable' but it is only one part of design education. Primordial to that is the optimisation of opportunity to freely experiment (and enjoy doing so) since we are not simply a production line for industry. There is a paralleled commentary from Stockport College's Thoughtful Six project:

We realised that perhaps it's okay that design education isn't some boot camp for the industry where every student is drilled into preparation for a job. Because, guess what? We've learnt not every single design student really, really wants to be a successful designer... and their design degree is just the first step. (Corazzo 2009)

Zoe Patterson support this broader view of employability in suggesting that the Design Agency Project empowers students to recognise and prepare alternatives too:

All the design related jobs you don't know exist... they're getting a taste of that... and some of them are slightly rejecting that, or looking further afield for agencies that don't follow that type of model... So it is opening up other opportunities... We're not saying to these students they have to work in a certain way... Many of them are working as though they're collectives as opposed to design agencies... Some of them have rejected all of that... and they write their philosophy. (ZP)

A staff member who has charge of one of the year groups cements this with a hopeful view of the wider possibilities for the project and his students:

The agency project offers me the opportunity to be part of the single most exciting and fundamentally far reaching teaching and learning experience I have witnessed in my decade of practice as a design lecturer. Better yet is the knowledge that we have only just started to realise the true potential of this project and the best has yet to come. (Staff member A)

*"Not two weeks in a place tidying-up the paper drawer"*

**Acknowledgements:** Thanks to the students, mentors and staff of the Design Agency Project at Edinburgh College of Art, University of Edinburgh.

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