The effect of social media on design education: from product to process

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ABSTRACT
Social media such as blogs, wikis and digital stories facilitate knowledge exchange through social networking. Such media create a new forum within which dispersed audiences can engage with design processes to create new knowledge and artefacts. Across the online environment, there is a growing engagement with user-generated content which impacts on designers as they move from sole author and producer to facilitator of design processes.

From the commercial successes of Flickr and YouTube to the design-centric initiatives such as ReadyMade and Design it Yourself, design education is just as impacted upon by the user-generated demand driven revolution as is broadcasting and other forms of media. Ready Made, Instructions for Everyday Life a design magazine and associated website focuses on facilitating the production of design by providing readers with examples, instructions and reviews on how “amateurs” can create their own design objects. Lupton’s ‘DIY Design it Yourself’ book and website proposes that those who have access to design tools can “make tangible their own knowledge and concepts”(Lupton 2006: 15).

These two examples go some way to exploring the issues which social media present to design education, including: the role of community in the creative process; the relationship between designer and outcome; the role of designer in user-generated production and distribution; and the long term effects of social media on design education and practice. Design education may broaden to affirm the interface between social sciences and design ensuring that the designer brings a deeper understanding of social systems, communities, audiences and motivations.

This paper uses a recent example of design education and social media networking from the Cooper Hewitt National Design Museum to explore how design thinking and design education can be made more transparent to broader audiences whose engagement with design is precipitated by a desire to engage in the process of conceptualisation and production from their own perspective.

INTRODUCTION
We are currently witnessing a change to the processes which engage community and users with the design process. This is in keeping with a general shift in society from the consumption of authoritative knowledge to the production of social information. This shift impacts on the role of design education both within dedicated design programs and in disciplines where design is used as a provocation for creative practice, ie: human computer interaction. In this education environment, it is likely that design education will need to become more skilled at articulating the methods and processes used in order to meaningfully fulfill future professional experiences. For example, design education may need to take more account of the way in which the design process facilitates users and audiences; that is, the people who wish to engage with media which is made available to them to create content.

Across the media landscape there is a shift for the designer moving from sole author and producer to becoming facilitator of individual creative practice. This shift necessitates a greater emphasis on certain kinds of strategic skills, methods, project skill, a different kind of social understanding which designers will bring to understanding communities, audiences, motivations and so on, than perhaps traditional design education provided. This culminates in a change in the way design is viewed in relation to other disciplines. For instance, at Parsons School of Design in New York, the exploration is focused on the intersection of the social sciences with design. This has been identified as one area where design education can evolve to bring together the creation of media or artefacts with a deeper understanding of social systems, communities and behaviours more explicitly.

Such an emphasis on working with communities of interest and facilitating their creation of new products fundamentally changes the role of community in the design process. Social media sharing networks such as Flickr could be said to have a different starting point for the traditional
design process. For instance, the Pace/McGill Gallery in New York recently exhibited a community co-created exhibition entitled selfportrait – curating the Flickr.com community. The content for this exhibition was created by the Flickr community and the final display of the exhibition was designed to show the works as appropriate for a medium-scale inner city gallery. The outcome could be considered to demonstrate a new relationship between designer and community where designers provide the resources and ‘infrastructure’ which enables community-created content to be displayed in major gallery spaces. The designer’s role in this example is a complex one where the relationship with the community is built on the existence of different production values. The process of producing has embedded within it differing expectations on the part of both communities and designers, that is:

- Communities’ understanding of the design and creation process and the mechanisms by which that is or is not declared,
- Designers’ readings, interpretations and observations of the experience and the situated context they are within.

It is evident that the process differs to both what a designer would observe from the outside and what a client would perceive as the issues for a community. Ultimately, this example demonstrates not simply a first hand account of what an individual user would see but a multi-vocal account of how a community would in a pluralistic way, wish to be viewed and what it perceives as the benefit of this collaboration.

II. EFFECT OF FACILITATION ON PERCEPTIONS OF DESIGN

While on one hand, the experience of facilitating community-created content in a social media environment could be considered a key shift in design education, there is an equally significant paradigmatic shift where the designer perceives his/her agency in the process. In traditional design education, the designer develops a notion of agency through the creation and production of objects/ environments themselves. In the social media environment, designers gain agency through the facilitation of the creative process within the community. This fundamental shift emphasises different parts of the design process. In particular, it necessitates the articulation of design thinking as an integrated way of understanding design, how visual and material thinking sit alongside situated and integrated thinking, conceptual and strategic thinking, and how meaning is created.

Designers and design educators are expert at articulating the material and visual expertise which they bring into any collaboration, yet they often display a more tacit understanding of the kind of methodological contribution that they make. It is this tacit understanding which is often used within design education to distinguish good from bad design. Designers may not necessarily articulate their tacit understanding of design to their community or clients, yet the agency of design in general and the processes through which outcomes are achieved is often seen to be the mainstay of both professional practice and design education. The implications of social media suggest that designers who are more conscious of the expertise they bring to a collaboration are better positioned to consciously and explicitly engage in community relationships in ways which embody their knowledge and skills while providing space and opportunity for communities to utilise design processes and benefit from this expertise.

There is a reasonably long tradition of participatory design or inclusive design strategies which for the most part, has been articulated in specific disciplines. For instance; product designers have long used Human Factors and Universal Design strategies have been used by graphic designers for many decades. In the 70s, 80s these inclusive strategies were described in terms of engaging community to ensure that they became part of the design discourse.

With the advent of the World Wide Web, inclusive design strategies such as Experience Design (Shedroff 1994), User-Centred Design (Nielson 1995) and Information Design (Jacobsen 2000) brought a new level of articulation to the design process. Each of these strategies focused on creating environments where users could navigate the virtual environment in ways which were meaningful for them and they provided explicit methods which designers could use to achieve this engagement. Tufte’s additions to the growing field of digital visual literacy (1995 and 1997) created a new vocabulary for the design of web interfaces while Kress and van Leeuwen (1996) demonstrated the value of representation and modality in interactive environments.

While these authors expressed meaningful ways in which design processes could migrate to the online environment, few apart from Shedroff and Nielsen articulated the need to recognise the nascent skills and abilities which designers draw on in the process of creating quality design outcomes in collaboration with their communities or users.

The social media landscape presents new design challenges which can draw upon design knowledge to develop forms of rhetorical communication. Educating a new generation of designers to both embrace social media technology and the outcomes of its practice on design objects and then utilize it in sustainable and valuable way, relies on articulating the processes of design which are open to social, political and cultural contexts as well as audience experiences.

III. DESIGN EDUCATION AS A CRITICAL PRACTICE FOR SOCIAL MEDIA

In considering how social media could encourage sustainable design practices, it is important to also consider how design and design education came to be structured in modernist practices. In this way, social media can be analysed and paths of practice can be renegotiated to extract value from the social media environment.

Buchanan describes how design came to be regarded as a creative activity during the renaissance and was practiced by those who possessed practical and intuitive abilities but who “did not possess the ability to explain the first principles that guided their work” (Buchannan, 2001: 5). Design was considered paleoteric, a term which was used to describe old
ways of learning. At this time, the new sciences promised to address new problems in understanding the world. The new learning (neoteric) was theoretical and oriented towards subject matters that were underpinned by demonstrable principles and causes. (Buchanan: 6) Design, being considered intuitive and practical, was not seen as producing theoretical constructs of knowledge; rather it was defined by its lack of intellectual status. This legacy continues today in design education and practice, where technology is still privileged over design research. Buchanan (6-7) proposes that design has been tolerated in the university environment due to its practical significance for economic development and the well being of citizens. As the new learning has produced knowledge in the science and arts, it has remained fragmented in an array of specializations where it is difficult to find connections and integrations which serve either in their desire to know and understand the world or in their ability to act knowledgeably and responsibly. Buchanan’s treatise on design practice and research proposes that design will become the new learning as it is capable of connecting and integrating knowledge from different specializations to produce meaning. His emphasis on the notion of design knowledge as a formal and descriptive way of tackling the new learning presents us with new opportunities in design