Story/No Story: narrative design exercise for shared ways of seeing

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Abstract

A case example is presented of an innovative teaching and learning experience, devised somewhat emergently for a mixed class of 30 undergraduate design students in Beijing, China. It shares the benefits of a mash-up approach drawing on fundamentals of design practice translated into an intensive five-day observation-to-animation exercise, with unexpected learning value to students of three different design-related disciplines.

This paper outlines the instructions given, the process followed, the resulting designed outcomes, and student feedback gathered some three and a half years later. These testimonies evidence the lasting impact of this activity on the students despite its short duration, and specifically the value of observation, creative experiment, facilitating peer relationships, collaboration, and peer learning across the three disciplines. All of these elements were explicitly absent from other learning modules in their curriculum. The scenario provides a framework to inspire and guide similar collaborative activities across design disciplines.

Keywords: narrative design; observation; animation, interaction design; drawing, sensemaking; action learning.

1. Introduction

As this is a qualitative personal account, this paper is written in the first person, giving the author's subjective perspective on a particular teaching situation, accompanied by samples of the visual output of the students and of their recollections of the project.

While visiting Beijing from the UK I was invited to lead a short course for a mixed class of 30 Animation, Information & Art Design (Infodesign), and Photography undergraduate students. I had complete freedom to cover any areas I chose, with no learning outcomes specified by the hosting faculty. However, as I had come expecting to run a product innovation course, this left me with a short time to plan. Having no experience of animation I consulted a friend and former colleague, Dr Hugo Glover, who gave me very helpful suggestions for accessible and stimulating approaches to animation.It was a new challenge to me to devise a learning exercise that would be equally engaging, relevant and stimulating to students of all three loosely connected disciplines. Looking for common ground between them, I devised an activity that would emphasise practises common to all – namely observing, visualising, and storytelling – but not overly familiar or unchallenging. I was confident that I could draw on my own expertise in innovation design, of products, services and digital experiences, to conceive such an activity, but was uncertain how successful it would be.

The main activity outlined here required the students to work together in mixed teams of three or four people, to examine a simple (to them), everyday task in detail, by describing in text, then enacting it, recording on video, translating to a storyboard then into a stylised animation. By moving from the detailed recording of the actions to a free, abstracted visualisation, the exercise balanced the contrasting elements of technical exactitude and creative fluidity.

2. Educational context

Animation as a practice demonstrates and builds skills of visual narrative and observation (Williams, 2009; Dobson *et al*. 2018; Glover, 2020). Constructivist theories of learning suggest students acquire knowledge by active engagement, connecting existing knowledge with new stimuli (Bada & Olusegun, 2015). In design pedagogy the studio learning environment is considered fundamentally important for enabling active engagement for tacit knowledge acquisition, not only 'hard' technical skills, such as drawing and modelmaking, but the softer skills of observation and creative association, as well as informing development of a personal perspective or ethos (Wilson & Zamberlan, 2017).

In design pedagogy, drawing objects is a well established studio activity to observe and interrogate, principally for a better understanding of their material and formal qualities but also to practise and build this skill of noticing, that is, to develop attentiveness to details of

form and materiality. The principle can be extended from object to experience; if through drawing we learn to "see things more clearly" (Edwards, 1997), it follows that in enacting and studying a short temporal experience and focussing on the minutiae of the actions involved, students would learn about the specific chosen experience but more importantly, would develop technique for observation, relevant to all three specialisms. While such detailed scrutiny is important in design knowledge, a less formal, less deliberate form of noticing is also important in creative practice for making serendipitous connections. The term encounter (Adamson et al, 2011) is helpful to convey such a subtler kind of openness to connections and insights that may yield creative progress:

"Knowledge is always fragmentary, partial and provisional, and only comes into its own through the unexpected challenges, confirmations, elaborations and unsettlings that result from encounter." (Adamson et al 2011)

Similar claims are found in theories of sensemaking – the process of giving meaning to experience – (see eg Weick 1995), of which the activity of design is an example (Stevens 2013). Sensemaking is triggered when a person becomes aware of a disruption, a deviation from the expected (Weick, 1995, p. 5). This enables one to "comprehend, understand, explain, attribute, extrapolate, and predict" (Starbuck & Milliken, 1988, p. 51); to understand connections among, for example, people, places, and events (Klein et al., 2006); or to explain surprises or discrepancies.

The exercise was planned therefore to promote shared ways of seeing and acting – to encompass in a very short time these complementary practices of observing and noticing, analysis and creative synthesis, and (by fostering their collective and individual agency) action-based learning (van Lier 2007). In so doing, the students collectively produced an abstracted narrative film of striking quality.

3. Exercise Instructions and Sample Outcome

- Class divided into 8 teams of 3-4, at least one from each discipline.
- "Imagine someone carrying out a simple task over a few minutes in the home, at work, or a public place, (eg boil an egg, fasten a tie, hang a picture on a wall). It should be something you can do yourself, and include physical objects."
- "Make written notes in as much detail as possible: What steps are required? Any emotions like frustration, delight? Parts that are easy, difficult, unthinking, require other objects, special skill or knowledge etc..?"
- Each team member then enacts the task, recorded in simple video using phones.
- Storyboard sketches of key steps: draw up a storyboard using stills from the videos.
- Edit the video footage into an abstract 16 second movie. "It does not have to be instructive. Be as expressive and stylised as you like."

- Divide the 16" video equally across the team
- Working solo, trace the video frame by frame (rotoscoping) on tracing paper or digitally, and embellish with any visual style (fig 1) then animate the frames.
- Each team re-assemble their 3 or 4 segments back into one 16" movie (fig 2).

The finale of the course was to show all eight animations to the class as a single film, titled Story/No Story (Stevens 2019) to which I added text titles and an upbeat soundtrack. In the end, the students, myself and the hosting faculty were very pleased and impressed with the results, both in terms of learning outcome and in the resulting output of the students.
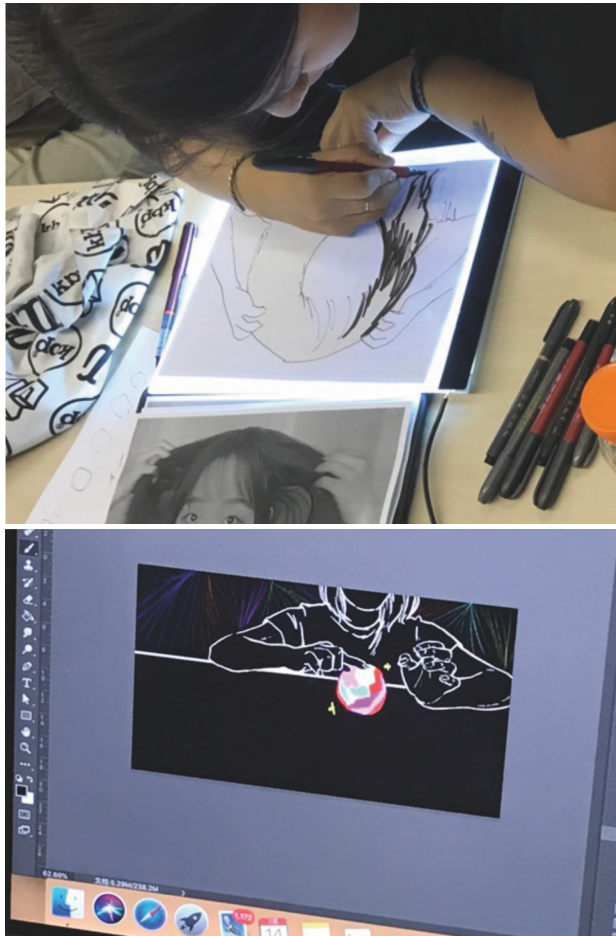
Figure 1. Frame-by-frame tracing of live action (rotoscoping) using paper over a tablet (top) and directly on screen (bottom). Photo credit: author.

Figure 2. Sample frames from the final compiled animation show the variety of styles and media. Credit: student participants, see Acknowledgements.

4. Student Feedback

The following are extracts from reflections of six student participants, now graduates, who kindly responded in English text to my emailed request for feedback.

4.1. What do you remember most from the class?

"What impressed me most was the group animation cooperation, in which everyone built different visual styles through the way of real shooting and turning to tracing. When these styles were played together, they brought me a novel experience …The whole class was full of lively atmosphere and innovative and open teaching contents." **Yuxin (Animation).**

"The most impressive thing for me was that the teacher encouraged group members to create an animation together. At first, we doubted ourselves about this, worried that our styles would have conflicts if combined… Finally, to our surprise, we did fantastic work, brightening our eyes. … After I graduated, looking back, this class was the most impressive to me because it was a brand-new attempt for me to learn how to make animation like that. I hope more classes like this can be added to students' schedules in the future." **Yuelin (information & art design).**

"It was the first time for me to make animation informally, so the part where the team did different styles of animation impressed me the most. The teacher asked us to pick a small routine in the daily behaviour and record it as detailed as possible. As first it may seem tedious and superfluous, but soon we realized that it is a delicate observation method to every detail, which can help us to create animation more vividly." **Zhonghe (animation).**

"In the last class, when everyone's animations were connected and played together, it was very touching. Another point is that I have always been very timid to brainstorm and express ideas quickly. But in the first class, I could imagine an interaction product… with students from different majors and exhibited our ideas in class, which impressed me a lot.… Thank you, you brought us a wonderful course that I still remember many details even [after] four years passed." **Hanjie (information & art design).**

"I attended this course a long time ago, but the experience is still memorable because it was the first time I had worked in a group for a project. Plus, the diversified academic background among the members and experiencing the complete design process was truly inspirational. At the time… sketching, sculpture, and Chinese painting were my daily routine. However, it was the first time I took the hybrid class that consisted of three different classes. It was unfamiliar but exciting. I got to meet new classmates and established friendships with them over time. This was a very exciting process." **Lingjun (Photography).**

"I remember clearly… our group made a short animation video and a poster about beauty and makeup, trying to break and re-think about this daily routine though this whole creative process. The process of research and design inspired me a lot in my later practices. I found that the design methodologies I learned from the class are actually widely used by people doing interaction or industrial designs. I majored in animation, so that these methodologies do not usually work straightforwardly in my own creative practice. However, the way the class taught me to observe life, find pain points and dig into it — the way of thinking really helped a lot in my own studies." **Rui (animation).**

4.2. How did you feel being in a mixed class of photography, animation and digital designers?

"In a hybrid classroom, the integration of different majors can provide suggestions from different perspectives for the implementation of project cooperation, and these suggestions can create new sparks." **Yuxin.**

"I think it's cool! Because we are from different majors so that we have different perspectives and different methods of solving a problem. We learned from each other and leveraged our respective strengths to complete our final work. For example, I learned how to make a frame-by-frame animation under the guidance of my team member who majored in animation." **Yuelin.**

"It was an amazing experience to have classes with students from different majors. Different people grasp different knowledge and have different understanding on one topic. Therefore, when facing the same design, they choose different angles. They were all very enlightening." **Zhonghe.**

"Being in a mixed class is, at first, painful, but I definitely learned a lot from this diversity. At the time … most of us did not have a very clear idea of what our majors were really about and what we were learning… I think that being able to have a mixed class in freshman year really expanded my vision not just in an interdisciplinary perspective, but gave some more depth to my understanding of my own major — animation, which became crucial to my later trans-disciplinary studies and career path." **Rui.**

"When cooperating with other members, I have sensed the charm within a cross-major environment. We come from different fields of studies, but gathered as a whole, displaying our own unique strengths. We help and encourage each other during the process, as well as reminding each other of the designing procedures and details. As time progresses, the fascinating aspects of cooperating with people that come from different academic backgrounds have taught me the basics, and the importance of personnel speciality during the designing process." **Lingjun.**

5. Conclusion

The structure of the unit was highly successful in acheiving a range of learning outcomes, and is easily repeatable via simple instruction, with hardware and software commonly already used by many students. The same structure could, I suggest, also be valuable for younger learners or non-design students, as the rotoscoping technique is highly accessible to less expert or able students, and produces vary satisfying results.

The teams achived a high quality output, demonstrating the complementary practices of observation, analysis and creative synthesis, and an intense combination of group and solo work, and of intra- and interdisciplinarity. From these written reflections, and in the class atmosphere at the end of the module, it is clear the intensity and intimacy of the challenge had a highly emotive resonance. Participants found collaboration daunting at first, then enjoyed the lively and energetic atmosphere in the class, and ultimately made valuable learnings and lasting friendships, and produced an artwork they were immensely proud of.

Acknowledgements

their hard work and for making me so welcome: Zhang Zhonghe, Zhu Yanru, Zhang Yueying, Du Yilin, Wu Yudan, Yang Linyue, Wang Rui, Lin Jiahua, Guo Xinyi, Liu Chang, Wang Yiliu, Yu Hanjie, He Shixian, Chen Long, Liu Lingjun, Han Xiaoxuan, Xiao Xiaodi, Hu Yifei, Liu Siyi, and Tan Xinran.

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