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Learning in Practice

Interview with Mathew Bates, Design Director, Design Partners

This article forms part of a Master's Degree by research entitled 'The Role of Practice Oriented Learning in Design & Creativity in an Irish Technological University'.

Until the late 1960's, Ireland was mainly dependent on agriculture for economic security. In a bid to improve economic development, national policy identified that membership of the EEC was necessary for the development of industrial capacity. The Regional Technical College network, now the Institutes of Technology, were established to provide a technical educational infrastructure in order to supply a trained workforce to achieve this policy objective. The authors research to date maps the years from their foundation, through to the present. The educational strategies adopted in these new colleges, reflect a clear mirroring of the fiscal and political objectives of their time. Noteworthy, however, is the impact of the fiscal crisis that Ireland experienced as a result of the international banking crash of 2008; which triggered an EU strategic directive.

The Department of Education responded and has begun implementation of a National Strategy to 2030 for Higher Education; known as The Hunt Report. The role of teaching and learning in the sector is being reviewed and attempts are being made to identify the changing needs of the tertiary sector as a whole, to promote a climate of innovation for Ireland's future workforce. This revised strategy places a greater focus on innovative and creative thinking for competitive advantage. Through the proposed clustering and merging of existing Institutes of Technology, there is potential for the emergence of a new and dynamic educational structure, or Technological University (TU). This new educational structure would aim to provide a new learning experience and graduate profile, to meet the needs of the innovation and creative economy, considered important for growth and competitiveness within EU and the global markets in the 21st century.

To achieve this innovation based economy, the authors research focuses on the role of practice oriented learning; more specifically the design education practice oriented approach to learning. Design education already provides an existing educational and practice-led framework for rapid knowledge based innovation. The project seeks to explore how this learning strategy can be exploited to frame a more universal practice oriented learning strategy for the emerging TU structure, to deliver innovative and creative graduates.

The dynamic and responsive nature of commercial design practice, necessitates constant change, innovation and creativity. To gain insight and understanding of the innovative and creative process, the research sought to interview leading designer practitioners, operating both nationally and internationally. By exploring the daily activities, interactions and practice which engage these practitioners, the aim was to seek deeper understanding and insight of the relationship between knowledge, skill, and competency required by designers in innovative and creative practice. By exploring cues and response to an ever dynamic and changing commercial environment in delivery of innovative and creative output, emergent and modified practice might be observed. The aim of the research is to gain fundamental knowledge and insight to inform future design and education frameworks. It also seeks to identify necessary graduate attributes for the innovative and creative practitioner that support the development of an approach to educational practice, as we progress towards TU structure in Ireland.

To assist in uncovering some of these cues, the following interview was conducted with Matthew Bates, senior design director at

Design Partners. With a global list of clients across many sectors, Design Partners is a leading Irish strategic design consultancy with studios in Dublin and Eindhoven. Their mission is to partner with ambitious clients and help fuel their growth by providing exceptional, story-led design.

The interview was semi-structured and based around the context of three main open ended questions namely, what do you do? what have you learned through practice? and what are the attributes that you value in graduates?

Q. Tell me a bit about what you do in Design Partners

We work on many connected product experiences where we focus on the design of the physical artifact as well as the experience of a digital interface. It's a combined experience that we believe needs to be considered together in order to be as seamless, efficient and delightful as possible. In the 'Professional Category' in Design Partners, this often involves both observational and user testing research with users in the field, involving interviews with technicians, service engineers, facility managers and specifiers. These are all stakeholders in the route to market and usually have different needs and motivations in their decision-making. By tuning into these different user and customer needs we are able to think about the holistic experience and put a proposal on the table that has thought of everything together rather than as separate entities. As we work more at this intersection of artifact and interaction design, the term UX (user experience) is being used a lot and for some reason it seems to be largely associated with UI (user interface) design which for me is not the full picture. UI and digital interface design is incredibly important but it's not always the full experience. I have started using a new phrase to describe this - Holistic User Experience, HUX. This is about considering and designing a full meaningful user experience from the moment they open the box, install and commission the product, maintain it and interact with it both physically and through a mobile App. They could be in a dark environment, wearing gloves or half way up a ladder. This context is something that Design Partners thinks about all the time. Applying design thinking to all of these different stakeholders is really interesting to me in my

role as leader of the Professional category, creating efficient, delightful new work flows to help brands grow and empower users.

Q. Could you talk us through a typical project or the process you engage?

Yes, we have a five stage process, the first stage is the discovery phase. Our discovery phase is very much about 'tuning in' to two things; the brand and the customer/user. The client is an important stakeholder and they will have knowledge and depth of the market that we will never have. They also have their own brand ambition so you need to 'tune in' to that and understand that it is a huge influence on what a product can be, wants to be or needs to be. The second thing to tune in to is the customer or user [they are sometimes different people] once we connect to those two mind sets, we will build a story.

The second phase of the process is the concept phase: this is about building concepts that speak to a strong meaningful story.

The third phase is concept development: this involves developing the chosen concept, embodying the story in detail. Sometimes it also involves taking feedback from any testing that may have been done.

The fourth phase is the detail phase, in an industrial design project this is detailing the product in CAD, liaising with suppliers and toolmakers in the process.

The fifth phase is the delivery phase. This can mean different things to different clients. It is primarily delivery of a service, when the engineering teams or the toolmakers have their outputs from the previous phase then we liaise with them to ensure that tooling or any issues that have arisen are well managed and that nothing compromises the design vision. It also encompasses marketing needs, clients may need assets to communicate the story, so we have done things like that such as an art directed photo shoot helped communicate marketing stories or created photo (appearance) models. The delivery phase can be different things for different people but it is really about seeing the product through to final production.

This five phase process is one we have honed and works best for us. That's not to say we may not need to hone it again in the



Mathew Bates Design Director, Design Partners

future. A willingness to adapt is important in a consultancy.

Q. Could you give us an example in relation to time allocation within the phases?

It varies hugely, it is important to always 'tune in' at some level, it could be a two hour workshop for the discovery phase, then other projects could be a three month discovery phase to gain a deeper customer insight. Sometimes we conduct ethnographic research on multiple sights, in multiple countries so it varies. The least we would spend is an hour or two with a client tuning in to their ambition, getting a common consensus around the table so we can move confidently forward with the project.

Q. What have you learned throughout your experience in a working design practice and how do the junior designers learn within the commercial environment of the practice?

One of the things I've learned is you have to be versatile and change as the pervasive trends change. One of the massive changes happening is the internet of things, it is a powerful new opportunity for brands that is growing all the time. We have to adapt our thinking and know how best to add value within that context. Digital interaction design is part of that at an M2M base level but there are other important things to consider such as how the value proposition is moving away from the first level M2M interaction. Ten years ago we might have been doing a high performance keyboard and it was all about how quickly you could type, the travel distance of the keys and the ability to work wirelessly. This no longer meets the needs of the future worker so you have to constantly change and be tuned in to what is around you.

That is certainly one thing I have learned, to observe what is happening with pervasive trends but then to be brave enough to change and stand for something, it is a challenge. We also spend a lot of time putting together credentials, presentations and pitches. Having the ability to understand what is relevant so you can almost pitch on the fly, focus on certain areas, emphasise different areas to different clients only comes with experience. If I was trying to explain what it is, I don't think I could, when I'm in a meeting and I have a young designer with me, you can see it, they don't get it, that's why it's important

that in every project we do to try and work in triangles. There is a senior director, who is directing the team, then a senior and junior designer. Every meeting and project is different but you always have an experienced hand holding the tiller, just guiding it and nudging it back on course if it deviates. In this way at Design Partners we empower the designers to think for themselves, we want them to become design consultants and for that they have to think for themselves and have a point of view. It is not just about processing models and sketches, it has to be based on a strong reason why. The more they can show they can do that, the more responsibility they'll be given. We have people who come here on internship and have shown that ability to take that opportunity and there are others who don't. You can guess which ones are likely to be offered a more permanent role. Certainly at Design Partners there is a need to have a voice and that's one of the great things if you can give them the opportunity to have a voice. They must have the answer to 'why?' and what is the meaningful connection with the user.'

Q. What have you learned about the business side of design through working in the practice?

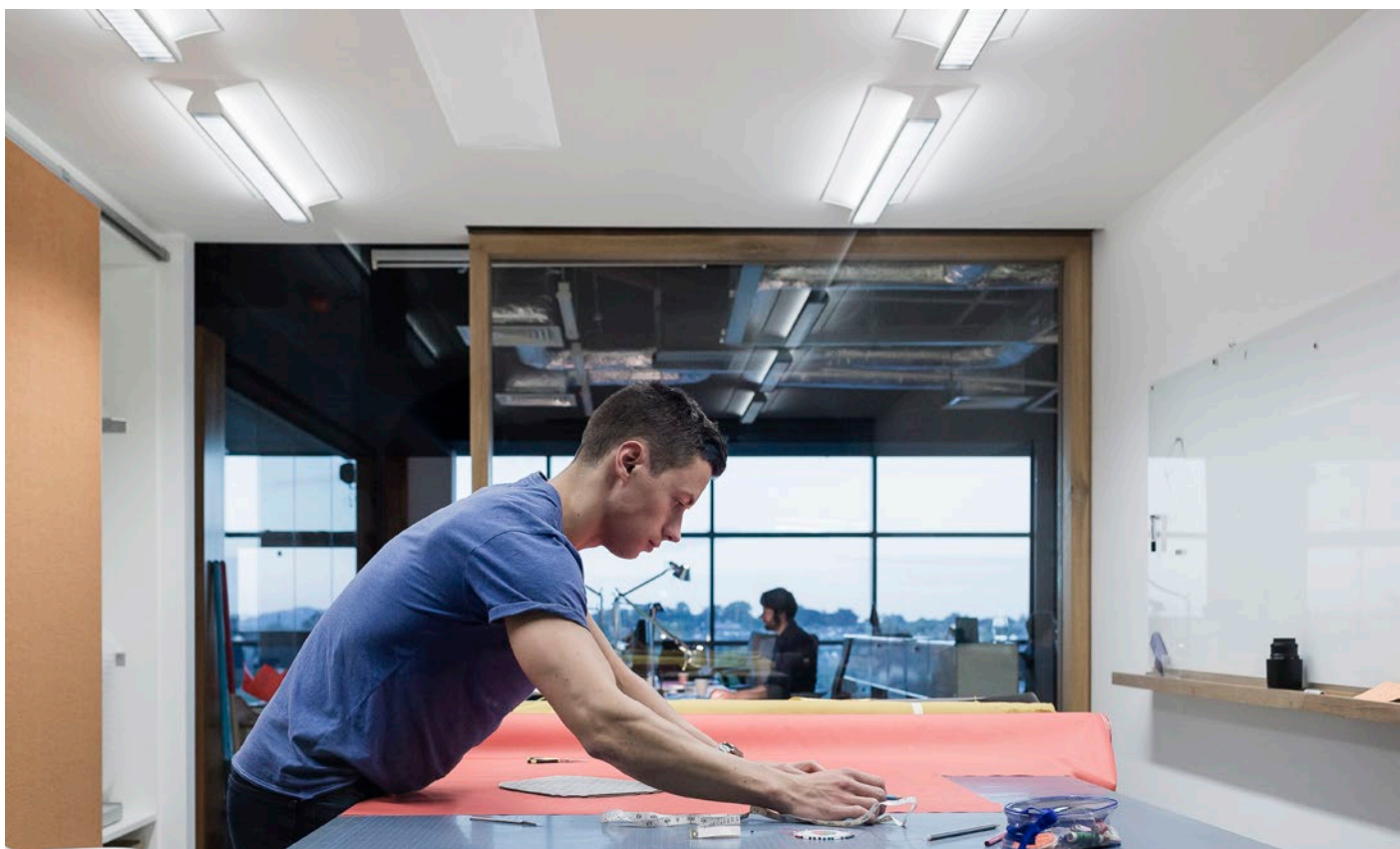
Industrial design is all about creativity but it is a business, it is an applied art. We have to sustain our business by doing great work, maintaining strong relationships and seizing opportunities that fit our vision.

Q. Is that something you were aware of when you first started in the practice?

I think I did have an awareness of the business side but it wasn't my focus obviously. It is not something that designers coming out of college have for sure.

Q. Has that helped your success?

Maybe it has helped me get to the position I'm in now. One of the great things about being a designer is that you have to wear different hats all the time during the day. As a design director there is a lot of filters going on when I'm in a meeting or conversation. There is a philosopher called Edward de Bono who has written a book called Six Thinking Hats. He talks about exercises where you can have six different coloured hats and each person has to wear, for example, the red hat for business, the green hat is creative, the



other represents the user and you talk about a product but everyone thinks about it from the chosen perspective. It could be an interesting exercise to bring to the college environment. When you are a designer, you are right in the middle, you are the fulcrum point, you've got engineering shouting down your neck, I can't do this, you've got the marketing team wanting to push the boat out and finance reigning you in, you've got the user who wants you to use something else and you are trying to have creative vision so you try and balance everything..... (laughs) it's like juggling the plates.

Q. How do you navigate creative freedom and the iterative process in a commercial environment?

This is definitely one that comes with experience, I am sure many if not all agencies have clients and projects that they are working with that are spearheading innovation and are where they want to be and there are others that maybe are not. There are other projects that may be just lagging a bit behind the innovation curve but they are still really interesting and we can still bring a lot of value, they are actually great projects for younger designers to get their teeth into because they

are like stepping stone projects in a way. They are very good for training young designers with a bit of direction from experienced designers. We try to bring all our designers up to design consultants.

I think in interaction design, an iterative process is hugely important for sure. I think as you get more experienced in industrial design you require less iteration, you make less mistakes, you know if the story is compelling and you build an instinct of what the creative solution might be but some projects do require a lot of exploration. I was describing an example of this to a colleague recently where I was working on a project that needed a physical articulation in the design. I was explaining that you just can't break the laws of physics regardless of your vision but there are other ideas that challenge your understanding and you might think they aren't feasible until you try. On this particular project we made the rig and it turned out it was feasible and that turned out to be a ground breaking new experience. So in that case instinct tells you it might not be feasible but you make the rig and it did and the result were –wow! I think what I'm saying is iterations are important absolutely but

Design Partners Studio, Dublin



Crafted form

with experience you can generally bypass a lot of the exploration that maybe a younger designer has to go through. As a young designer you need to learn it however, you have to do your ten thousand hours (laughs). That sounds very old fashioned but you kind of do, I had to do it and I believe by doing it you become a better designer.

Q. You have almost 20 years industry experience with Design partners, have you witnessed much change?

I think there are certain values that we have from the very start that we haven't lost. I think things like having a physical model as early as possible in the process, there is nothing like a physical model to communicate to a client an experience, product design or prototype.

We have always thought about getting the thinking and doing balance just right. It is about having a really strong strategic idea but also making it actionable - something a client can actually take to market and sell but that has a new meaningful connection. I would

say we have probably fine-tuned and honed that process over the years so that is what has changed. The tools we have brought in to that process to help things move efficiently and quicker has also changed. The 'how' we do that has changed but there is still that continuous backbone of hands-on thinking and doing but technology has allowed us to make it even more efficient, so I think that is one thing that has changed.

Q. How do people identify with the design industry in Ireland today as opposed to when you started?

There was a lack of awareness at the start, most of our clients have been international. We found working with Irish clients in earlier times was a constant struggle to sell the value of design. It is only in more recent times, maybe due to younger CEO's realising that design and design thinking can add value because the market is constantly changing and their approach needs to be different. We are working with more Irish clients but a lot of our clients are still international. The high

tech and medical companies in Ireland are involved in dynamic and exciting projects now and we are actually in talks with new highly innovative technology start-up companies who are creating some game changing products. There is also really exciting things happening in the professional category around agriculture and industrial connected spaces. It is amazing to be part of that and to design and curate new experiences.

Q. There is a certain amount of networking involved in any business. How at Design Partners do you fair at networking or collaborating with other businesses?

I think we are getting much better at it. There has been quite a lot of co-operations and the healthcare team are collaborating with hospitals like St. Thomas's Hospital in London. I've been collaborating with other creative professionals, I think it's healthy, we all learn from each other so I support it.

Q. At Design Partners do you get involved in networking with any design education providers?

Yes, we have done quite a few things, we have been involved in tutoring in colleges such as NCAD and Maynooth. We ran a design competition two years ago, the prize was an internship at Design Partners which worked out well. We are constantly looking to recruit but the Irish graduates still have a way to go, our experience of international colleges has been positive, so many of the students we take are French, German, Austrian, Swedish.

Q. What graduate attributes are you looking for?

I think what we are looking for is an ability in creative story-telling, good technical skills, good user experience focus, general design thinking, maybe had work placement in the field, really well equipped creatively, mature about design. The student project we did was in part to try to help influence what's happening, try to highlight the standard needed and in a way, light a fire. Creativity is the most important thing that we are looking for coming out of college for students. They need to show an ability to think differently and apply that thinking to design, to an output, they have got to have the 'why?' behind what they are thinking. The portfolio is really important, it is our first filter and we are looking for evidence of creativity

and applied thinking. Building a portfolio is really important, we have a short online presentation with tips on portfolios on our website that includes some high level things to think about when you're building a portfolio.

I often wonder if we should be targeting second level education because I wonder are the right people going in to design education. In Ireland, traditional professions seem to get promoted from career guidance teachers - like engineering, law, accountancy where, I don't know, there is a perception that that is where the money is and they are more secure. The creative industry is looked upon as inferior, people don't really understand it. Maybe we should approach second level schools and show how exciting and innovating a career in design is. Highlight the kind of work we are doing on a daily basis rather than just sitting in an office. I think to go and do that, you might reach out to people in the secondary schools who have an inkling but they are afraid or feel pressurised to go into a more traditional field. If you strike and inject the excitement early on in their career they might think about going into that course so you can start getting the right people in who are more motivated about it.

We are very grateful to Design Partners who have provided us with an outline of the practice from the daily processes, the learning experiences and ultimately how this informs the graduate attributes which are sought after. Further interviews are currently being conducted with Irish design practitioners to enable comparative and thematic analysis of insights into design practice today. Overall these interviews will inform the research of industry demands which have traditionally been one of the contributing influences of Irish educational strategy. As we transition from Institutes of Technology towards Technological University, establishing these benchmarks to inform future educational frameworks, will in part, contribute to the overall quality and dynamics of Irish design education. Should anyone who may have an interest in this area wish to comment or participate in the research, please email:
lynne.whelan@itcarlow.ie