Social Innovations with Craft and Design Education:
Exploring the opportunities and impact these can have on health and wellbeing in an ageing society.

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Social Innovations with Craft and Design Education: Exploring the opportunities and impact these can have on health and wellbeing in an ageing society.

Abstract:
Since 2009, Manchester School of Art has evolved and delivered a series of craft and design projects where social responsibility, integrity and professional excellence are placed at the heart of the curriculum. This paper will explore the challenges arising from the national and global backdrop of an ageing society, and will evaluate the importance of developing close partnerships with Manchester City Council, health organisations and communities. The initiatives that result are supported by and discussed in terms of social and situated learning theories.

The paper addresses how we embrace these objectives and respond accordingly with innovative projects that are defined by hands-on project work with the community. The case studies presented address the challenges of facilitation, collaboration, delivery and impact. We shall illustrate the rationale, methodologies and impact that social innovations can provide, and how these encourage engagement with communities.

This paper highlights the drivers for further participatory projects where craft and design support society. Furthermore it seeks to inform and initiate future (more global) partnerships that can work to address critical social issues through craft and design education.
Paper:

Ageing in the city

“The world is rapidly ageing: the number of people aged 60 and over as a proportion of the global population will double from 11% in 2006 to 22% by 2050. By then, there will be more older people than children (aged 0–14 years) in the population for the first time in human history” (World Health Organisation, 2013)

The Age-friendly city approach is a World Health Organisation - led movement of over 100 cities world-wide in which the Valuing Older People department at Manchester City Council has played a leading role since 2010. (1)

According to Valuing Older People, an age-friendly city is “a city committed to social inclusion ensuring that older people, so often marginalised in society, are involved, are part of and feel comfortable and valued in the city in which they live.” (2)

Evidence shows that it is particularly challenging to age in a deprived urban environment. Manchester, is a particularly ‘tough patch’. Greater Manchester includes ten authorities, with a total population of 2.6 million. We have an unusual older population – as a result of cohort migration and economic decline in the 70/80s. We have the second lowest male life expectancy in England and high levels of pensioner poverty, ill-health and disability. We also have a vibrant public, community and private sectors. (3)

Since 2010, VOP has been developing a Manchester focused approach to the Age Friendly City through understanding the concept and planning activity, and it is through partnership with VOP that Manchester School of Art are beginning to contribute to creating an age-friendly Manchester. The early partnerships began in 2010 with collaborations between the City Council and the Postgraduate Design LAB.

MA Design LAB is a multi-disciplinary and project-led MA. Since it began, we sought to respond to design issues in the City. Since 2008, projects have become increasingly socially focused, finding collaborative endeavors and mutually beneficial partnerships. Developing our network and understanding the fabric of our City underpins our practice.
Case Study 1:
A Manchester Age-friendly City plan is presently being shaped around the following themes:

- People – involving older people
- Places - working in neighbourhoods, responding to local need
- Projects - practical pieces of work that improve services and help our learning
- Partnerships - practical collaborations to achieve plans locally and to draw down resources and investment into the city
- Policy - influencing policy and embedding age-friendly principals

Case Study one, “Age-friendly Chorlton” is a project between MA Design LAB and Valuing Older People (VOP). Students were asked to develop local propositions of what the Age-Friendly neighbourhood concept could be and attempt to increase awareness of age friendly issues. This was a three-month project located in Chorlton, a suburb of Manchester. The project team consisted of eight postgraduate students. Their disciplines were: Textiles, Knit, Embroidery, Interior Design and Ceramics.

The early foci were primarily guided by the conversations with a community group called Chorlton Good Neighbours and with older visitors at a café in Chorlton precinct. Students were told the pavements are often difficult to negotiate due to gaps, cracking and inconsistent levels. Social and environmental change was much commented on by residents; many didn’t feel like the area was their own anymore and felt that they were fading into the background. Walking the area highlighted the importance and significance of resting points within communities.

Gemma Latham & Lucy Gannon
Initial interventions

Over six weeks, students carried out initial explorations and subtle interventions. They mapped existing resting points, noted where they were lacking and modified an existing bench in the central precinct where older people gathered. They produced casts from problematic cracked pavements. A living-room set erected on the street provided a catalyst for conversation. They explored ways of recognizing and communicating the voice of older people.

The research crystallized into ideas when the students considered how they might combine their approaches to gain a greater insight into the issues. The work the students produced came about through the students negotiating the use of the Chorlton Arts Festival Hub – a shop space in the precinct - where they held an event called ‘Meet Me at the Precinct.’

In order to encourage people to sit and talk, they designed and produced a table that recalled the images of cracked pavements. Furniture and fabrics sourced from local charities displayed comments and questions gathered from the community. A series of ‘props’ were produced and visitors were encouraged to participate. Resources were pooled together to create an event, which extended the collaborative research effort whilst allowing distinct research approaches with the community to be pursued.

The response from the Council was positive. Following the event, a publication documented the project and made recommendations, including:

- Approach older people and others as individuals, allowing for different levels of engagement.
- Use a range of communication materials, props and visual prompts to encourage people to share memories and thoughts.
- Collaborate with older people to determine project outcomes
- Work physically and visibly. The act of making encourages dialogue.
**Reflection**

The project aim was to develop local propositions of what the Age-Friendly neighbourhood concept could be. Whilst good recommendations were made, the real project was in learning *how* we could recognize the enormity of the issue and find ways to approach it.

**Some key factors:**

The collaborative practices and teamwork encouraged within the LAB were particularly supported by introducing students to communities of practice and social learning theories. For example, those of Wenger & Lave have provided particularly useful frameworks, reflecting on the *‘whole person acting in the world’* and encourage students to reflect upon the *‘relational interdependency of agent and world, activity, meaning, cognition, learning and knowing’*. (Lave, Wenger 1991)

**True dialogue:** It was the words exchanged with the community that engendered qualities such as respect, humility and courage. We have to really care and we have to pursue meaningful dialogue with the community. Paulo Friere (2000) describes powerfully the essence of dialogue, the *‘word’*, discussing the *‘true word’* as that *‘with which men and women transform the world’* (Friere, pp 88). Recognising the true nature of dialogue – how this can impact and transform is central to socially engaged design practices.

**Flexibility:** What we needed were minds and hands that not only had some respect and courage, but also flexibility. It was not a *‘comfortable’* project. The teamwork and the multi-disciplinarity of the groups required flexibility. Flexibility of skills was important – for example, the speedy production of specialized items and props for the event and community. This project was about flexing our creative minds and hands in new ways – trying to understand the movements, the range and limitations of our creative roles within this context.

**Adaptability:** Mid-way in the project a post-it note exercise required students to identify different roles assumed over the course of the project, within the team and community. These included: listener to fabricator, crafter to negotiator. Students had to be adaptable and recognize the boundaries of their practice. Working within the community and engaging in the network, encouraged adaptability.
Our creative exploration helped people and things to soften and become less ridged. We were challenged to recognize the particular role of craft in this process. As it seeped through the project, craft was used as a tool to soften, to challenge, to draw attention, to distract. This flexibility and adaptability on a material and social level enables us to connect with the vastness and profound nature of the issues in hand.

**Case Study 2:**

The ‘Ageing issue’ cuts to the core of human life. Through the eyes of our elderly we come into contact with issues that shape the quality of our life and death. Developing Aubrey’s research in Dementia alongside Felcey’s connection with VOP, we saw the potential to develop the undergraduate curriculum. Aubrey’s research focuses on Dementia, working with a Risk Assessment Unit in Derbyshire and latterly Reminiscence Units in Manchester. However, it was not until the formation of a new unit, “Unit X” that the opportunity to embed this social experience and her research within the undergraduate programme could be seen. As Brew has commented, “What motivates numbers of academics is engaging in the excitement of research. Bringing research and teaching together is a way of enhancing the motivation of both academics and students.” (Brew, 2003)

By engaging students in external facing social projects they can embed their subject specific learning, develop transferable skills and engage in wider, more social issues. Undergraduate students are less aware of and have less experience with community-based projects than postgraduates. However they are open minded and have the courage to sensitively respond to social issues.

**Unit X**

Essentially the development of Unit X (an 8 week, 30 credit unit that comprises 25% of the year’s mark) aims to provide a platform for students to work effectively in collaboration; to support students in the development of professional skills and to aid them to become confident, employable graduates. The rationale for working alongside Manchester City Council in Case Study 2 includes the following considerations:

- Numbers - over 4000 people have dementia in Manchester. This is expected to rise to 5000 by 2029. (pp 50, Manchester City Council, 2009)
- Cost – dementia costs the UK economy £23 billion a year, more than cancer and heart disease combined (Alzheimer’s Research UK)
It is not hard to see that positive action is needed, particularly in light that there is presently no cure for Dementia presently. However, we have creative individuals- designers, architects and artists who are lateral, flexible thinkers- the kind of thinkers who think outside of the box. There are those who are rethinking architecture to better serve Dementia patients; designers are producing objects to facilitate touch and curiosity such as Darren Browett’s seedpods. Anne Basting has developed ‘Time Slips’, offering online access to help others facilitate creative workshops for dementia sufferers.

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Oliver Sacks’ views on Music Therapy can be extended to other artforms; “The aim of therapy in people with dementia is…it seeks to address the emotions, cognitive powers, thoughts and memories, the surviving ‘self’ of the patient, to stimulate these and bring them to the fore.” (2011, pp 372-3.) As such, the remit for our undergraduate students was to deliver a series of workshops that could enhance the wellbeing of service users with dementia.

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Teaching this at an Undergraduate level raises challenges including negotiation, preparation, mentoring and understanding.

**Negotiation:**

- Each environment had to be visited by staff to negotiate the brief and to ensure that the expectation, delivery and duration were all understood for both parties. Appropriate risk assessment and CRB checks needed coordinating.
Preparation:

- Students attended site visits to familiarise themselves with the environment and service users. It was a daunting task and it took time for students to chat comfortably with the service users.
- Exploratory sessions were delivered to encourage students to think laterally about the type of workshops they could run on site for service users. Materials, approach, workshop duration, skills and cost were all factors to consider. Student groups were mixed to provide new challenges and share skills. They were required to plan, and run workshops for each other in-house, gaining valuable feedback from staff and students before going into their new environments.

Understanding the territory:

- Dementia patients like stability. They may have short term memory. Their social skills may be wanting. At times, the project became less about disseminating a workshop and rather more about the challenge to engage the service user.
- These new experiences require staff to truly support students to maintain their confidence. Students could be ‘thrown’ by some of the uninhibited comments from the service users, but in understanding more about dementia, the students developed a tough yet sensitive skin to the service users’ responses.

Evaluation

Importantly it was pleasing to see how the students responded; they did not try to get the service users to recapture a lost memory. Instead they focused on ‘what’s left’, engaging Dementia patients in new creative ventures.

The impact of the experience can be seen in:

- Voluntary work: Over 50% engaged with the mental health environments beyond the unit
- Curriculum: The experience became integral in developing their level 6 practical and contextual studies
- Network: The experience has widened their network.
Student demand:
The collaborations reflect many of the subject specific dilemmas we are facing; More rare is there a ‘ceramic’ specialist or a glass maker but rather these highly creative individuals are engaging in collaboration, mixing and combining materials freely. They are questioning their own creative territory and client base. Many not only want to produce objects but want to interact with those using their objects; some see this as running community based workshops, others as designing and producing products that enhance the environment and make a difference to people’s lives.

Role of Higher Education:
As an Art School engaged in craft and design practice we have an important role, and we need to work with experts in Ageing in order to provide meaningful outcomes. The Art School is a place where we can facilitate discussion and act as a catalyst and contributor to improving the well-being of our City. Since 2010, our work with Valuing Older People has continued to develop and we now have four key areas of activity:

- Postgraduate and Undergraduate Research
- Age-friendly Design Steering Group and Age-friendly Design Forums. Postgraduate researchers and staff have been part of the founding members of an Age Friendly Design Steering Group in the City.
- We are currently producing Age Friendly City Guidelines, to be published in 2014
- We gained a funded Industry based studentship PhD on Intergenerational Design and the Urban Environment.

In order to run collaborative, socially aware projects staff are developing their roles beyond their subject discipline. We are exploring new frameworks and theories for socially engaged design practice, building our ability to facilitate socially responsible projects and demonstrate why they are necessary for the health and wellbeing of the community. Building and nurturing our relationships with our partners, particularly within MA, has become a significant part of the ‘teaching’ role.
Our desire to create a meaningful life, to impact on health and wellbeing, drives us. Through our collaborative partnerships, we seek to:

- raise awareness of issues
- have meaningful exchanges
- develop skills - both subject specific in design/craft discipline, and transferable skills
- initiate projects which contribute positively to communities and social change

In 2012 Manchester School of Art was awarded the Sir Misha Black award, in part for its work and commitment to its partnerships with the Council. Malcolm Garrett commented that such activities “...demonstrate that educational innovation and enterprise are not confined to capital cities, and that with enlightened public support design education can be an inspiration for urban regeneration, and a complement to City Council initiatives.” (Sir Misha Black Award, 2012)

Manchester School of Art is placing design issues at the heart. Responding to these issues takes guts and is certainly a challenge. It is also rewarding, evolving and most importantly meaningful. The case studies today demonstrate that craft and design education positively impact on health and wellbeing in an ageing society and is an area that merits further investigation.
Notes:
(1) P. McGarry (Senior Strategy Manager, Public Health Manchester, Manchester City Council). Information from a presentation given by Paul McGarry at the Symposium: The Age-friendly City 2nd October 2012, organized by Manchester Design LAB and Manchester City Council.
(2) Personal communication with Patrick Hanfling (Programme Co-ordinator, Public Health Manchester, Manchester City Council), Wednesday 31st July 2013
(3) P. McGarry (Senior Strategy Manager, Public Health Manchester, Manchester City Council), information from a presentation by Paul McGarry at the Symposium: The Age-friendly City 2nd October 2012, organized by Manchester Design LAB and Manchester City Council.

References:

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Manchester City Council, 2009. Health and Well-being Overview and Scrutiny Committee Item 8, 21 May.


