EDUCATOR 2: DESIGN
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CONTEXT (12 STUDENTS)

The Interaction and Service Design Studio is part of the Master of Design program at UTS. Students in the Service and Interaction Design majors do three different iterations of this studio over their Masters degree (1.5 semesters for full time students, 3 years for part time), in combination with six electives. The cohort is typically a diverse combination of students who have recently come through the undergraduate program, students who have been working for 3-7 years and students who have been in the workforce for a significant amount of time and are looking to refresh or pivot to another design speciality.

The aim of this studio is to give students experience in thinking at a strategic level and position work within a wider social, economic and cultural context. Student will learn to adjust to design problems that continually morph as projects develop, negotiate how design can work collaboratively with other disciplines, engage with committed external stakeholders and have confidence managing projects. The studio is structured according to the following principles: design briefs present wicked problems with conflicting considerations; briefs have many points of entry, allowing students to propose their own approach; external briefs and stakeholders make the projects real and provide specialised knowledge; project length, group size and discipline mix defined according to project briefs; educators and external stakeholders provide regular, targeted guidance rather than students following a set methodology.

Approaches and resources

The subject typically runs for 3 hours per week over 11 weeks, with x 3-4 full day workshops. However, class time only accounts for a segment of learning activity. The nature of the assessment tasks and the expectations set by the studio culture mean that students typically work extensively outside class: organising interviews with relevant stakeholders, undertaking field trips and various group meetings and workshops.

The relationship between the expected workload, the limited class time and the complex work and life commitments of masters students outside of university mean that remote communication is a key part of the learning experience. The university email service and the online learning platform typically encourage a low level of compliance among students due most significantly to poor user experience and interaction design. As a result, I have trialled a variety of other, third party digital tools, including Skype, Zoom, Facebook and Slack. For the purpose of this intervention Slack was used as the exclusive software for communication between

the teaching team and students. I had used Slack before in a previous studio, but on this occasion, it was used alongside the university email software. As a result of previous student feedback, I decided to focus exclusively on one channel for communication with students. Ideally this would prevent students having to check multiple channels or missing information if they chose to focus on one channel themselves.

What happened: implementation

In the first class a Slack channel was created with students invited through email. The class was made aware of the planned exclusive use of Slack and given the chance to offer further recommendations for designing practices around the use of the software. One important suggestion was to create a different channel within Slack focused on important announcements relating to the class, such as assessment details. One of the features of Slack is that it allows users to create and theme different 'channels' based on different content. The standard channels are 'random' and 'general' which encourage the sharing of information based on those titles: random usually involves the sharing of diverse content, with indirect or non-existent relationship to work, whereas 'general' is used to communicate relevant, day-to-day information for projects. The standard titles are imperfect, particularly for a university learning context, which differs from typical office work in the limited contact team members and studios leaders have together on a day-to-day basis. As a result, students rely more heavily on remotely accessible documents like subject outlines than workers, who have the opportunity to check-in with colleagues on a day-to-day basis. The title 'general' can imply relevant but not crucial information, and as such things like assessment details can get lost in the abundance of links and comments that are also shared on the channel. This identification of this problem led to the creation of a new channel titled 'key details', where information about assessment tasks and other important information was shared.

Focusing exclusively on Slack changed the dynamic of the class in a number of key ways. Time spent together remotely, or outside of class, is a crucial part of coursework masters degrees, which typically lack the immersive, day-to-day rhythms that allow for cohort building in the undergraduate context. Existing university email services lack the user experience that creates an adequate sense of being together in a digital space. Exchanges through email are typically either peer-to-peer or peer-to-group. The email server does not facilitate a sense of togetherness as a class or as group that captures the spontaneity and cross class interaction that exists in ideal learning contexts. By contrast, the interaction and user experience design of Slack makes it easy for students to view class activity as a whole. It allows for the ongoing sharing of digital files and links in an online space that is designed to capture the best of synchronous and asynchronous conversation. It gives sense of the class being together in the one space remotely, such that content and views might be more willingly shared.

Over the course of the semester an average of roughly 300 messages in private and public exchanges were sent each week. This is a staggeringly high amount of messaging traffic for a class of twelve and far surpasses anything I have witnessed in my five years of teaching using the online platforms and email used by the university. It demonstrates a vibrant virtual learning space, with students sharing and engaging with content and autonomously managing projects.

Students experienced challenges and success using other remote communications software, such as Zoom and Skype, which are both used to have group video meetings. While some geographically disparate students found that video calls became a foundational part of their weekly group work activities, other groups expressed frustration when relying on remote video communication due to a lack of etiquette and familiarity with the medium. For example, one group member initially was required to conduct Skype meetings on the train journey home from work, as this was the time that best suited the diverse schedules of group members. However, due to existing English language difficulties, poor reception on the train line and background noise, this communicative context was found to be inadequate for the purposes of group communications, particularly during early stages of the project when high-level conceptual discussions require optimal levels of conversational fluidity and shared semantic certainty, across a range of verbal and graphic media.

Reflection and recommendations

In the future it would be beneficial for educators to work with students more closely and in a target fashion to establish a set of expectations and ambitions for online communications to minimise such difficulties and engage students in the process of creating an optimal communicative context. A specific document, in the form of an adaptable user guide for the tools available, outlining the best contexts for use and likely limitations would be ideal in this regard. This could also be useful for educators who are seeking contributions from guest speakers who participate remotely in delivering material or on review panels.

For future iterations of this subject I will continue to use Slack and emphasise that it is the central channel on which to rely for class communications. I will dedicate class time not only to programmatically raising the likely difficulties and advantages of communicating remotely in a group work context, but also to active, imaginative working out of new practices for using digital communication and to encourage a general attitude of experiment in using such technology.

Key take-aways

Students will benefit from:

- Being given the resources that allow them to take a reflective, analytical and evaluative approach to the tools they use as part of the collaborative process

- Being encouraged to develop a general attitude of experiment in using such technology and challenged to be imaginative in working out new practices for digital communication and collaboration