

FINAL DEGREE SHOWS; CULMINATION OR INVITATION?

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ABSTRACT

Final degree shows are often described as a ‘culmination’ – a climax or completion. Is the academy missing an opportunity with this perspective? This paper calls into question the role of final degree shows, exploring the potential for them to stimulate pedagogical and curricular development within a design programme or design school.

There are increasing pressures on universities to engage in socially relevant research and nurture students able to respond to the grand challenges of the modern world. To ensure relevance, the academy must learn with the communities it serves. Whilst much research exists on different forms of collaboration with universities, this position paper responds to a gap in literature regarding the role of public exhibitions and proposes final degree shows as a space for new models of public discourse, providing opportunities for knowledge exchange and stimulating discussion with communities outside of academia in different contexts. Rather than being the end of a conversation, we propose that final degree shows become an invitation to begin.

Using a single case study methodology we describe a snapshot safari activity, held during a final degree show, highlighting key outcomes, and exploring the insights revealed in terms of design teaching and curricula. The paper concludes by proposing models of micro-engagement within the context of a final degree show. We believe these could form the basis of further research in this area giving universities the opportunity to explore specific areas of interest through thematic curation of exhibitions with considered convening of people to discuss them.

Keywords: Final show, degree show, design show, final exhibition, graduate exhibition, design curriculum, design pedagogy, industry-academia collaboration, public discourse

1 INTRODUCTION

This paper proposes that there is untapped value in final degree shows and opens with a literature review exploring the format of contemporary shows and what value they offer the academy. We scan forms of interaction between the public and design academics, and review how micro-collaborations can contribute to design curricula, pedagogy, and knowledge exchange. Through a single case study, we demonstrate how an activity held within a degree show raised unexpected insights from people outside of the academy while responding to the design outcomes of graduates. We suggest these insights could be valuable to academics helping them to tailor curricula and teaching practice to stay relevant to real-world societal and industry needs and challenges. We outline the design and application of the snapshot safari activity and give examples of resulting outcomes. The paper concludes by proposing models which could be used to leverage the final degree show as a space for new forms of discourse.

2 BACKGROUNDS

There are increasing calls for new models of public dialogue, formal and informal spaces for people to connect and collaborate on strategically relevant themes leading to research and innovation for prosperity and public good [1]. As institutions grounded on research and innovation, universities have a responsibility to play a role in developing and engaging within these spaces.

The Knowledge Exchange Framework (KEF) [2] identifies public and community engagement and work, along with local growth and regeneration as key segments of a knowledge exchange (KE) strategy. A systematic review of literature on KE for the National Centre for Academic and Cultural Exchange

(NCACE) [3] shares different types of collaborative engagement but does not feature short-term micro-engagements independent of larger projects.

This review of literature explores two key areas of opportunity:

1. Universities could take advantage of more opportunities to gather insights from and exchange knowledge with those outside of academia to inform their teaching and programmes. We explore the format of short-term collaborations and to what extent they inform curricula and teaching.
2. Universities could leverage additional value from final degree shows. We review literature which describes the value they are thought to bring to the academy.

A systematic literature review on university-industry cooperation [4] revealed research on the value transferred from universities to industry, but nothing on the value industry provides to academia. Siegel [5] covers the impact of medium-term partnerships on the curriculum of summer business residentials, but there is little academic attention on short-term collaborations in relation to curriculum design. Plewa et al [6] describe different methods used to facilitate industry involvement in curriculum design and delivery, measuring the efficacy of these in a variety of contexts but excludes any mention of final degree shows.

A report examining the impact of university-industry cooperation in the context of education [7] covers shared physical spaces, Knowledge Transfer Partnerships, live projects and student placements, explaining how these have been used to co-design and develop curricular with industry. However very short-term micro-collaborations are not covered. Additionally, the cases explored focussed on strengthening the knowledge and skills valued by corporations, rather than those which would be valuable to the social innovator. We suggest that discourse between academics and non-academics during final degree shows through micro-engagement models such as a snapshot safari could be a valuable way of enabling people outside of the university to contribute to and influence socially responsible design curricula.

Rarely mentioned in literature on design pedagogy, the final degree show is an important fixture for many higher education art and design programmes, providing motivation for students presenting their work and promoting the courses on show to external visitors. There is a noteworthy lack of literature about degree shows and what exists covers visual and fine art rather than design shows which rarely appear in pedagogic literature or discourse. Available research covers the process of developing the final show and the value of this to students participating in the process, falling short of any deep discussion on the value of the show to industry, society or the academic institutions themselves.

Final degree shows are considered important to students, they are known to motivate and create opportunities for collaboration [8]. Often happening at the very end of the student experience, the opportunity for students to learn during their final degree show is rarely utilised. Hjelde [9] suggests “foregrounding the critical pedagogical and social dynamics of [the degree show] and considering it as a process, not just the outcome” to deliver on a wider potential and references Bismark (2006) who suggests that we should consider the degree show as a reflexive tool to combine educational, with political socially relevant purposes. Littlewood and Wyatt-Livesley [10] also suggest that degree shows should be more connected to the students’ educational experience. Making work visible in a shared space provides the type of social learning space which Shreeve et al [11] propose as a signature pedagogy of art and design disciplines.

Shows are considered a valuable opportunity for the public to have access to challenging contemporary design and act as a public face for the university, communicating a course identity and philosophy [10] and demonstrating students’ learning and knowledge through material products. In considering other types of value to society there are more questions than answers in the literature. In ‘Making Public: The Fine Art Degree Show’, Leeds Beckett School of Art and Architecture [12] asks whether degree shows affect shifts in the delivery and design of teaching and learning, and questions how programmes are influenced by the local and socio-economic landscape.

The ‘Therapeutic Academy’ described by De Ville and Foster (1994) [9] is distinguished by a “political and social stance where the aim is society betterment”. They suggest the exhibitionesque form of the show hinders its ability to create connection with others. Hjelde [9] agrees “The institution cannot be contemporary in its relationship with society, which is perhaps a problem for a place that educates artists and designers of the future”. Gilmore and Comunian [13] highlight the need for universities to turn toward new models of creative engagement to enable academics, industry, and the public to collaborate in the same spaces. How might we use the degree show to foster discourse and understanding of the

exhibition, nurturing the therapeutic part of the university, and providing a way to connect with and better serve society?

Aside from showcasing the teaching of universities and work of students to proud parents, prospective scholars and recruiting employers, degree shows appear to draw little value for the academic institution. No literature was found on the value of shows to higher education institutions in terms of pedagogy, or on their use as an environment for encouraging discourse with public communities aside from ‘industry partners’ – this paper offers a response to this opportunity.

3 POSITIONS

We propose that leveraging additional value from graduation exhibitions through new models of public discourse as a part of design pedagogy would provide an opportunity for further research which this paper begins to address.

4 METHODOLOGIES

Unexpected outcomes triggered this research study, when valuable points relevant to design pedagogy were being raised during discussions as part of a snapshot safari activity at a final degree show. We used auto-ethnographic insights from a place of ‘insider research’ [14] to explore these, mindful that within this emerging intuitive inquiry [15] [16] our positions and perspectives influence our interpretation of research data. This qualitative, participatory case study gave us flexibility to reflect on the experience of the snapshot safari activity without a previously constructed hypotheses or a predefined set of outcomes [17]. We consider this research as a potential first step in a longer period of inductive theory building [18] which given a more substantial body of data could reach conclusions or generate theory.

5 RESEARCH ENVIRONMENT

In June 2022, a UK university design school hosted a conference to encourage discourse on the ways design can be used to identify, respond to or address social issues. Attendees included:

- 9 academics from a research network focussing on multidisciplinary innovation for social change. These academics held teaching and research roles in a wide range of disciplines, other than art and design, from different pan-European universities.
- 19 scholars from the host university who all actively contributed during the event. They included Masters’ students, PhD candidates, teaching and research staff from different design disciplines, (the authors are part of this group).
- 11 practitioners from (largely local) organisations including charities, social enterprises, small businesses, and independent consultants working on projects to further social justice. Largely non-designers, they all had a relationship with the design school as alumni or collaborators. Some spoke in the conference.

6 CASE STUDY

A snapshot safari activity was designed as part of the conference to create a safe, inclusive, and effective space for discourse. It included periods of individual work, followed by group collaboration and discussion, accommodating a variety of visual, aural, read/write, and kinaesthetic (VARK) learning styles [19]. Visual learning through photographs and posters as primary tools for communication finding common ground between people of different native languages and disciplinary vocabularies, auditory learning through the conversations between different people, read/write-learning via text which accompanied the degree show exhibits and kinaesthetic learning through the active experience of creating paper posters.

The snapshot safari was made up of three consecutive activities:

- Activity 1 Individual response to a photography brief
- Activity 2 Small group conversation and poster-making
- Activity 3 Whole group discussion on the poster exhibition

In activity 1 people explored the final degree show exhibitions (3D Design, Architecture, Industrial Design, Fashion Design, Fashion Communication, Graphic Design and Interior Design), with a brief inviting them each to take 6 photographs illustrating ‘design for social innovation’ (the conference theme). Questions invited people to think about what design for social innovation meant to them and how it might relate to or influence their own practice.

During activity 2 people formed 3 groups, each joined by a design academic who facilitated conversation on their photos exploring their interpretations of ‘design for social innovation’. Groups created posters using their photos and annotations to respond to the question “How should we live?”. Finally for activity 3 posters were displayed and each group presented theirs. The whole group discussed the posters exploring the various ways they had responded to the brief.

7 RESEARCH DATA

Data on this case study was collected through:

1. Auto-ethnographic observations (as designers of/participants in the activity)
2. A systematic literature review focussing largely on literature since 2018.
3. Audio transcription of group discussion during the poster exhibition
4. Photographs of the safari process and exhibition posters created [20]

Following an Intuitive Inquiry methodology [16] observations (1) were used to determine the positioning for this study and frame the literature review (2). Then data from the transcription (3) and posters (4) were analysed, the preliminary interpretive position tested and modified based on that data.

8 LEARNING

As subsequent posters were discussed during activity 3 of the snapshot safari, recurring themes around the role of design in social innovation emerged, and the conversation began to move to aspects of design education. People asked questions about the student experience and shared thoughts on how the students, teaching and curricula might have influenced outcomes.

Qualitative analysis of this group discussion data revealed feedback of two main types.

- Experiential insights from all participants having participated in the activity.
- Pedagogic reflections from academics and scholars on how different curricula and teaching styles impact the student experience and outcomes.

Participants described experiencing a sense of optimism and hope through pieces they viewed, others felt inspired by interesting and clever exhibits. Many shared how they were drawn to exhibits which showed humour, relevancy to their own practice, or represented quality production. Some people found the exhibition overwhelming, with so many exhibits from different disciplines, but felt the safari brief and timeframe, helped them focus and was useful in framing or filtering their experience. Overall people enjoyed the activity and the opportunity to discuss it together.

Participants commented on the fact that the most impactful exhibits tended to be person-centred, relating very clearly to an individual that the designer knew. This led to a discussion on the importance of design in raising awareness within society of the need to shift away from the paradigm of competition and capitalism. One participant suggested the positioning of the design school within the academy could be important, the social impact of design work perhaps being easier to tease out where the design and social sciences faculties co-exist, than in an academy where perhaps design and engineering belong together. Further discussion focussed on the fact that while some objects were very well designed and produced, perhaps there was no real need for them in the world. Participants felt students should be given the opportunity to take part in discourse around their work to understand that it could be perceived as unnecessary and reflect on this tension of design. People felt it would have been interesting and valuable to speak to the student designers during the safari to understand why they created their designs and give them the opportunity to share what could not be exhibited. Some academics pondered whether we could nurture more rounded and inclusive designers by amending assessment schedules to allow for discussion on design ethics paired with reflection on final exhibits. People commented on the obvious maturity in the work of students who had spent part of their course working in industry, giving them valuable experience in how their work interacts in the real world and its impact aside from simply looking great.

9 LIMITATIONS

This preliminary study took place with a small number of participants, many who knew each other or shared an interest in social innovation/responsible design. Outcomes are likely to be different with a group who have not previously met or lack a shared focus. A limitation of this study is the restricted amount of data gathered. Had we realised how deep and rich the discussion would be and foreseen the potential for it to be research material, we would have planned to collect data more purposefully. In the

timeframe of this study we were unable to confirm whether this activity triggered any curriculum or teaching changes, or simply started a reflective process. While these factors limit this study, they serve as an opportunity to run research in other contexts and around other themes, with greater rigor, planning and reflection.

10 REVISED POSITION AND PROPOSITION

That the academic participants of this safari found value in the conversations which took place during the snapshot safari indicates that there is un-tapped value which could be leveraged in creating more space for public conversation around design exhibitions. It is possible that a purposeful brief can help an audience engage with an exhibition curated by design discipline rather than theme. It is clear from this case study that finding an opportunity for groups of teaching staff to discuss final show exhibits can reveal useful pedagogic and curricula insights.

The positioning of exhibitions at the end of the teaching year limits opportunities for students to engage in reflective conversations. We propose that design schools could create space to share work during the design process, gathering perspectives from communities outside of academia. Students could engage with this discourse as a part of their learning experience before finalising their work. Models of micro-engagement (such as that covered in this case study), could provide a valuable opportunity for teaching academics to draw critically and purposefully from public discourse. This would provide an opportunity to loop back to inform the curricula, briefs and challenges students engage with in following years.

This study does not cover digital gatherings or exhibitions outside of the academy, neither do we examine the value of final shows to communities outside of the academy, therefore these are areas open to further research. As we consider future opportunities to gather around design shows, we will need to think deeply about who the academy might want to include and how they might benefit from the discussion. What shared contexts, thematics or challenges might help to bring diverse groups together? How might we use reflective shared spaces to discuss work in areas of design without physical materials to exhibit? What might the academy learn from other forms of contemporary design-focussed gatherings? The authors plan to carry out follow-on research covering some of these areas during the degree shows of summer 2023.

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