

## LEAP Case Studies:

### Collaborating with Communities

#### Number 12:

Category	Description
<b>Case Study Title:</b>	The Nightmare Brief
<b>Pedagogical Theme:</b>	Collaborating with Communities
<b>Key Words:</b>	co-design; online co-design; online typography; graphic design; online graphic design; online group design; no-print type; collaboration; groupwork
<b>Academic subject area:</b>	Graphic Design
<b>Key Conclusions:</b>	Online discussion motivated the students to learn in new ways, and encouraged even reticent students to join in. But beware technical problems that can demotivate students. Students must also see the relevance of the online work to their chosen course of study if they are to join in.

#### Description of e-learning activities:

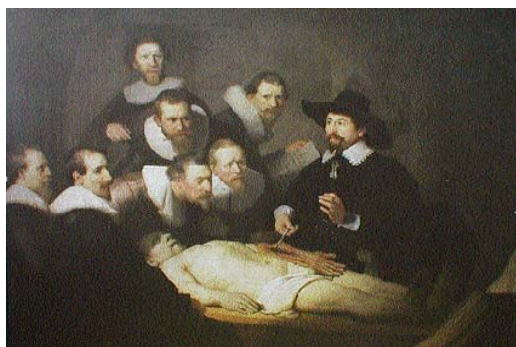
Students collaborated in their typographic design work using online discussion in small groups. The group could share their designs, but a maximum of 12 iterations were allowed.

#### Introduction to the brief

My first collaboration was with a Visual Arts lecturer who gave a 15-minute presentation at the launch of the project on Rembrandt's 'The Anatomy Lesson of Dr Tulp'. In this, he highlighted the skill of Dutch Masters in creating dynamic and plausible relationships in group portraits. This was a chance for first year students on my Typography module to explore and appreciate the expressive potential of pure typography. Apart from the introduction, every aspect of the brief was conducted online.

#### Rationale:

I wanted the students to recreate the (perceived/agreed) relationships in a given painting. The design had to go beyond pure mimicry of layout – there had to be some exploration of the characters and how they were seen to be responding to each other and what was going on in the painting. There could be infinite solutions to the brief – there is no right or wrong typeface or typestyle for any given character. However if the typographic treatment for any one individual is accepted, then one can comment on the typographic treatment of the other characters in relation to a hypothesis of their (inter)relationships.



*Rembrandt: The Anatomy Lesson of Dr Tulp*

### **The brief itself**

Students would have to work online in groups within a fixed canvas (in their case A4, for technical convenience) and with fixed texts (the names of a painting's characters), with the final product being a document with a collection of names on it.

### **Rationale:**

Students were broken into groups because I wanted them to discuss the painting and the recent explanation of it with each other before coming up with a solution. I also wanted them to collaborate online because I wanted them to visualise and verbalise their typographic responses to their musings on the painting. The software was limited to Word to allow greater and less exclusive participation, although something like Quark provides more subtle typography.

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Topi Landesman

*My sample design – to help students visualize the brief*

### **Rules of the brief**

Groups were allowed unlimited discussion but each group was limited to a maximum of 12 attachments.

### **Rationale:**

This meant students had to discuss, visualise, verbalise, explain, argue and collaborate before using a precious attachment. One of the main project aims was elegantly catered for at a stroke.

### **Evaluation of case study:**

*What was your perception of the e-learning activity?*

The project produced interesting and imaginative design work, entertainingly and ably supported by analysis and discussion. Students reflected, helped each other, and came to respect each other's work at the same time feeling able to criticise it and move it on. Students were responsible and took commendable advantage of serendipity. The discussions were solid and extensive. There was no alienation, and some of the more notoriously quiet and reticent (for many reasons) students felt empowered to join in. Students also made connections with other modules – again, maybe the abstraction of the project encouraged this. The novelty of the project coincided with the students view of me as an experimenter, not to say eccentric, and there was a great sense of togetherness.

*What was your colleagues' perception of the e-learning activity?*

My colleagues, both at Coventry and other institutions, have expressed this to be an excellent project that should be repeated and opened out to more students. I believe that critical commentary is a central tenet of university education, and would want to develop this model to more students with the aim of comparable personal, online and key transferable skills (analysis, discussion, presentation of ideas, group responsibility etc) being the focus. It has huge potential.

*What was your students' perception of the e-learning activity?*

That it was fun and new. However server problems were a major disincentive!

*Activity Statistics (if applicable)*

820 postings in the Discussion area total = 41 per group of 9 = 4.5+ per student average over 3 weeks approx.

*What have you learned from your experiences (good and bad)?*

- That you must start from the module descriptor's learning objectives, and not with an urge just to 'go online' for the sake of it;
- That you have to monitor online regularly and when you say you will;
- That you need a good and reliable computer system – getting demotivated students back is hard;
- That you need to build on the experience – in my case the project was the last in the module and the typographic learning and experimentation went into the ether. The learning needs to be seen to be relevant to other work, and to be applied practically. Students don't want to be considered as guinea pigs (and I don't blame them);
- That there can be interesting spin-offs in other modules – for example the first digital sketchbook was submitted in the following module!

*What were the expected outcomes?*

- That the abstraction of WebCT (by comparison with the 'concrete' world of meetings and print-outs that is the norm) might encourage imaginative, freer and riskier thinking;
- that there would be mutual support and interdependence created by the unusual but still achievable nature of the brief and by the notion of group work without ever meeting your group;
- that there would be collaboration and self- and peer-evaluation;
- that online skills would be developed;
- that typographic design skills would be developed;
- that the framework of no resource outlay would be reassuring, especially as the cohort was year 1;
- that group members could interact without feeling intimidated by personal contact and presentation (which can happen with year 1);
- that the accessibility would be a great leveller (in the positive sense of the word – some of the students were not on full-time Art and Design courses and were unfamiliar with studio culture, for example);
- that it would be fun – it was an experiment for me as well!

**Course Details:**

Name of course:	Typography
Course level:	Level 1 of BA(Hons) course
Number of students:	180 on module - 90 Graphic Design; 30 Communication Authoring and Design; 60 Maths and Information Sciences
Case study running time:	3 weeks
Course compulsory:	Yes
Software used:	WebCT

*Please describe whether the e-learning activity was complementary/ supplementary (indicate %age):*

This was not the only project in the module – it actually formed only 10% of it – and WebCT was used in the other projects for contact, distribution of the brief and publishing lecture and workshop notes: however The Nightmare Brief was the only one that was 100% e-learning in every respect. Apart from the initial 30 minute presentation about the brief and the painting at the end of a conventional lecture, every aspect was online and this has not happened before with practical Art and Design projects on our course (or indeed elsewhere in the University as far as I know).

Is the course assessed: Yes – all the projects in this module are compulsory and assessed with one exception. A complementary project was to construct a letter out of any material at all, and as the freedom of the brief made assessment restrictive and invidious for this part students had to make the letter or they would not pass, but the letter making was not in itself graded or separately assessed.

## **Academic Staff Development:**

*What existing skills were required?*

The existing skills are the skills of:

- Curriculum design,
- Diagnosing learning needs,
- Large and small group management,
- Assessment design,
- Building VLE content
- Using discussion (for words and images)
- Attaching files to discussions

*What new skills were required?*

The new skills required were:

- Creating collaborative groups in the VLE
- Having the vision of the project as an entity in order to keep it manageable

*How much time was required to develop new skills?*

1 day total (although this was spread out over several) with VLE support from the Centre for Higher Education Development.

*How much time was required to develop the e-learning activities?*

The project evolved over a period of a year as a proposition that I chewed over – then I started to make it happen and to introduce it into a module. It relates directly to the module's learning objectives (as they were at the time of launching it). Centrally provided, fleshed-out templates for the modules are already provided in the VLE at the University – lecturers / module leaders are free to customise them as they see fit.

*How much support staff time was required? (please describe job roles if possible)*

Apart from the initial VLE support already mentioned, only a few hours were needed from one staff member in addition to myself to help me monitor progress and comment on the work and the working practices. I added many staff to the web because they had expressed interest in the project and wanted to see how it turned out. These were from related subject areas – e.g. Visual Arts – as well as from Graphic Design, and also included colleagues from the Centre for Higher Education Development.

*What skills have been learned from the experience?*

- Managing scale;
- creating groups;
- overseeing work at reasonable intervals;
- assessing discussion;
- providing practical criticism to a virtual piece of design;
- intervening with due sensitivity to include group members who may have felt inhibited (a few did – the technology and the unfamiliarity given the context were important factors).

## **Future work**

*Do you intend to further develop this case study?*

Yes

*If yes, why are you intending to develop it?*

Because of the successful outcomes described above! And because the student body is only going to get bigger and more diverse and this handled both these phenomena pretty well.

*If yes, how do you intend to develop it?*

Again, see above. I want to start it at the beginning of the module to make it more relevant and applicable, and to include a broader cohort of students so that there will be even greater cross-fertilisation of ideas and discipline-related interests.

*If no, why not?*

N/A

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