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Bridging the Gap Between Industry and Education: Engaging Design Professionals in the Education of Student Designers

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ABSTRACT

I-SPACE, **I**nnovation for **S**tudents, **P**ractitioners, **A**lumni, and **C**ommunity **E**ngagement, is a new model for higher education that uses online and hybrid teaching strategies to facilitate extended interactions between students and design professionals. Using I-SPACE online meetings to bridge the gap between industry and education, students obtain industry collaborations with design professionals, giving an internship-type of experience in the classroom and introducing them to high quality early career networking opportunities. I-SPACE also provides a valuable tool for diversity, equity, and inclusion in professional design education. By using the I-SPACE online and hybrid model of teaching, students from underserved and at-risk populations or those with limited monetary resources can more effectively engage with the professional design community. I-SPACE focuses on three professional practice inspired models of engagement: Co-Creation Student Practitioner, Student Mentorship, and Professional Practice. I-SPACE effectively integrates social networking and complex problem solving into the online curriculum through student collaborations with alumni, design professionals, and community stakeholders.

Keywords: Design, Community engagement, Professional practice, Mentorship, Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, DEI, Online education, Design education, Internship

INTRODUCTION

Internships have traditionally been a pathway to careers in design. Students with better portfolios, higher grades, and those who were professionally well-connected were more likely to understand the dynamics of obtaining the best internships and early career networking opportunities. According to AIGA, the Professional Association for Design, "quality internships provide an invaluable steppingstone towards professional practice and create continuity within the design provision." An internship is typically a temporary job in the design industry with a set amount of time or hours such as a summer or one semester's work. An internship, according to AIGA, is an opportunity for students to learn the following skills:[1]

- Apply design skills acquired in school to real-world projects
- Collaborate and Network with design professionals
- Gain insight into the professional world of design
- "Test-Drive" a particular working environment for landing a full-time job

SEGD, a multidisciplinary design community for professionals in experiential graphic design and branded environments, also acknowledges the importance of professional experience and to address this hosts numerous events and platforms for student engagement with the profession of design. One such event, Present Yourself, is their "initiative for connecting students to their future careers and provides mentorship and opportunities for professional networking to students." The event includes a virtual space for portfolio reviews and career advice which –essential in our current climate.[2] Both AIGA and SEGD note the importance of networking, portfolio development and real-world skills to students entering the profession.

However, many students lack the requisite skills to obtain an internship due to uneven college preparation and economic conditions. According to the Chronicle of Higher Education, colleges recognize that experiential learning and real-world work experience need to be integrated into the curriculum.[3] This is especially true for colleges with high enrollments of students experiencing poverty, homelessness, and food insecurity. For these students, sacrificing a full-time income that is a crucial part of their financial stability is in many ways an impossibility.

Therefore, there is a critical need to identify new opportunities for industry engagement with design students by utilizing online and hybrid models of teaching that can engage students with the design profession with limited need for monetary resources. I-SPACE, **I**nnovation for **S**tudents, **P**ractitioners, **A**lumni, and **C**ommunity **E**ngagement, is a new platform that addresses the following needs for innovation in design education:

- Collaboration and Value Co-Creation in the Design Curriculum
- Connecting Design Professionals and Student Designers
- Integrating Social Networking into Design Education
- Creating a Dialogue Between Design Educators and Practitioners
- Opportunities Networking in Professional Organizations (SEGD/AIGA)
- Engaging Community Stakeholders into Online Education Curriculum
- Engaging Students in Complex Problem Solving with Alumni, Design Professionals, and Community Stakeholders

METHODOLOGY

A design co-creation and **case study method** were used to author and test the I-SPACE online teaching strategy for three upper division design courses in an environmental design program at a state university. The three models of I-SPACE include the distinct engagement strategies and time frames in the classroom:

- Co-Creation Student Practitioner (8 weeks (about 2 months))
  - Design Studio Collaboration Partner
  - Non-Profit Partner
- Student Mentorship (5 weeks)
  - Alumni Mentorship
- Professional Practice (1 week)
  - Sprints
  - Elevator Pitch

The Co-Creation Student Practitioner Model was piloted in three upper division courses: display and exhibition design; design entrepreneurship; and senior design capstone. These courses are taught over the final two semesters in the senior year. They are used as an opportunity to explore alternatives to the face-to-face internship experience, build a meaningful social network within the professional community, and engage students in complex problem solving with a robust multi-generational group of stakeholders representing industry and the community. The design co-creation method was used to gather input from industry stakeholders for the purpose of designing an industry aligned curriculum over the course of a full semester.

Student Mentorship was used over a period of 5 weeks for the course of one project. During this time, students engaged with design alumni at three points; project introduction and ideation; mid-project review of design prototypes and presentation of concepts; and final presentation of finished project slide decks. Students were given opportunities to use design professionals and alumni as professional sounding boards and for the social rehearsal of mid-fidelity concepts and final deliverables as preparation for the design industry.

Professional Practice models allow students to utilize role rehearsal and classroom team building. In addition to being a designer for their team students were given the opportunity to select industry relevant roles such as general manager, art director, editor, and writer.. Providing strategic engage with design professionals at specific times such as mid-review, portfolio reviews, mock interviews. These brief student and design professional interactions were used as a source of external validation of student preparedness for interviews and public presentations of design work. Because students do not gain a relationship with these professionals, it builds their communication skills, confidence in novel situations that test their design knowledge and social skills. Students use slide decks and an elevator pitch process to quickly form a good rapport with other design professionals.

I-SPACE also prepares students for the post-COVID professional practice of design by teaching important online and digital workflows that are relevant to remote and hybrid work by utilizing tools such as digital whiteboards, virtual meeting software, and file sharing platforms. The I-SPACE experiences teach students how to work online using breakout rooms, digital collaboration spaces, and communication methods.

DISCUSSION

Changes in our economy from lifetime employment to career stages to gigs have necessitated a series of fundamental changes in both how we conduct the business of design and how we prepare future designers. Experts and guests who were once out of reach due to time and the financial issues involved in crossing the country or crossing the ocean are now just a virtual room ID code away. Suddenly, the barriers have fallen, and students can freely meet and interact with industry professionals.

Implications for Design Theory and Practice

Successfully transitioning from being a student to a practicing professional is not usually given a lot of thought by students, design educators, or future employers. The I-SPACE teaching strategy, co-created by design education professionals and industry professionals, uses a framework focused on integrating valued professional experience into the online classroom in a way that is usually only accessible to students who are in a formal internship. An emphasis is put on the design and project processes and the professionals act as the students' clients throughout a semester-long project. When successful the students will enter the workforce with a better understanding of how professional projects are run and will better empathize and understand the clients' needs and will be able to successfully design processes to fulfill the projects objectives. However, the benefits of this cross pollination do not fall solely with the students. This model allows young professional designers an opportunity to pass on their knowledge and professional transition experience while simultaneously expanding their proficiency in a robust critique process. The experience also gives the professionals an opportunity to see what it is like being the client and will make them more empathetic and understanding in their future projects resulting in greater design excellence.

The Triple Bottom Line of Design: A Benefit to Students, Educators and Design Practitioners

It was concluded that all constituent groups of students, educators and design professionals benefited from this industry engaged model. The following benefits were identified for each group:

Students

- Engaging with alumni and professional designers
- Refining abilities to communicate concepts professionally
- Establishing time management skills
- Collaborating with students on team projects
- Working with stakeholders and multi-generational mentors
- Motivating classroom experiences based on real-world models

Educators

- Maximizing student engagement in a virtual learning environment.
- Connecting educators to design practitioners
- Cost savings on speaker fees and travel costs for guest speakers
- Building social networks for student internships and job opportunities

Design Professionals

- Engaging with students provides insight into new professional mindsets
- Refining abilities to provide feedback to early career team members
- Practicing creative direction in a clear and concise manner that students will understand and develop
- Students unfiltered ideas with outside of the box thinking
- Potential pipeline for future interns and entry level designers

The first iteration of I-SPACE engaged one environmental design agency with offices in New York City and San Francisco offices with one senior level environmental graphic design class for a semester-long project engaging 7 art directors each with one student team for the semester. The following is an example of student outcomes and project development using the I-SPACE models:

Student Presentation: https://docs.google.com/presentation/d/1cBchuC6a5s27wl-m_JOZMeRgc8BLwhr1jWG2RxidDKk/edit?usp=sharing

CONCLUSION

The use of I-SPACE teaching strategy has been proven to create a well-rounded and positive educational experience for students, practitioners, alumni, and faculty. Online education and industry collaborations are significantly different than traditional brick and mortar classroom visits or guest lectures. The online platform for I-SPACE, allows greater guest speakers and collaborators to participate from all over the world with no significant costs or geographic barriers, and allows students the opportunity to excel academically by embracing new strategies in education.

The I-SPACE method provided more effective ways for students to gain important design industry skills in teamwork, leadership, project management, professional communication, and networking than are possible in traditional classrooms. Advantages of the I-SPACE platform to the design program include monetary savings of travel and speaker fees, and a reduction in barriers for professionals to participate in classes and educational programs due to issues of time and travel.

Over three semesters of integration into upper division design courses taught in online formats, I-SPACE was found to be an effective way to bridge the gap between industry and education by allowing students to obtain the best industry collaborations and interactions to give an internship type of experience in the classroom and introduce students to professionals and early career opportunities. I-SPACE effectively integrated social networking and complex problem solving into the online curriculum while students collaborate with alumni, design professionals, and community stakeholders.

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