Interact Global Design Networks: Exploring Post-Disciplinary Design in a Global Context

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Abstract: Interact is an academic and student exchange project between four major institutions that explores the futures of design in the global context.

The first stage of the project took place between 2014 and 2017 across London College of Communication, University of the Arts (London), Danish School of Media and Journalism (Aarhus), Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology (Melbourne) and Queensland University of Technology (Brisbane), the project draws on the abundance of knowledge and experience of interaction design in practice, research and pedagogy between the institutions and industry partners to develop new ways of collaborating and communicating across institutional, national and expertise borders.

The project affords for a diverse range of voices across countries, fields and levels of expertise to develop strategies for applying interaction design to combat anxiety about future uncertainty, imagining and building new opportunities. By encouraging a global vision for staff and students in the program the project aims to broaden vocabularies and carve out a shared language for design and its interlocutors. This language works in a future-facing way; able to tackle or at least reconcile anxieties in regard to the dramatically shifting geopolitical contexts that design is bound up in.

The significance of the project lies in imagining alternative futures of interaction design practice and research against the tendencies of contemporary geopolitics. The vision of Interact affords space and time for a global forum of students, academics and practitioners with interaction design as a universal language of practice. The project established and provided frameworks for new pedagogic and practice relationships between academics, students and industry that would allow for continued resilience through collaboration and sharing.

The first stage of the project concluded with a seminar at the London Design Festival in September where many of those involved were drawn together to develop outputs and begin next stages. Here we were able to deal in strategies that would enable the continuation of a global, anti-nationalistic design practice. We drew conclusions about the vitality of these kinds of ambitious international projects, their importance

to the continued imagination, ambition and growth of design fields and their role in combatting anxiety about future uncertainty.
Theme : Language

Keywords: Collaboration, Internationalisation, Education, Digital, Resilience

1. Introduction

Interact (full title: INTERACTive Studios & Innovative Networks for Future Design Careers) was a three-and-a-half-year student and staff exchange between four higher education institutes in the EU and Australia. In Europe, the London College of Communication (LCC), University of the Arts London and the Danish School of Media and Journalism in Aarhus, Denmark. In Australia, the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology (RMIT) and the Queensland University of Technology (QUT) in Brisbane. Between 2014 and 2017 forty student and twenty staff exchanges were made between the European and Australian institutions. The project focussed specifically on undergraduate level designers in the field of what could broadly be termed 'interactive design.' The key courses and programs involves were BA (Hons.) Interaction Design Arts at LCC, Bachelor of Visual Communication (Interactive Design) at DMJX, Bachelor of Design (Communication Design) at RMIT and Bachelor of Design (Interactive and Visual Design) at QUT. Throughout the period of the exchanges students would typically spend one unit (approximately ten weeks) at their exchange institution and receive transferrable credits while staff would typically exchange for one to two weeks in order to observe classes, deliver sessions and hold operational meetings.

The objectives of the Interact program are clearly laid out on the program's website:

> "The overarching objective of the INTERACT programme is to link coursework, studio practice and work integrated learning (in a cross-cultural setting) to develop better graduate outcomes for future practitioners in the field of Interaction Design." (Interact Mobility Network, 2018)

In the current global context of growing anti-globalism and anti-intellectualism as well as changing work and living patterns, the needs of industry and students, Interact was an experiment to see if a common language of design could be used as a platform for the resilience of the field and student experience of design.

Interact is a unique project as far as the authors are aware in its scale, scope and ambition. Being a global exchange of a large number of individuals for lengthy periods it stands out as almost an institution in its own right. There is valuable work to be done in sharing operational methods for how projects like this are set up, structured and run. However, the aim of this paper is not to focus on the operational proceedings so much as to illuminate the disciplinary, pedagogic and institutional lessons of it and how they enable and are enabled by the vitality of design as a common language and common languages within and across design.

This paper will firstly summarise the key questions and concerns of the Interact program as it stands three years in and towards the end of the program; the questions of context, discipline and pedagogy. Secondly, we will examine and critique the methods of enquiry we used between the institutions including the students and staff exchanges and other events. Thirdly we will examine key lessons in disciplinarity, pedagogy and politics. We will then introduce and discuss the next steps of the project and the rationale behind them before concluding with key lessons and strategies for programs like Interact.

2. Key Concerns and Questions

2.1 Global and Political Context for Design

Primarily, the Interact program seeks to address and question current assumptions in higher education institutes about discipline and pedagogy in design. To do this the program embraces and experiments in the changing global context of the designer and the design student. The specific concerns can be listed as:

1. Globalisation and atomisation of design processes in industry.
2. Changing working patterns and employment structures.
3. The growth of tools for digital collaboration.

All of these are found in a political climate specific to Europe and Australia of increasing conservatism with regards to intellectuality and human migration which directly affect the subject area.

As an international exchange the project attempted to inculcate the concept of global design practice, a concept that is all but the norm for the contemporary designer:

> "In today's global economy, multinational companies and world-wide supply networks mean that participating in distributed working has become commonplace for many engineering designers." (Wodehouse, A., et al, 2008)

By operational necessity, the contemporary delivery of design education generally places it in one city and institutional context. This offers little insight into the lived experience of design practice where practitioners move between tasks, groups and places both physically and digitally at regular intervals.

The Interact program sought to explore ways of operationally and theoretically integrating a global-first approach to learning and practice in the students, situating them in their learning primarily as global practitioners as opposed to students based in a particular city. Operating this way requires a set of skills not necessarily delivered in the day-to-day running of a course or program. Students need to be adaptable, quick and confident in their interactions as well as competent in organisation and self-direction. These are qualities that we would expect to instil in all students but is hard to embed in praxis when in a purely localised context. These ambitions introduce an element of pastoral education into a design curricula that may not necessarily be present when a routine of sedentary education and practice is considered the norm.

Tied to the globalisation of design is the issue of employment and labour structures. Again, the nature of an institution is to offer sustainability, stability and routine which reflects little of the agile, adaptable and uncertain working habits of the contemporary designer where work is increasingly "…intermittent, irregular and informal and tend[s] not to be based on contractual agreements." (Shorthouse & Strange, 2004, p. 45) By emphasising the skills of self-organisation listed above, the aim was to experiment in embedding attitudes and strategies of resilience into the operation of the program and delivered curricula.

Finally, the growth of digital tools for collaboration are enabled by and enable globalised design practice and more precarious working habits. The aim here was to experiment with platforms and services that would allow for the program to be delivered in a similar way.

2.2 The Discipline of Design

The fraught question of disciplinarity in design is an ongoing issue which the Interact program sought to at least acknowledge if not address. This problem is approached through three main lenses:

1. Transdisciplinarity in design.
2. What a designer is in view of the global context described above.
3. The relationship with practice outside of the academy.

The academic teams and the course materials involved with Interact consistently refer to the value of transdisciplinary languages in the toolkit of the contemporary designer. The Interact material describes a "…trans-disciplinary field of design practice…" (Interact Mobility Network, 2018) as its remit. It's largely accepted that the future of design practice and the designer will involve high degrees of agility in interacting with other design fields as it becomes "…an all-encompassing field that integrates together business and engineering, the social sciences and the arts." (Norman, D., & Klemmer, S., 2014)

Although it is largely accepted, it is harder to practice and deliver truly transdisciplinary curricula in the context of large HEI's where the "hidden curriculum" (Dutton, 1987) can often take precedence and stifle the flow of skills and information necessary for true transdisciplinary.

In order to operate in a transdisciplinary way, it is first vital to understand the discipline we are situated in. By working across the globe and with a vast range of individuals, skills and courses, an aim of Interact is to establish commonalities that can form a language of design. The shifting nature of design practice as it becomes globalised and brought into a huge range of applied practices makes it harder to pin down definitions for practice and discipline. As Paul Rodgers and Craig Bremner note:

> "…design is expanding its disciplinary, conceptual, theoretical, and methodological frameworks to encompass ever-wider disciplines, activities and practice. As a result, design is either copious and being smeared as a viscous layer over the problems of the world, or what we call design is being stretched into an impermeable film expanding to keep in capital and consumption." (Rodgers, A.P., & Bremner, C., 2016)

Reviewing the titles of the courses and programs involved in the exchange as outlined in the introduction it's easy to see why the loosest possible definition of interaction design was applied as a disciplinary remit for the activities of the program. Even in this loose framing, it is an ambition of the program to see if students from different global contexts could establish a common language within their own understanding of the discipline that allowed for agile, confident and easy transition to new contexts in keeping with the shifting nature of practice.

Questioning the discipline and hence what a future designer is and needs to be relates to the relationship of teaching with industry. Interact was set up with the support and consultation of fourteen major industry partners and students took part in work experience as part of their exchange. The subject of the direction of the relationship with industry and teaching is much larger than can be covered here by the authors. The creeping perception that '…higher-education institutions that largely operate at a 19th-century pace [are] trying to keep up with the fast-changing demands of 21st-century employers…" (Marcus, 2017) was sought to be challenged by an approach in Interact that seeks to "…build the capacity that is necessary to answer current and future market needs." (Interact Mobility Network, 2018)

2.3 New Pedagogy

Finally, in respect of the shifting global context and disciplinary debates the project sought to discover new teaching strategies and methods as well as gaps in the current teaching offering in the partner institutions:

1. How we can work beyond and between institutions and what we can learn from each other?
2. What digital platforms and new shared productivity tools can be integrated in learning?
3. Where in the new globalised context of the design discipline do we need to change teaching?

As noted in the previous two sections the changing nature of the designer leads to changes in the disciplinary definition of design which in turn demands new pedagogies and teaching and learning strategies. As an outcome the emphasis here was on exploring how teaching at partner institutions could change in response to best practices between the partners.

Firstly, we sought to have conversations between teaching staff at different institutions in order to share and learn new teaching methods from each other. This is a relatively straightforward exchange of expertise which will be explored in a later section. A more complex ambition for the program was to open the institutions to sharing of teaching responsibilities – an inter-institutional program of learning rather than one situated at any particular institute. Several external events beyond the main student exchanges sought to push this idea further.

Secondly, by the sheer nature of the geography of the institutions involved, the use of digital tools was a crucial factor in the way that teaching was delivered and the program recorded. Interact sought to explore ways of integrating digital tools like real-time collaborative platforms which are standard in many industry and practice settings.

Finally, was the more existential question of how teaching needed to shift in response to the lived experience of the contemporary designer. This need has been well noted in the previous two subsections but questions about how to 'teach' resilience, organisation and prepare students for precariarity and global practice were a key ambition of the program.

3. Modes of Enquiry

The program could be said to have three main modes of enquiry with regard to the ambitions listed above: student exchange, staff exchange and a series of one-off events associated with the program. In each of these modes, feedback in the form of interviews has been gathered both at the point of the exchange or event and in retrospect toward the end of the project. This section will briefly describe and critique the various methods used to explore the ambitions of the program.

The main work of the program was in the exchange of forty students between the EU and Australia over three years. These exchanges typically lasted for a 'unit' – around ten weeks. Much exhaustive work was done on the writing of credit exchange frameworks and delivery methods to make sure that students could use their exchange in their own assessment criteria at their own institutions. This has since become an incredibly useful exercise in creating precedent for further exchanges of this scale but presented obvious logistical and organisational difficulties at first.

Students were first asked to propose a rationale for exchange before being selected by their own tutors. The objective was to match each student to the institution of their best interest and as an iterative process of exchanges, a greater understanding of the strengths and weaknesses between each institution was learned over time. By placing students in other cohorts in other institutions they had to respond and to adapt to new intellectual and structural ways of operating.

Students additionally took part in work experience as part of their exchange. This was often unsuccessful for operational reasons discussed in the next section.

Throughout their exchange and after, students and staff worked with various digital tools and platforms to maintain contact and share work. There is an active Google+ group, an edited Wordpress site with regular updates and then productivity platforms like Slack and Trello are used to organise tasks and schedules. These platforms are industry-standard and offer students insight into the collaborative behaviour of contemporary designers.

The student exchanges were unusual for the partner institutions in their length and expense and volume. In other words, for most of the universities it was the first time that something of this scale had been undertaken. This became a debugging process for how to do exchanges on this scale in the future. The initial round of exchanges suffered from issues – connecting international offices to housing to legal departments to make sure that visas, accommodation and academic process are all aligned. Academically, though a student exchange is an invaluable form of learning about the operation and methods of other organisations and conceptions of design it is necessarily limiting – only a handful of students (relatively) are able to take part and this privileges these students above others in their domestic and international cohort. As the academic team we also made sure to interview the students at various points throughout the process to keep track of their changing attitudes and feelings towards their experience. The student exchange alone only offers one perspective – from the praxis of being a learning designer. Inevitably students lack much experience outside of university education that gives them a sense of how their learning connects to the 'world' of design through the strategic decisions of academics and course teams as well as the pursuit of projects. In order to complement the 'ground-level' perspective of students it was important to engage in work experience as well as conduct staff exchange for a more 'birds-eye' view.

Staff exchange typically lasted one to two weeks between the EU and Australia. During exchanges staff would conduct classes, take part in crits, run workshops and deliver lectures as well as socialise with other institution's staff and students as a way of strengthening partnerships. This staff exchange has developed into several one-off projects described below but one of the tangible outcomes is a 'recipe' book of pre-prepared workshops and sessions that was gathered through google forms and shared between the staff at institutions. This also served as a way of sign-posting key disciplinary approaches and styles that were common across the institutions. As mentioned above, the staff exchanges complemented the student exchanges and ensuring that there was dialogue at key points between the various staff and students involved kept perspectives mixed and rich. The staff exchange runs the same problem as the student exchange in privileging the experience of those taking part and toward the end of the project, the intention of broadening the mobility exchanges to a wide range of staff at the partner institutions had in fact narrowed to a handful of core staff associated with Interact. This was largely due to the shifting priorities and staff teams at the partner institutions, which made sustaining leadership and participation in a project lasting around five years from preparation to execution difficult. Towards the end of the project when conducting closing interviews, many participating staff had in fact left the institution they were at with Interact and had to be tracked down elsewhere.

Finally, several events and one-off projects took place that are of particular note. Firstly, an online workshop delivered by staff of DMJX to RMIT students in real-time. This was a pre-emptive experiment in digital collaboration and inter-institutional teaching delivery. Secondly was a seminar at the London Design Festival hosted by LCC where members of the program and student alumni attended to discuss the outcomes from the program and next steps. Much of that discussion has informed this paper. Further to that we are working on a 'Global Design Studio', an attempt at a collaborative teaching unit to be delivered simultaneously at the partner institutions using digital tools to create opportunities for student collaboration across the institutions. These events provided

an opportunity to explore intellectual and practice ideas but also to cement the social and cultural identity of Interact with recurring personalities and practices. They provided an iterative opportunity for the program to continue to grow and develop.

4. What was Learnt

4.1 Lessons on Pedagogy

An outright aim of the program was to refresh teaching methods and focus at the partner institutions. As Neal Haslam at RMIT noted in an interview "We teach in a changing way, design teaching has to change. If it's not changing, it's dying, it becomes a legacy. So Interact exchange has provided us that opportunity explicitly to keep the conversation going."

The first clear lesson to draw on teaching is the models in which content is delivered between the EU and Australia. Both LCC and DMJX lean heavily on atelier-style groups. This model is familiar all across Europe and encourages a student-driven, deep and engaged approached to the intentional material being delivered or the design brief set. By having an open fluid space and a multi-year relationship with peers and tutors, students feel confident in synthesising a range of theories into bold experiments and original outcomes (Crowther, 2013). Students are more empowered to take more ambitious and riskier design challenges by the set of social relations they have constructed and learning is delivered on a more personal level, the tutorial being central, but impromptu collaboration and personally-driven external projects also forming an important part of expanded practice. One RMIT exchange student commented: "The studio environment was instantaneously welcoming from both the staff and peers, resulting in an easy progression into the experience and since has been a supportive atmosphere to work in." (Interact Mobility Network, 2018)

At a contrast, RMIT and QUT, with a history as technical universities are taught with a modular structure. The common social culture of the studio is dispersed across a series of modules delivered by specialist tutors for a few hours a week. In these classroom, without the confidence of long and established relationships with peers and tutors, students can often find it harder to being confident in criticality and experimentation with design.

However, where the atelier model provides opportunity for social integration and confidence, it is limited to that group. We discovered over the exchange that the students with the most pastoral problems were ones from LCC going into an unfamiliar environment of another institution without the confidence and independence to adapt and be opportunistic that the modular learning environment of the Australian universities instilled in their domestic students.

The problem of delivering the values of resilience and global-ness that were the aim of the program was harder. Through the very nature of exchange, being thrust into a new environment with a new support structure, the students on exchange were forced to adapt quickly and move fluidly into their new setting but this is not necessarily something that is 'taught' as part of the student-tutor relationship. A point that returned in interviews with teaching staff was the way that having an exchange student changed the dynamic of the rest of a group they were put into – it opened new conversations and worked to broaden the contexts of discourse in a group. One example brought up by Deb Polson at QUT was a debate in class on the relationship between 'responsibility,' 'ethics,' and 'sustainability,' which arose from the different emphasis' and definitions in the European context of her two exchange students and the rest of her cohort. This was a point opened up by other tutors who commented about the effects of an 'internationalisation' of the cohort that came from having students from other institutions offer alternative perspectives and interpretations.

Aside from emergent learning in these kind of in class debates, a heavy emphasis on work experience and industry partnerships was supposed to lead the project and offer educational opportunities. In reality these relationships rarely worked out in the way they were supposed to. Due to a confluence of visa issues, poor communication and the logistics of parsing course structures, terms, blocks and semesters, units, programs, years and courses, credits points and grades only a handful of exchange students engaged in work experience. Unfortunately, this is a failing of the project, and a project like this at any scale that the mismatch in the scale and agility of small, industry-leading companies versus behemoth institutions and national boundaries will always hamper opportunities for exchange between these sectors.

4.2 Lessons on Discipline

The search for a common language that was undertaken by Interact find its roots in trying to use design as a language that can allow students to be resilient and flexible across time and space into their future practices. In doing this, we sought to define 'interaction design' or at least 'design' in some way through the shared practices we saw in exchanges and projects. Although there was never a particular time where the partner institutions sought to lay down a definition of design per se there were definite agreements about the need for design education to adapt to changing political circumstances.

The changing role of design in the contemporary world probably puts us past definition. Impressing rigid constraints on students who will be forced to adapt and be agile for their careers may prove more destructive than enabling. Rodgers and Bremner note that the work of leading designers and companies "…regularly transcend historical disciplinary frameworks such as interior design, fine art, product design, and graphic design…" such that "…the discipline that was once recognized and acknowledged as design, which was born of the split of idea from manufacture, now has little to do with manufacture and a single idea." (Rodgers, A.P., & Bremner, C., 2016)

Instead design, rather than a discrete discipline in and of itself seems to form the role of a language that works across boundaries of globalisation and techno-politics, using the digital as a medium to build connections that challenge political narratives of borders and disciplines.

A key example of this re-assessing of the nature of the discipline is how students have reacted to seeing the practice and research of design in other institutions. The ability to enter into new conversations and discourses with students and staff from other institutions cements in them the idea that design is a subject that transcends the boundaries of a single institution. As Blair Wilde of RMIT noted in interview "…they've stopped looking at it in context within this particular institution and gone 'ok, there's much bigger context – I can think about things in a different way – there's actually a bigger picture here.'"

At all the partner institutions, there is an ambition to deal with these larger contexts and disciplinary ambiguities by allowing for more flexible and agile forms of practice – RMIT are implementing and testing a 'studio model' where students gather round specific projects with different focuses across year groups. At LCC there is discussion around a similar model of modular flexibility in order to respond quickly to expectations and contemporary disciplinary changes. This can be difficult in large institutions that rely on regularity and legibility but the staff involved have been working to exchange strategies and tactics to get agile and responsive design teaching that can respond to disciplinary discussion into curricula. This exchange of strategies and tactics is endemic of a structural problem at all the partner institutions and more globally – a focus on clustering students around subject rather than necessarily around ideas. While the partner institutions all exchanged students from some form of design we are increasingly witnessing a prevalence of 'creative' courses that are not necessarily

clustered around a certain subject or canon but around a socio-technological concept – Nelly Ben Hayoun's 'University of The Underground' or 'Shadow Channel' – both associated with the Sandberg Institute are interesting examples of 'pop-up' courses that deal with particular contemporary issues rather than a discipline. It's in this mould that the idea of modular, agile studios for students could work.

The pull towards a modular curriculum that is globally active and has internationalisation built into the praxis of the course is the Global Design Studio described in further detail in the conclusion. The Global Design Studio will be an attempt at a modular, agile and digitally-constructed unit/course that allows students some of the experience of exchange without the cost.

5. Conclusion

Interact sought to discover a common language across interaction design (and design more broadly) that would enable future graduates to learn strategies of resilience and empowerment in the changing political, disciplinary and institutional context for design. The partner institutions would use the student and staff exchanges to develop new teaching and learning tools and form lasting partnerships that would strengthen the global design network. As Interact draws to a close, with most commenting on the success of the project we are moving in to new forms of relationships and new projects, discussions and early stages are underway to expand these exchanges to higher levels; postgraduate and research partnerships as well as more programmed teaching exchanges. A more tangible next step is the creation of the Global Design Studio, a project in partnership with designer and educator Fred Deakin and staff from Interact to use digital platforms for a collaborative project involving eighty students from LCC, DMJX, RMIT and QUT. The aim of the Global Design Studio is to introduce working practices of: "… trans-national collaboration in order to enable students to move beyond a focus on local teams and outcomes to global ways of designing together." (Internal document, no source)

The Global Design Studio was the product of attempts to distil the key benefits of Interact into a formula that could be scaled to include a greater number of students without the expense of a physical exchange. In the Global Design Studio, the students will have to learn to build relationships, share skills, exercise critical judgement and resource management while being asynchronously connected through digital platforms such as Slack and Trello.

There an understanding across the institutions that the way we teach design needs to change and this needs to be done regardless of the pace of the institution's internal clocks or the logistical and operational problems of interfacing effectively with industry. The digital platforms tested out in Interact and going to use in the Global Design Studio indicate an opportunity to work around institutional structures while an increase in emphasis on modularity and teaching structured around contemporary issues rather than traditional disciplinary boundaries prepares students better for a reality of trans-disciplinary practice.

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