

# ***Typotastic*: a collaborative teaching and learning model**

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*Typotastic* is a design journal published by the Visual Communication Studio at the Tasmanian School of Art, University of Tasmania, as part of the curriculum for third year graphic design students. *Typotastic* is an award winning, unique collaboration between design educators, students, industry professionals and commentators, working together to produce Australia's first publication dedicated solely to the critical writing and exploration of typography. The project represents an innovative pedagogical model combining collaborative design practice and a real-world project. Through *Typotastic* students publish an international design journal, collaborating both on content and design. Lecturers take the roles of editor and creative director, guiding the publication through to finished printed outcome. *Typotastic* also generates research, conceptual frameworks, written and visual content and contact with scholarly networks. *Typotastic* is not a seamless design project; instead it is vulnerable to the usual compromises, timelines and budget pressures of any normal publication. Students are exposed to a high level of professional practice experience and learn what it takes to create a publication from initial vision through to finished work. This paper presents the project *Typotastic* as an example of innovative teaching through collaboration, and argues that many of the strengths of the project come from its high-risk and collaborative nature.

Keywords: Design education, collaborative design, typography, visual communication

## **Introduction**

*Typotastic* is a project run within the University of Tasmania's School of Art, in the third year undergraduate Graphic Design (FSG311) unit. All third year students work together on *Typotastic*, along with their lecturers. Visual Communication lecturer Justy Phillips initiated *Typotastic* in 2005 from a desire to contribute to design dialogue. Phillips says "I felt we needed a new magazine to get more critical debate into typography and graphic design and to encourage students who are leaving Tasmania into staying. We want them to engage in their profession at a professional level and to be passionate" (O'Keefe, 2005, p. 23). Since then the magazine has been published annually, with a growing circulation base and attention from designers and educators. The 2006 edition won major design awards in the Tasmanian print industry competing against more professional and experienced designers. Previously produced by staff and students as an extra-curricula publication, in 2007 *Typotastic* was incorporated into the subject FSG311 Graphic Design 3A as a group project. This paper presents the project as an innovative teaching model where students are exposed to a high level of professional practice experience and learn what it takes to create a publication from

initial vision through to finished work. The professional and educational contexts for this subject will be outlined first before discussing the collaborative project in detail.

### **Professional Context - Graphic Design**

Graphic Design 3A can be described as a pre-professional subject for students entering the graphic and communication design industry. The aim of the unit is to introduce students to the necessary skills and knowledge to enable them to produce professional graphic design work. Through an understanding of typographic detail, print production processes and image-making, the unit gives students a grounding in publication design along with writing, editing and research skills. As Graphic Design majors within a Bachelor of Fine Arts these students intend to work as graphic and communication designers joining an industry which has undergone significant change and redefinition over the last few decades. Design educator and theorist Richard Buchanan (1992) writes “In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, graphic design was orientated toward personal expression through image making. It was an extension of the expressiveness of the fine arts, pressed into commercial or scientific service” (p. 12). The latter part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century has seen graphic design transformed from a trade and service role to participating in the knowledge industry with its requirements for research, strategy, project management and marketing. Rather than a focus on the production of artefacts and objects, the graphic design industry has evolved to become a professional practice that is more collaborative and team based than ever before, with designers working on complex projects involving multiple stakeholders. Graduates with some experience of this professional context of design who can ‘manage’ the commercial, business and collaborative side of design projects, as well as generate artefacts are going to be better equipped to join a now highly competitive and exacting field. Min Badasur (2003), Professor of Innovation at McMaster University School of Business sees mainstream design education as lagging behind in providing collaborative multidisciplinary experiences writing:

For at least 15 years designers have increasingly been called upon to work in collaboration with others addressing problems growing in complexity but their teamwork and process skills are often not up to such challenges.

With few exceptions, mainstream graduate design education still focuses on teaching what we call design with a small d. In such programs designers talk mostly to others within their own discipline, learn discipline specific problem solving skills applicable to match-book sized problems, and primarily work alone at their computers. The fall-out we see in the workplace is a huge shift in who leads and who follows. What is happening is that other professionals are moving into the leadership void, creating a new breed of multidisciplinary leaders. While we see business schools waking up to the opportunities this void represents, in contrast we see mainstream design education institutions, with a few notable exceptions, lagging far behind. (p. 4)

For most design courses taught at a university level, it is difficult to provide a ‘real’ professional practice experience at an undergraduate level. Embedded in an authentic professional practice design experience are the business-related realities of working with clients, budgets, industry professionals and deadlines. Some universities provide a work placement program at an honours or postgraduate level, relying on external work placement hosts. The Tasmanian School of Art can be distinguished from other institutions by endeavouring to give all third year undergraduates some professional practice projects in-house, one of which is *Typotastic*. One third year student comments on the uniqueness of this experience writing,

What sets *Typotastic* apart from other projects is the professional outcome and the amount of control that myself and the other students are given over the content and the design. A publication of this scale is something not many graphics graduates would have a chance to produce at all and to be part of it while still learning and with the support of the teaching staff is

a very valuable experience. Through the professional practice part of the course I have built a strong relationship with the printers and had the opportunity to go through the entire printing process from getting proofs to a press approval. *Typotastic* is a professional standard magazine produced by students and to be part of something that has already received recognition and awards is an incredibly satisfying feeling. Not only is a project like this looked at favourably by future employees, but I don't know of another design school that does such a large, well received project. (Graphic Design student email correspondence)

Design education frequently comes under criticism from industry and professional bodies. In a recent article in *Artichoke* magazine by David Robertson, National President of the Design Institute of Australia, titled *Design Education Rage*, he lists the top ten problems or issues that surveyed designers have with design education. The issues are: “commercial relevance, production skills, work experience, business training, quality, computers, skills, industry links teaching staff and competence. In short, the adequate preparation of design graduates for participation in professional employment” (Robertson, 2007, p. 20). Criticism of this kind are not uncommon and regardless of its accuracy, design educators feel pressured by such commentary and are mindful and sensitive towards industry feedback. Developing projects such as *Typotastic* can address some of these issues in a buffered environment where staff can emulate a professional workplace and project but with the reflexivity and ‘guidance’ of a learning environment.

### **Educational context – Studio Model**

The studio model of teaching at the Tasmanian School of Art is another feature that facilitates *Typotastic*. Studio teaching has been a common feature of teaching in the areas of architecture, art and design, for most of the twentieth century. In briefing notes to participants of a National Forum on Studio Teaching in July 2007 Studio teaching is described as:

It uses a model of education in which students are immersed in a milieu of reflective creative practice, working alongside, as much as under, the guidance of a practitioner/educator. Within each of these disciplines it is assumed that studio teaching is intrinsic to learning and the student experience; that it is valued and well understood. In both academic and practice contexts, the term 'Studio' encompasses all the circumstances surrounding and contributing to the milieu for creative action. In an educational context, Studio involves learning through project work. (NFST, 2007)

Features of studio teaching are small class sizes, long hours of face-to-face contact with teachers who are often first and foremost practitioners, generous allocations of space, and facilities that reflect a working environment rather than a classroom. The National Forum on Studio Teaching flagged that there is an emerging interest in studio and project-based learning across the education sector (Jamieson et al., 2000; Kuhn, 2001) and is at the forefront of educational concepts such as reflective practice (Schön, 1987) and learning-by-doing in a constructionist learning environment (Papert, 1991). While many design courses have moved away from the studio model due to pressure on space, staffing allocation plus the trend for students to work off campus with their own personal computers, the Tasmanian School of Art's teaching model and projects like *Typotastic* are underpinned by studio practice. Entering a now highly team based profession, the studio model and collaborative projects are both crucial in allowing graphic design students to experience the benefits and difficulties inherent in group enterprises.

### **Typotastic - benefits**

The benefits of *Typotastic* as a project and experience can be conceptualised by borrowing concepts from the work of Norman Fairclough and his work in critical discourse analysis. Conceptualising two layers of activity as ‘text’ work and ‘identity’ work easily identify the benefits of the project. Using Fairclough's concepts of text and identity the project generates

both a text (the magazine) and also shapes the identity of those collaborating on the project as scholars, researchers, pre-professional designers and educators. Each year the students start with four 'givens' towards producing the magazine; a theme identified by the editor, a few expressions of interest from some contributors, the A5 magazine size and the name *Typotastic*. Beyond these elements each magazine evolves as a highly unique artefact, a writerly and designerly text, an outcome generated by the collaboration and dynamics of the particular student and staff group.

As important but less tangible than the magazine itself is the development of multiple 'identities' of the participants and how this is evidenced. Firstly, students are developing their identity as designers in training, as pre-professionals liaising with printers, paper merchants, sponsors, suppliers and businesses in the local community. They are treated as clients by these professionals, mentored to an extent but taken seriously as customers and designers. They are also forming their identity as design writers, scholars and researchers as they write, edit, and interview contributors. In doing so they are participating in a global design discourse, one which may at times seem out of reach from a 'peripheral' island such as Tasmania removed as it is from the main commercial and manufacturing centres of the world with their attendant advertising and publishing industries. Students, through the magazine, can converse with design 'gurus' who they have contacted by hearing them speak, through lecturer contacts or simply through admiring their work and tracking them down. One third year student who has used the project to 'network' extensively reflects,

As a contributor in this year's magazine I was given the opportunity to interview one of the world's leading design research writers and publishers, Ellen Lupton. This has been a very valuable experience because since then I have continued to make contacts with some of the world's leading designers including, Paul Davis, John Warwicker and Chris O'Doherty (Aka Reg Mambossa). Furthermore, through my research for my article I discovered many career opportunities in the design industry that I had not considered before. (Graphic Design student email correspondence)

Over the course of this project there is a definite sense that students have shifted from a position of being over-awed by those established in the field, to rubbing shoulders and conversing with them, contacts that may provide avenues for employment, further conversations and the sense that the design network is within reach, not something that happens elsewhere. While some students develop their identities as scholars by writing and researching for articles, others liaise with the local printing industry forming important professional contacts. Through students interacting with the design community and their success in receiving recognition through awards, the identity of courses and units offered at the TSA is promoted positively. Staff also occupy and develop several identities working on the project. As contributors, designers, editors, writers and researchers the teaching research nexus is strengthened as staff contribute articles or have their projects critiqued by students.

### ***Typotastic* as collaborative practice**

*Typotastic*, as a publication, a design education project, and as a designed object, is collaborative. There is no one specific agenda or individual the project is promoting or in whose benefit the project exists. Many individuals come together to plan, create content for, design and produce the publication. Although the lecturers involved have a 'direction' role, this is kept low-key, emphasizing the need for all parties involved to take an active role and have responsibility for the project. The project is the result of this collaborative effort, no one person has ownership or can take credit, or for that matter, responsibility for the entire publication. Due to this collaborative nature, a few specific situational conditions are created; these relate to the nature of the design tasks as well as roles that the participants must take.

The students and lecturers involved are placed into a position of trust with one another; there is no over-arching party to 'take care', 'mediate' or pick up the slack, it is made clear to all members of the team that they have a role to play and everyone is, in turn, relying on them. This is an unusual situation within an education environment, it turns what might be an 'exercise' into a reality with real risks and rewards. It introduces the student to a level of professional practice within the studio environment. It is important that the reality of the situation is made clear to the student participants. In the current issue of *Typotastic*, for example, a launch date of 8 July 2007 was set, at the designer's market in Melbourne, Victoria. Discussions about funding for travel and the stall cost at the market were part of the weekly work-in-progress meetings for *Typotastic* until, towards the end of semester one, it became obvious that the cost was prohibitive, funding opportunities had not been successful and the plan was abandoned. This event reinforced the project's reality and the realisation in all the students involved that no-one was going to step-in and take care of these issues for them, they needed to take charge of their actions and responsibilities themselves.

Although the risks are real, there is an element of support from the lecturers. This distinguishes a project like *Typotastic* from an industry placement situation where individual students are embedded within functioning professional environments. Thus *Typotastic* does become a sort of half-way house, exposing the student to the realities of professional practice but leaving them within the support network of their peers as well giving them the full-time guidance of lecturers. These lecturers, while importantly not protecting the students from the realities of collaboration, can ensure that educational objectives are being met and provide a sense of confidence in the student that might otherwise not be present.

As discussed earlier, no one individual has control over the complete outcome, this is unusual for students, especially with a project of this magnitude. It releases them from the myth that they will be working as sole designers, creating individual 'works of art' and introduces them to the reality that most professional design projects are collaborative projects. As Hugues Boekraad (2000) puts it in his introduction to *Copy Proof: A New Method for Design Education*, "This process is not a solo activity of the designer sequestered off in his studio. The designer operates under procedural, technological, organisational and financial conditions" (p. 10). *Typotastic* emulates these conditions, freeing the student from responsibility for the complete publication but revealing the real constraints, compromises and design challenges of an actual design project.

*Typotastic* also involves the students in interpersonal relationships with real consequences. Studio-based teaching already does this, but the *Typotastic* project reveals to students the real benefits and risks and conditions of relying on one another in a studio design team, much as the majority of the students will experience when employed in the professional arena. Members of the team must be considerate to other members and their contributions if there is going to be an adequate synthesis of material. They also have to convince other team members of the legitimacy of their design work using rationale and presentation techniques. This develops the studio critique model further in that students can feel an ownership of the project and a real need to engage in full critical debate and discussion until issues are resolved. This is unlike a traditional studio critique where some students may chose to 'wait out' the critique until it is their own work being discussed, join the conversation and then duck back out again. The *Typotastic* project and its collaborative nature gives each student a real 'stake' in the project and ensures active participation in design criticism and discussion.

*Typotastic* reveals to students that nothing takes care of itself. Every aspect of the production of a publication of its type is highlighted and made obvious to the group. The members of the team become aware of multiple aspects of the project and all the various roles and responsibilities involved in a production of this nature. This can become fairly inefficient, as it is unlikely that any of the students are proficient in their new roles but all members gain some level of experience and understanding in all aspects through the active reporting back of the individuals on the team. Amongst the roles taken on by the students are; fundraising, photographic art direction, art direction, layout, writing, research, interviews, contributor liaison, print liaison, typography, print production, file preparation for reproduction, editing, proofing, and more. Through the first hand experiences with a multitude of roles, the students are exposed directly to the integrative nature of contemporary visual communication practice. The student roles were negotiated with lecturers and at times taken on independently by students. Students drew on their own strengths when electing to take roles, or alternatively chose roles that could fill gaps in their professional practice knowledge or experience. They could invent new roles for themselves and take opportunities for professional networking or trying themselves out in the various 'real world' studio roles within the group. The lecturers allowed for a degree of self organisation; this caused a constant renegotiation of roles and responsibilities but allowed the individual students strengths and inclinations to come to the fore rather than be imposed. Individual students valued aspects of the process more highly than others.

### **Student feedback**

After the project students returned a feedback sheet commenting on the project. When they were asked to rank aspects of the project they felt they learned the most from the group returned the following rankings where preparing finished art was considered more valuable than raising money

1. preparing finished art
2. design development meetings (discussing the development of type and illustration styles)
3. work-in-progress meetings (discussing who was going to do what and when)
4. initial concept development
5. liaison with printer and other production people
6. liaison with contributors
7. type layout
8. photography
9. writing articles
10. raising money

Comments about positive aspects of the project included a sense of ownership on a real publication and the opportunity to execute finished ideas. Difficult aspects included too many different ideas, people wanting their own way and not listening to others and internal conflict. The following comment captures the extremes of the project for one student.

“We were all so excited that we going to create the best thing we had ever done, ...when everyone started to be art directors there was no control and tensions started to build within the class.” (Third Year student in feedback sheet)

### **Risks of collaboration**

Collaborative projects are problematic; they involve the clash of egos and agendas and necessitate consensus and compromise in order to achieve their end outcomes. *Typotastic* is no exception to this. Collaborations entail all sorts of risks, especially when the team is not hand picked but ‘thrown’ together by virtue of common enrollment in an academic unit. Risks include: inability for any one party to maintain control of a project, leading to reduced quality or the lack of meeting certain aims and objectives; tension within a group based on

disagreements and lack of clear demarcation or hierarchical structure of roles. Collaborations also, we would maintain, allow access to a whole range of possible benefits. In this paper we want to show that some of the risks and difficulties are also advantageous when viewed from a design pedagogy perspective.

The Design industry would aim for every design project to be a success and meet or go beyond expectations for quality, interest and effectiveness. *Typotastic* is not an industry-based publication, its ambition is firmly based on pedagogical objectives, both teaching and research. That it is also award winning and a leader in its area, is in many ways, incidental to this. *Typotastic* is a risky project; the manner of its production creates the very real risk of failure. Given its collaborative nature and lack of pre-existing 'safety blanket' or funding, the project has the opportunity to not go ahead at all, be very low quality, put the Visual Communication studio into debt, damage the academic credibility of the involved lecturers, or be an embarrassment to the involved students and provide them with their first 'real' design experience as a disaster, one that they might never recover their confidence from.

We might compare this to other design education projects where the parameters are set, the funding for materials, production and exhibition is in place, the final outcome is well defined from the start and a certain level of quality of outcome is assured. These sorts of projects might generate a confidence in the student in their own abilities, promote the student, lecturers and the department as producing interesting and high quality design work and act as guaranteed showcases for the university. A low-risk project can give a false experience of a seamless design process. Through the established expertise of the lecturer a situation can be created where the possibility for a low quality result or no result at all is removed. This can be, to the student, highly reassuring and a boost to their confidence. The notion of a smooth process of design, whereby the planning and production of the design outcome run to a clockwork agenda and smoothly produce the goods are reassuring fallacies. Even in industry with established professionals, this is a fallacy, it is a prevalent myth and is often shown to a client as the 'design process', but if it is the process then that process could quite possibly not be 'design', it might be the re-manipulation of existing form pieces into new configurations which satisfy the aesthetics norms of the context.

This paper argues that the advantages of *Typotastic* are that it is high-risk and collaborative. To design as a professional authentically engaged practitioner is to be engaged in a difficult, convoluted, multifarious activity of compromise and negotiation and necessarily imperfect outcomes; this is design. Through the *Typotastic* project students are taken out of the undergraduate crèche of certainty and led into the often scary world of reality and real world 'wicked' design problems. We would suggest that it is this very risk of failure that energises the project and 'superheats' the possibility for learning to be accomplished through the project.

### ***Typotastic* as a wicked design problem**

The concept of wicked problems was originally proposed by H Rittel and M Webber in 1973 to describe problems in planning and design that are messy, indeterminate, contradictory and ill-defined. Traditionally design theory has tried to define a linear model for design, in the hope of coming to a logical understanding of the design process. This model involves problem definition followed by problem solution. As design theorist Richard Buchanan points out in his seminal paper, "Wicked Problems in Design Thinking", this conventional model has serious flaws as the actual sequence of problem identification, design thinking and decision-making is not a simple linear process (Buchanan, 2000, p. 15). With wicked problems one solution may reveal another even more complex problem. Conklin, Badasur,

and VanPatter (2007) argue that wicked problems are not so much 'solved', but rather stakeholders are helped to negotiate shared understandings and meaning about the problems and its possible solutions. They write

The objective of the work is coherent action, not final solution. Thus, Rittel and Webber's contribution was well ahead of its time, and is now finally helping us understand why communication and collaboration, more even than creativity, keep emerging as critical to success on large projects (Conklin, Badasur, & VanPatter, 2007 p. 5).

The nature of *Typotastic* as a creative, collaborative project presents a truly contemporary design problem; a wicked design problem. There is no guarantee that the project will proceed in a linear fashion to even produce a publishable magazine at the end of the process. Instead the process of collaboration and communication between multiple stakeholders involved in its production is given as much attention as the deliverable artifact. The *Typotastic* project highlights the 'wickedness' of both teaching and design for students and teachers alike. Yet as design educators, we hope that the capacity of students to graduate as nascent designers equipped to deal with the world's increasingly complex communication needs, will be enhanced by the experience of the *Typotastic* project.

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For more information and to order *Typotastic* visit [www.tygotastic.net](http://www.tygotastic.net).

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