

25 Online creative collaboration as a pathway to social responsibility

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Abstract

While online technologies continue to reshape and enhance possibilities for collaboration, traditional administrative and pedagogical approaches at many higher education institutions worldwide still focus on the merits of the individual. In many cases there is an active effort to actually encourage students not to work together, in striking contrast to the norms of other academic and professional activities such as research and interdisciplinary collaborations. Yet, collaboration is increasingly recognised and respected as an important component and culture of contemporary creative processes (Warwicker, 1999). So, what are the benefits of creative collaboration online and how do they relate to a pedagogical framework in the ethical curriculum?

The Omnium Project has been hosting global online education and creative communities since 1999 in order to examine some of these questions. A recent project, Creative Waves, was held over a seven-week period in 2005 and formed the largest multicultural community of creative students to ever work together in a totally online context. The visual works themselves formed only part of the final outcome; the collaborative process and online discussions were arguably more valuable. Two message-board threads specifically discussed issues of collaboration and generated 22,000 words of critical debate. This paper examines several questions and themes raised through the discussions in Creative Waves and explores how they might lead to a heightened awareness of the role of designers as ‘good citizens’ in terms of ethic, society and sustainability through the newly formed Omnium Creative Network.

Introduction

(N.B. All names of Creative Waves participants have been reduced to initials in this paper. In most cases their message postings have been left largely unedited, except for spelling and grammatical errors and then only where these obscure the meaning of the sentence.)

Collaboration is increasingly recognised and respected as an important component and culture of contemporary creative processes although the visual arts have had their fair share of the cult of the individual. Thirteen years ago, iconic American graphic designer and writer, Paul Rand, described design as being ‘a personal activity, where collaboration is more likely to hinder than enhance an individual designer’s thought process’ (1993).

Less than ten years later however, John Warwicker, co-founder of the highly successful UK creative collective, Tomato, was already arguing the opposite. In his view we now operate in a global context of ‘increased interconnectivity and multiplicity in ideas, cultures and practices’, one in which ‘there is a changed sense of the individual, an increased ease in interaction, the value of individuality is now seen within a collaborative context, and where change is the only constant’ (1999).

The 90s were a decade that saw collaborative studios such as Tomato germinating across the globe. Looking back over past five years or so here in 2006 it is fair to say they have positively blossomed. Part of this is undoubtedly due to increasingly digitally mediated production processes (our own faculty, for example, had less than ten computers for graphic work ten years ago – now there are over 300). With digital production processes came an ease of file sharing as well as the attendant blurring of skill-set boundaries that working on the computer encourages and enables. At the same time we have seen the rise of the Web – arguably the biggest communications shift since the Gutenberg press – which is perhaps why those six years between the comments of Rand and Warwicker make all the difference.

Today's designers belong to communities and have conversations seamlessly across the globe, as do many in other professions. However, design-focused social communities such as K10k.net (Nygaard, Schmidt & Jj, 1998–2006) were some of the very first online design 'zines' connected to a community and pioneered what we might now think of as a multiple author weblog and collaborative creative community. Designers seized the opportunity to share ideas, styles and files early on because they were early adopters of computers and the Web from their backgrounds in desktop publishing and graphic design.

Yet all this suggests that design collaboration never happened before the Internet or that collaboration only happens in a creative context. Why is any of this new? Much of the perceived 'newness' comes from viewing this convergence of technology and culture through a distorted and idealised sense of the 'present', but in many cases the future has already happened and only the myths remain (Bennett, Chan & Polaine, 2005). Certainly our pedagogical institutions, from school upwards through higher education, still focus on the merits of the individual. In many cases there appears to be an active effort to encourage students *not* to work together. Students are graded individually; policies are set to ensure group projects are divvied up in terms of marks; anti-plagiarism enforcement is high on the agenda of most universities, often with confusing policies and descriptions.

In Australia and the USA, and increasingly in Europe, students are under tremendous duress to perform even at the high school stage. Education is expensive and this puts enormous pressure into the system. If students fail to get high enough grades at school, they fail to get into the course they desire (our faculty has no portfolio admissions, for example, admission is through high-school grade point averages). Once admitted, students pay ever-increasing fees for their education. This creates a climate of competitiveness in which students can easily only focus on gaining the credentials as quickly as possible before getting out, finding a job and paying off the debt. This environment hardly fosters a collaborative mindset or altruistic tendencies.

All of this is in striking contrast to the norms of most design practices. One is always collaborating, whether with other designers or with clients, photographers, writers, printers, to name but a few. Academic activities such as research require joining forces to form research teams. Putting together a major research grant application without several people onboard who have a shared track record is unthinkable. Once we are researching, borrowing each other's ideas for closer examination, citing, exchanging and challenging each other's findings are commonplace. Sharing our combined experiences is a matter of accepted practice, indeed it is essential to the process.

Creative Waves

Despite the reluctance of some, numerous educational studies over recent years have very much examined the building of learning communities and the mapping of collaborative coursework (Ryder & Wilson, 1996). Not surprisingly, when such methodologies are applied they raise a number of new questions for online collaborative learning and when specific to individual discipline areas. For example:

- What kinds of strategies can lead to productive collaborations and where can it all go wrong?
- Can successful collaborations be planned or are they purely accidental?

- What place does collaboration have as a methodology for graphic designers or visual communicators?
- How can this be harnessed to teach visual communicators about social and ethical responsibilities?

The Omnium Project has been hosting global online education and creative communities since 1999 to address some of these questions and raise others. One recent project, Creative Waves, was held over a seven-week period in 2005 and formed the largest multicultural community of creative students to ever work together in a totally online context (Figure 1). The project was conducted on request of the International Council of Graphic Design Associations (Icograda) and witnessed over 100 participants from 22 countries engaged in a collaborative visual communication project (Bennett & Dziekan, 2005).

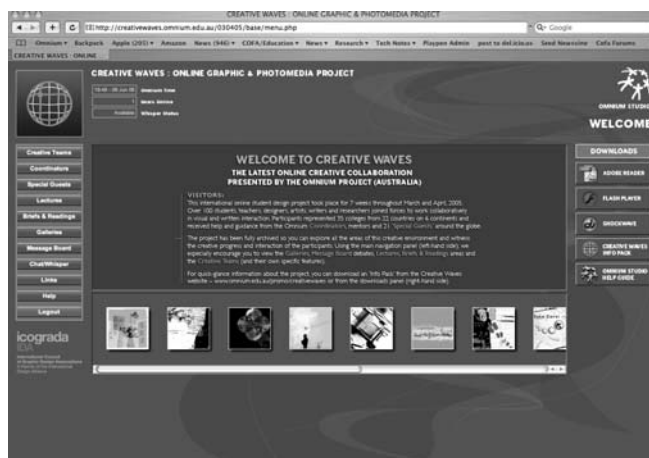


Figure 1 The Creative Waves 'welcome' page: giving participants access to all features and project content

The visual works created during Creative Waves formed only part of the final outcome; the collaborative process and online discussions were arguably more valuable. Two 'message-board' (Figure 2) threads specifically discussed issues of collaboration and generated over 22,000 words of critical debate within the space of a few weeks. These threads form the central part of this paper, for the community that was built up around Creative Waves is often best left to speak for itself (Figure 3).

One participant and ‘mentor’ (mentors helped facilitate individual teams) in Creative Waves, NL from Australia, gives a very clear example of the issues raised in our introduction. In the message-board thread about collaboration she writes:

We run a design centre which is staffed by postgrad students from three disciplines, working on commercial research and production jobs. At the heart of the course is the idea that they must all learn to draw from each other – and it doesn't matter who worked on what, or who 'owns' the idea or the production. Or even if you are on the project team. The most incredible experiences we have had with these students is on short deadlines and big problems, where the brainstorming and testing of ideas happens with the whole studio involved, although it might be broken into tasks for production or be the responsibility of just one person. Everyone has a stake and everyone adds to the outcome.

There are, of course, students who find this process a more difficult learning curve – some take to the idea of shared design processes more easily than others. They often come from an environment that they have understood to be competitive, and it can take a while to adjust to the idea that assessment doesn't rest on it being 'all your own work'. But this is the real world; we don't (and shouldn't) work in isolation – we can take the opportunity to learn from everyone around us. I don't see the joy in keeping it all to yourself, it's much more interesting and energetic to have others to share the difficulties and the successes.

Another participant, KI, a student in New Zealand, expands on the problems with current educational practices:

As a student I know there is a very strong sentiment towards catering ones work around what the tutor deems to be 'correct' simply because they are the ones dishing out the grades.

Obviously we have to be given grades within a learning environment such as design school, they are one of the most pertinent universal measure of success and achievement we have. But how does this grading system impact upon our experimentation?

I know from experience that there is often a general unwillingness to experiment because of the possibility of 'failure' and the implications

that this will have upon a students grades. This can make design school a very serious place, as well as intensely competitive. [B]ecause there is this strong emphasis on grades as a measure of achievement I think that a lot of potential experimentation gets thrown out the window as a result.

Now compare that environment to the one that is found within this Creative Waves project, where there are no marks given out etc. I think you will find that there is possibly more of a willingness to experiment here and to voice opinions as opposed to that within the physical classroom. Why? Because at the end of the day here in this environment, the emphasis is not on giving out grades. It's on *experimentation, thinking, and questioning*. It's looking at WHY we are doing the things we do, and the creative and collaborative processes we are involved in. [My italics.]

We would all probably hope that 'experimentation, thinking, and questioning' and looking at *why* our students make the things they do are central to pedagogical methodologies within art and design institutions. Many students clearly feel this is not the case, however, and KI is not alone in voicing her concerns. So how can we encourage this inquisitive approach and how can collaboration, specifically online collaboration, help this along? One way is to flatten the usual hierarchical structures and have an open conversation and debate.

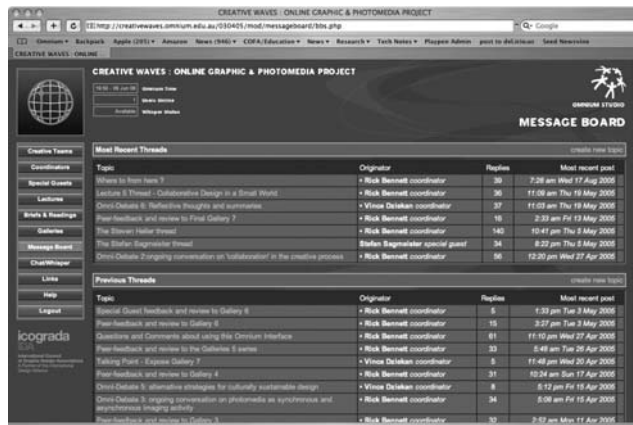


Figure 2 The Creative Waves message board: As a communal feature in the project, all students, mentors, convenors and special guests could debate issues in a threaded forum

Strategies and outcomes

One of the strategies used to stimulate such a debate was to place a number of specially commissioned papers and essays online for participants to respond to alongside the brief and project that they were working on. Each paper had a specific ‘talking point’ question written into the lecture with a matching message thread on the Creative Waves message board. In this way they could engage in the brief to hand as well as reflect on their collaborative, online process along the way.

One of this paper’s authors, Andy Polaine, wrote a lecture for Creative Waves titled ‘Collaborative design in a small world’ (Polaine, 2005). The essay reflects on his experiences, both positive and negative, of working within the award-winning new-media collective, Antiorom, which had a completely non-hierarchical structure based on Tomato’s model. The simple ‘talking point’ questions, ‘From your own experience, what kinds of collaborations have been successful and why? Can they be planned or are they accidental?’ produced an enormous amount of reflection and debate.

KI began her response by examining the value of the process over results:

I get the feeling that when thinking about collaborative projects, a lot of people (including myself) always seem to think of success in relation to the final product that is produced by the group. But does a collaborative project necessarily have to produce a very successful final product to be classed as a successful collaboration?

To be honest I can’t actually think of any collaborations that I have been involved with (yet) that I would want to label as being typically successful, in terms of the final product. But in terms of the process and what I have learned in the experience I would have to say that every collaborative situation I have been involved in has been successful to some degree.

RNDT, from Jordan, continues this line of thought in response, extending it into issues of competitiveness between individuals (which several people commented on and questioned, particularly in educational settings):

The best kind of collaboration is when people compete, not with each other, but with the problem they are dealing with. To compete with the issue, to have perseverance and to give effort to solve the problem or the issue.

A sense of commitment to the community is equally important online as it is offline. We would suggest that it is, in fact, even *more* important given the lack of day-to-day 'trivial' social contact that one might have in a face-to-face workplace or situation such as in the corridor or at the canteen. The tiny social niceties that we take for granted in our face-to-face lives are important to observe and replicate online. Online collaboration is no magic bullet; one must still make a personal effort. It is easy for people to (wrongly) assume that everybody else should be providing the content. This approach is akin to going to a party and never introducing oneself to anyone and then complaining it was dull and everybody *else* was antisocial.

CS, from Australia, suggested that this socialisation is something often overlooked by participants in online communities:

I think even saying hi or writ[ing] down a little comment in the message board or discussion and feedback every time the participants come in can make the project more lively and can trigger a lot of things (positive and negative... [it] depends on the comments too – at least it's something.. better than nothing) and the more interaction/communication the more chance the project will be successful...

KI continues in response, observing the issues of time differences:

[O]ur main means of communication [are] largely asynchronous. [I]f areas such as the [Discussion and Feedback] area on this site aren't utilised and team members keep 'missing each other' via the chat/whisper, over time a general feeling of isolation can develop for a member who is waiting on input/feedback from the rest of the team.

The idea of posting some concepts/images online, going to sleep and then logging back on in the morning and finding that your team mates have been busy working during the night is a truly wonderful notion, and a great example of utilising time differences. The paradox to this is that to log back on and find nothing has changed since you were last online is quite disheartening.

So, even if you log on and have nothing to add at the current stage of proceedings, or simply need time to think about what has been posted by your team mates, simply posting to say just this can make a world of difference. 'You' know that you have been online and looked at everything, but the person who posted the information doesn't and can be left wondering what is going on.

As some of the participants above have mentioned, there is often a tension in collaboration that is part of the enjoyment and value of it. Tomato's John Warwicker has said that he will often be working on something and think 'Oh, Dirk would love this, or Graham is going to hate it' (Warwicker, 2004). The first part of Warwicker's statement is the healthy competition – outdoing the others with something they'll love can be a very positive driving force in creative collaborations.

The second part, knowing that you are likely to be critiqued, is much more difficult to deal with, but can be equally positive. Open and honest critique is crucial, but one must know that the person critiquing supports one's own process. One person's interference is another person's feedback. Occasionally we want interference, particularly if we are feeling 'stuck' on a particular problem. Recognising which is appropriate has less to do with design skills than interpersonal relationships and responsibility. It is here that collaboration over longer periods of time has real strength.

Co-author, Polaine, sums this complex relationship up in the Creative Waves message board:

You can also think of the collaboration like any other relationship. You have the first rush of getting together and you care about everything and how you look. Then you start to blend into each other and, often, a panic sets in that you are losing your own sense of identity. Lots of couples break up at this point, fearing and despising the compromise. Sometimes this is advisable. But often when you work through this process and come out the other side as two individuals with a greater sense of self, the whole greater than the sum of the parts, that the real magic happens. Though it's never easy, there is a greater self-confidence having gone through that process.

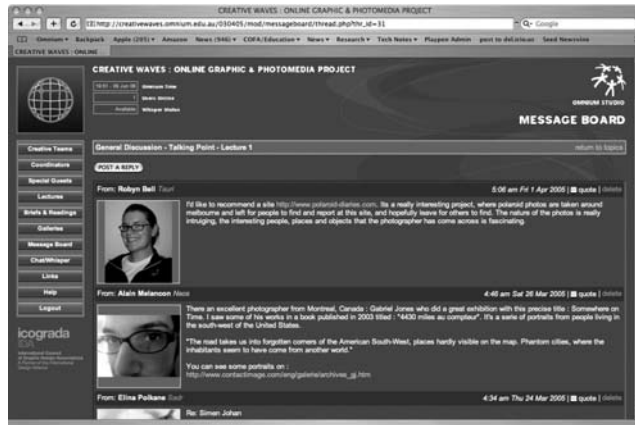


Figure 3 A Creative Waves message board thread: When individuals left contributions to the discussions, their profile images automatically accompanied their response and a quote feature allowed them to cite others' comments

The role of the moderator

JCEF comments in another Creative Waves message board thread about the need for direction when collaborating:

I think [Creative Waves] is a great resource both in terms of productivity and creativity, the more minds you have access to, the richer your palette will be.

But, I do think it's necessary to always have a leader in a creative group, especially when the purpose is design [...] Not as an automatic discarder of 'bad design', but as someone that makes sure cohesion is always present and the end results are always congruent.

Often the word 'collaboration' is misconstrued as everyone all working on the same project, or the same part of a project, at the same time. The film production model is interesting with regards to this because it has very clear lines of communication between different departments, clear divisions of roles and responsibilities and a respect for those divisions. Unlike most fine arts or graphic design endeavours, filmmaking is a much larger process, one that is difficult to do alone. The golden rule on a film set is that departments do not interfere with each other's work (props people will never move lights, for example). It is rather military in its way,

but it works well because everyone is able to do their job to the best of their abilities *in their own realm*. Of course film crews have their fights and conflicts, but filmmaking is usually a great example of a humming, purring creative engine. Film crews do, of course, have directors and producers to steer the project and this is the paradox, because this vision necessarily involves compromise and collaboration.

This example gives rise to another essential role in online creative collaborations and communities, the role of the moderator (Salmon, 2000). Whilst collaboration is easiest when it comes naturally rather than being forced, it does need the occasional ‘whipping of the spinning top’ to keep it going. This is often the role of the producer or production manager, the coach or the director in other environments. Online it tends to be the moderator that keeps everyone’s energy up and keeps people focused. It is a vital role and noticeable when it is not present. Part of this is because the group has to overcome the lack of everybody turning up to a physical location at the same time with the same *intent of purpose*. The asynchronous nature of online collaboration usually requires some direction because it lacks such an intention concentrated in one place and time but rather unfolds over time due to its asynchronous nature.

Collaboration does not necessarily mean everyone is completely equal in responsibility all the time. Occasionally taking a back seat and working for the other person can provide a different viewpoint as well as a welcome break. There can be a real and psychologically rewarding pleasure in serving someone else well – not only in doing the job well, but also in giving up responsibility for a while. Sometimes in a collective collaboration it is useful to be submissive, as it were, and let someone else take the reins for a while. Constantly originating can be exhausting and we work in an industry where originality is the stock-in-trade. Working ‘for’ someone else in the group can be a great way to recharge and also a good way to learn how to lead. Collaboration also helps to rein in the ego, which in turn gives rise to self-reflection about one’s responsibilities to others.

JRJ, a professor of design at a prominent university in the USA and one of the mentors in the Creative Waves project, wrote a detailed account of how social responsibility begins 'at home'. Collaboration, for him, is critical to this process:

I have utilised the collaborative experience for years in design education – not just between designers but also varying disciplines. Collaborative projects are sometimes the most painful, the most miserable, the most humbling and ironically the most beneficial experiences I have ever had. Successful collaboration presumes a state of selflessness. In commercial design, client is preferred – art director/creative director is preferred – and perhaps even other supervisors. In collaboration, others are often preferred over self. This isn't easy. The team member that postures and plays to manipulate the process frustrates the overall experience. In fact, in my experience, the strong voice in a collaborative team is often the least influential. There seems to be a greater truth in my estimation that rises out of a comprehensive collaborative process.

I understand the need for 'art' and individualised expression but it is self-indulgent. There is an 'artist' within each of us that longs for that expressiveness and needs it. This is fine and noble, however, the complexity of collaboration is a people skill and a personal skill. I believe that there is a strategy for creating successful collaborations. I know that the product is not without significance – after all, that is the most measurable fruit of our experience. However, there is yet another, more eternal product of collaboration that is less tangible, that brings holistic reasoning and in some cases – healing. The honest discourse provided by team members. The ability to listen, to assess, to criticise, to complement and to adjust. The ability to argue without offending. The ability to submit without compromise.

These ARE SOCIAL skills more so than traditional design skills. Collaboration leads to social responsibility. I'm not talking about social agendas – I'm speaking of social responsibility where each member realises the value of another's viewpoint and how to integrate that into their thought process.

The irony of online creative collaboration is that the same technology – the digital and Internet revolution – that has removed so much interpersonal contact face-to-face is also able to provide it again

online. We now have all the tools we need to create many things all on one machine. This means it is possible for one person to do everything, to be a one-woman or one-man show. A print designer used to have to spend a lot of time working with the printers, understanding technical processes and techniques that might dramatically affect their design. Now, people often just email an EPS or PDF file and leave it up to the people at the other end to sort out the details. All these tools are incredibly useful, but the counter of it is that we are not forced to work with other people as often as we used to be. Online collaboration can bring some of that process back to life and can also connect those whose voices are seldom heard.

Collaboration as methodology for teaching ethical and social awareness

One of the latest developments in The Omnium Project is The Omnium Creative Network (OCN). The OCN arose out of our concerns that the students and those working in the design industry often see themselves simply as service providers to clients or, perhaps, as artists constrained in their ability to express themselves due to the commercial nature of the project. Both these viewpoints are rather inward looking. In contrast, several high-profile designers and theorists such as Neville Brody (2002), Milton Glaser (2005), Stefan Sagmeister (Heller, 2004) and Steven Heller (2003) (these last two were both guests in *Creative Waves*) have been expressing their concerns about the need for a sense of ethics and social responsibility in the design industry for some time. As 'citizen designers' (Heller & Vienne, 2003) we have a responsibility to reflect upon our own practices as well as our relationships to others.

The Omnium Creative Network (Figure 4) was set up as a free and non-profit online global community of creative people (students, professionals, educators, theorists, writers) and its aim is to encourage members from all over the world to collaborate in a variety of ways; to focus their attention on more socially aware and ethically responsive art and design projects. Projects such as *Creative Waves* provide valuable experiences and create vibrant communities, but after they are over the community disperses again. We wanted to continue the conversation and the community.



Figure 4 Outline, the overview of the Omnium Creative Network community

The ongoing content in the OCN – debate, essays, interviews, guest lectures – feed into a series of projects run each month or so for organisations and charities. Through this specific focus on ethical issues in the visual arts, we hope to create a large membership made up of participants from a wide variety of countries worldwide; in particular countries less fortunate in terms of having easy access to creative interaction through conferences, publications and exhibitions. The OCN will, in time, become a rich research resource and information exchange, as well as a place for its members to get the chance to meet and work with people normally out of reach due to their geographical or socio-economic situation.

JRJ sums this up succinctly and it seems fitting to give a member of the Creative Waves community the last word:

Creativity is both personal and shared. Collaboration is difficult and – like most difficult experiences – the hybridised 'fruit' of the effort is greater. I understand Paul Rand's observation that 'collaboration can hinder an individual designer's thought process'. However, if we separate creativity from ego, there is something greater that exists – connectivity and community. There was a time and perhaps still is where folks departmentalised according to their specialisations. It seemed to be the best way to offer professionals the opportunity to

become the best that they could in their discipline allowing for some ad hoc acknowledgement and respect for their working partners in other disciplines. But now, there's something drastically different happening. The 'exclusion of interaction and integration with others' allows for inferior and less-effective design solutions in my estimation.

I tend to sympathise with John Warwicker's contention that there is a convergence of identity in post-modernity and even more so in this post-information age we are swimming in. Most all of us... no matter where and when... can gain information from thousands of sources. So, knowledge and access isn't the problem. Effectively connecting with others in a deeper way is the current problem as I see it.

About four years ago, I learned something important from a man named Leonard Sweet (an author, educator and historian). He taught me that people in this age are looking for an E.P.I.C. model for existence at this point in time. An existence that is E= experiential; P= participatory; I= image-driven; and C= connected. For now, 'collaboration' is absolutely necessary and should be utilised in the preparation of today's designers. Twenty-five years from now? Who knows?

Given the influence of the Internet, even in the last fifteen years, and the speed at which it is growing, twenty-five years is a very long time. It is, in fact, a whole generation. We hope they will report back to us when the time comes.

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