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Final Report

ELEMENTARY DESIGN STUDIO, **2011**

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CONTINUING STUDIES,

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Introduction

Recent research is illuminating the spectrum of strategies employed in North American school districts as new and emerging technology comes into use in the classroom. Discussions focus on many aspects of youth, learning and technology, including social literacies (for example, Wohlwend, 2010), special education (for example, McCalahan et al, 2012), and online youth cultural production and engagement (White, 2006).

In recent months, several iPad projects have been introduced in BC school districts, both elementary and secondary. The development of student-based exploratory learning practices pose many questions for educators and administrators. While established and emerging practices in student-driven, technology-centred learning environments mostly focus on K-12 environments led by classroom teachers, little has been explored in the way of inter-institutional collaborative partnerships pursuing this type of educational environment.

Jenkins (2006) addresses the importance of the afterschool environment in the success of media programs in the USA:

> Afterschool programs may encourage students to examine more directly their relationship to popular media and participatory culture. Afterschool programs may introduce core technical skills that students need to advance as media makers. In these more informal learning contexts,

> students may explore rich examples of existing media practice and develop a vocabulary for critically assessing work in these emerging fields. Students may also have more time to produce their own media and to reflect on their own production activities. (p. 58)

In developing the *Elementary Design Studio*, Emily Carr Continuing Studies embarked on a brand new kind of project, which required curricular flexibility and new approaches to supporting independent learning. Creating a collaborative and experimental afterschool ipad design lab, the instructors and participants entered into an eight-week hands-on laboratory with the goal of introducing elementary school student participants to design thinking using iPads in a fun and multi-generational environment.

How might University instructors best prepare for the complex social and cultural world of an elementary school at 3:30 pm? And what might we learn from the students there, whose abilities to work with new technologies seems almost innate? What might they teach us about this environment and our place in it as educators? How, in turn, will this prepare the university continuing education community to adjust and evolve its systems and services for future students?

In this paper I will address the challenges and opportunities we faced in pursuing this unique partnership, and share some of the results of developing design and art projects with students at the elementary school level.

Development of *The Elementary Design Studio*

Originally conceived as a spring-break camp, and later an afterschool program, the Elementary Design Studio was first collaborative offsite project pursued by Continuing Studies at Emily Carr University of Art + Design (Emily Carr). Elsie Roy Elementary School had recently acquired a new set of iPads for classroom use, and Principal Rosa Fazio was actively seeking education partners to develop extra-curricular programs using the hardware. As with any new technology in the classroom, the exploratory phase helps students and educators alike develop skills and ideas for implementation. Elementary Design Studio was created to fulfill exactly this role. What possibilities could we imagine in an afterschool think tank that brought together the students and iPads at Elsie Roy Elementary School, secondary school student volunteers, and two Emily Carr Continuing Studies faculty, one artist and one designer, neither having worked with an iPad in a classroom setting before, but both eager to explore the challenges and opportunities this program presented.

In the weeks and months leading up to the actual program, the two faculty from Emily Carr met several times with project organizers at Emily Carr, educators for both the Elsie Roy Elementary School and King George Secondary School team, and with the four high school students selected to participate as art and technology mentors.

The first challenge for the two faculty members was to understand the goal of the program. The exploratory and experimental nature of the program required them to think about the project differently than other Continuing Studies courses they had taught. Instead of concrete planning and outcomes-oriented lessons, the faculty made use of resources preparing them to present young students with opportunities to engage in a type of learning environment neither could fully imagine yet. After all, neither instructor has taught with an iPad before. Having an iPad to play with at early planning meetings made brainstorming a tangible, generative process, and each meeting ended with more questions and ideas than answers. The overall goal was to keep in mind the skill of "Play" that Jenkins (2006) described as a central component of the participatory culture using technology, "the capacity to experiment with one's surroundings as a form of problem-solving" (page 4).

Educators from Elsie Roy Elementary School and King George Secondary had some guidance for the faculty, but little experience with this kind of a program. They provided a copy of *A Basis for Practice: the Middle Years Programme* (IBO), a guide used in these schools, for ideas and approaches to independent learning for students aged 11 – 16. The guide emphasizes the social and cultural aspects of the classroom, and the importance of inquiry-based collaborative projects, in the development of internationally-minded, independent learners.

A second approach also underscored the instructors' planning. *Design Ignites Change* is a private foundation whose global network connects high school and university students in the development of multidisciplinary design and architecture projects focused on addressing local issues. Successful projects include collaborations between students and refugees, projects that address a local source of pollution, or a proposed solution to a problem affecting inner-city children in major American cities. The website, www.designigniteschange.org, provides hundreds of examples of inspiring collaborations, many of them involving technology either in or out of the classroom. This resource provided the instructors with models of successful outcomes-oriented projects, often involving participants from diverse schools and age groups, not unlike the one on which they were about to embark.

The *Elementary Design Studio* Team

The Faculty: Kara Peckold and Josh Hite

Design Ignites Change was especially Kara Pecknold, whose own creative practice has included many projects of this nature. Pecknold is a designer and a design researcher with a special interest in the role designers can play in community development and aid in developing nations. She created the "Human-Centered Design Toolkit" which helps international aid workers, volunteers and planners to "understand a community's needs in new ways, find innovative

solutions to meet those needs" (ideo.com). Her background in this area made her especially flexible and thoughtful when considering the desires of the students, the climate of the classroom, and the diverse ideas of the participants.

The second faculty member, Josh Hite, is a videographer and photographer with a creative practice often concerned with exploring and document urban space in new ways. Always interested in uncovering what assumptions his students are making about ownership and territory, Josh guides many of his young students on photo walks around the city, and has been involved in documenting some of Vancouver's hidden, abandoned or inaccessible structures, including the stairwell of the south tower of the Burrard Street Bridge, sealed off from pedestrian access since xx. Hite's interest in urban space served the group well, and he encouraged their continual engagement in questions about the space in and around their school including the corridors and stairwells, which became a central feature of the final exhibition put on by the students.

King George High School student assistants

Once curricular planning was underway, teachers and the community school liaison at King George Secondary school identified four appropriate students to participate as senior student mentors: Sara Marajanovic and James Yan, two very engaged senior art students, joined the team in early October. Once the program was underway, James and Sara attended sessions at Elsie Roy and

lent their assistance as group leaders, guiding students in listening to instruction or presentations, and providing ideas and energy for group work. By the conclusion of the program, James and Sara were fairly well integrated into the group projects, and their ability to supervise the younger students was helpful when other circumstances of the project created a fairly loose environment.

Samson Gama and Albert Hyneck, two senior technology students also from King George Secondary School, were also recruited to assist with the project. Albert and Samson had been instrumental in the rollout and management of almost all technology aspects of the Elsie Roy iPad program from its inception. Their ability to solve problems mid-stride, and the confidence and zeal with which they approached technological challenges, proved indispensible to the project. In fact, it would not be overstating it to say that the success of this project – indeed any extra-curricular program that uses iPad technology – owes much to the commitment, skills, and flexibility of a technical team. The project required the quick and nimble creation of new online accounts for uploading content retrieved from the iPads, the navigating of password-protected systems and networks, and the logistics of dispatching, collecting and charging the machines themselves. The truth is that it is be very difficult to predict these challenges in a pilot project, using new technology. Complicating this further is the fact that the instructors are away from the University's technical resources and the support structures to which they are accustomed. The onsite presence of a skilled technical team with experience using the technology is crucial. It is instructive to note that this team

came in the form of two high school student volunteers. It is possible that there is no better team for this particular task.

A final team member, David Peacock, was asked to take on project documentation and web development. David provided in-class support to student projects, and captured photo, video, audio throughout the eight weeks. The photographic archives are available at www.emilycarrdesignstudio.com.

The Elsie Roy Elementary School students

The Emily Carr Design Studio program launched a recruitment campaign for student participants in September 2011. Twenty-one students registered in the program; Sixteen paid a $100 participation fee, and 5 students were supported by bursaries provided by their school. All students were in grades 5, 6 or 7. Given the relatively small size of Elsie Roy School, all students knew eachother from class.

The *Elementary Design Studio*: October – December 2011

The eight-week program began on Wednesday October 12 in the Elsie Roy school library. The first session was an active one; students arrived energized to begin playing with the iPads, and the intent of the program was not clear to many

of them. The instructors introduced themselves and their own creative work, which captured the imagination of the students. Questions that highlighted the differences between two instructors' creative practices began the students on a path of defining for themselves how a designer and an artist might approach the same situation differently. Reflecting on these difference and the way they play out in the classroom, Hite asked himself whether "designers want to offer new and innovative solutions whereas artists want to offer new and innovative questions?" (Personal correspondence). This distinction offers us clues to how each might guide projects in the student-centred environment.

In the first weeks of the Elementary Design Studio, the students documented various aspects of their school environment and reflected on the social and cultural climates that thrived in different spaces. At this stage, the iPad was used primarily for capturing video, photo and audio files. Occasionally, the students used the iPads to answer a research question for themselves.

A highlight of the program was the student field trip from Else Roy to Emily Carr University's campus on Granville Island. Exploring the school buildings gave the students a chance to observe the social and cultural climates of similar spaces in another institution. For example, students remarked upon the different shape, size and placement of the lockers at Emily Carr, and began to imagine the different ways in which these lockers might be used. This gave them a tangible

introduction to principles of user-centred design, and illustrated the need for design thinking in every aspect of the student experience.

At the campus visit, students were also invited to meet the artist Michelle Gay, who was installing new work in the Charles H Scott gallery on the day of their visit. The work involved a number of multimedia video and digital installations, and gave the students an opportunity to see the professional, high-calibre contemporary art using the kinds of tools they themselves had been exploring. The students spoke with Gay and Scott Gallery curator Cate Rimmer, asking questions about this type of art practice, as well as installation and curatorial art practices. The fact that the students were getting a "sneak peak" of a show not yet open to the public made it an especially memorable experience for many of the participants.

The visit to the Scott Gallery crystalized the students' need to find their own multimedia exhibition strategy; the outcomes of the project would be exhibited at the Roundhouse Community Centre in December 2011. With this in mind, students working in four groups began to hone their focus on one particular area or feature of the school environment: Stairs, water fountains, washrooms, and lockers. Each team set about planning the best way to present their findings to the public. The students quickly turned to final display projects that incorporated sculpture, posters, and model-making, for "while this was geared up to be an iPad experience, many of the students have wanted to get into "making" (Kara

Pecknold, personal correspondence). The final projects, installed at the

Roundhouse Community Centre from December 11 – 18 2011, included several

built models and process drawings, as well as a wall of photos taken by the

students of their environment, and a video loop created by the students on the

"Stair" team and edited by Hite. Overall, the Elsie Roy project's exhibition was a

multimedia collection, both art and design, and the students proudly explained

their intent and thinking behind each project at the opening reception, with their

families, teachers and schoolmates present, on December 14, 2011.

Lessons Learned

Students each working individual with one iPad was quickly ruled out. The speed

with which the students navigate away from one App and to another, often a

game, was astonishing. The distractions of the after-school time slot added to the

chaos when each student was holding an iPad. Students in the hallway, not

registered in the Elementary Design Studio, were curious about the project, and

students holding the iPads often felt compelled to photograph their friends or

simply show off the toy and their command of it. The fact that the program took

place in the library, a space the students access frequently and casually, added

to the need for a more structured approach. Finally, many students are hungry,

tired and emotionally drained at the end of the school day - something our

instructors didn't count on. This made for a rocky start to some sessions, and the

instructors quickly adjusted to accommodate a snack period before instruction and workshops began in earnest.

Any new offsite program must be prepared for a different kind of logistical and technical support for teachers and learners. Like all Emily Carr instructors, Pecknold and Hite are accustomed to the support structures of a university, including skilled support in computer labs and additional technical assistance in the classroom when necessary. Adjusting to teach in an elementary school library required all instructors and assistants to come prepared to troubleshoot, and to completely alter lesson plans when necessary. The unanticipated failure of the school's wi-fi network one afternoon, for example, necessitated this kind of shift in thinking.

Another very simple difference in the offsite program is the lack (or difference) of art-making materials and resources. At Emily Carr for example, each Continuing Studies course instructor has access to the supplies and tools around the campus, and these can often be provided at a moment's notice if the need arises. Scissors, glue, tape, paint, paper, and any number of other supplies can be delivered by a technician to the studio at any time a class is running. At the elementary school, however, instructors had to make do with the supplies that they themselves had planned for and brought with them. In a student-centred learning environment, the availability of materials is crucial for the continued inspiration and engagement of the students especially when they begin

conceiving their own outcomes without pre-determined parameters. For this reason, partnership agreements with participating institutions must address the need for onsite storage of supplies. In fact, future Emily Carr offsite programs would do well to assemble a "kit" of various supplies, and store them temporarily at the facility where the program is taking place.

Next Practices

The planning and delivery of the Elementary Design Studio was a generative and productive experiment with overall positive results. The outcomes were exciting for the students, and introduced to them a new way of thinking about the built environment and their daily interactions with it. The program was instructive for Emily Carr Continuing Studies, and clarified the ways in which the University Continuing Studies unit might better prepare for an offsite program with school-aged students. Finally, the project provided a measure for the long-term viability of partnerships that bring the University into other school communities. Based on the successes of Elementary Design Studio, Emily Carr hopes to continue to pursue projects with the Vancouver Board of Parks and Recreation and the Vancouver School Board.

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