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Degree show learning curves

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Abstract

Degree shows are an integral part of a creative practice higher education, but sitting outside the curriculum, they remain a largely un-studied entity. After taking part in several of their own student exhibitions, two LCC design graduates undertook a summer residency with SUARTS, to investigate the concept of the degree show. By speaking to a number of key LCC stakeholders, the paper shares multiple perspectives on the purpose, drawbacks, value and future of the degree show, and offers advice for students about to undertake their own exhibitions.

Keywords

degree show, exhibitions, final year experience, student engagement, student research

Introduction

Over the course of four years study at London College of Communication we were involved in a number of degree shows, from visiting the Summer Shows that took place before we started our degrees; the intense three day install of our Foundation Degree exhibition in 2014; to throwing ourselves into the final BA show, for the Design for Graphic Communication course at London College of Communication, when we graduated earlier this year.

Rationale

Degree shows have always been a finish line that creative students aim for and to us these exhibitions were key moments in our learning. It was through these events that we learnt how to project manage, curate, design and build furniture, as well as how to communicate a course identity and philosophy. Our parallel project, Everyone Has A Goat Story, investigated the non-student roles that exist in coordinating degree shows. It was completed as part of a summer residency programme with the Students' Union (SUARTS) and was focused on helping other students think about their show and the extra exhibition opportunities UAL and SUARTS offer.

As a research project, our main focus was to gather as much information as possible on degree shows and how they are perceived and worked-on by staff. When we were students, we did not understand the roles staff members inhabited nor why they should be working on what we perceived as *our* show. We hoped that finding out more would help us understand the decisions they made and the reasons why these shows need staff input. By distributing our findings, we hope to help current students understand these various roles and how staff can assist them in preparing for their degree show.

Methodology

Our investigation involved using research methods learnt whilst studying at LCC. Starting with a list of stakeholders, we placed these names on a matrix, categorising their motivation against their influence (or lack of) during the process. This helped us narrow the list down to a set of key stakeholders who we then interviewed; and to develop a list of enquiry-based questions that structured these conversations. We interviewed five people at LCC, including the Summer Show's identity designer, the Communications Manager, the Exhibitions and Galleries Co-ordinator, an Associate Lecturer, a Course Leader and a Dean.

Multiple roles

From speaking to these key stakeholders, we discovered an awful lot about the shows and the amount of work that goes into them. Most importantly, we soon realised that each stakeholder performs a different job, with varying responsibilities and degrees of influence. We spoke to Alice Clark who as Exhibitions and Galleries Co-ordinator, manages any activity involving a gallery space. She revealed her clear-cut attitude towards what her role is when it comes to the degree shows, outlining that: 'It should be the students who curate it, with the direction of the course leader, and I just make it happen' (Clark, 2015). Her role is to practically support the students with what they want to do for their show, especially with regards to the materials they need in order to build exhibition furniture or display systems. It also involves coordinating which course has what space and organising the building team's jobs. Creating this support represents the majority of work involved in Alice's role and facilitates the delivery of the shows. As a result of this support the entire process becomes more collaborative (between staff and students), building the feeling that this team are working together. Many of the stakeholder interviewees we spoke to talked about their overarching responsibilities and constantly reiterated the importance of this support net, which is there to make sure the shows happen.

Multiple purposes

The purpose of the shows varies vastly, depending on the person you speak to. We think this is due to the diverse range of courses available at LCC. Questioning the purpose of degree shows was our first query; something we have been trying to answer for a while. After this project, we still do not have a clear answer, but we have managed to collate a range of views relating to the potential purposes of degree shows. For Lawrence Zeegen, Dean of the School of Design at LCC, the purpose of the shows is 'ultimately about celebrating the student work and student experience' (2015). For other staff members it is about the course. Paul Jackson, a Course Leader, reiterated that it was for his students to 'set [themselves] this goal of going out with a bang, and saying we're going to put down our legacy in this form' (2015). Even student-to-student opinions about the purpose of the show vary. Our personal reasons for being involved in our degree show stemmed from the desire to experience the process of staging an outward-facing exhibition. For other students it is a vocational event to help them get jobs, promote their name and showcase their work.

Student engagement

In our experience and from the experiences described by our interviewees, we found that a lot of students prefer to focus on their own work as opposed to 'the show' itself. This might come down to the short time between final hand-in and the installation of the degree show. Although a lot of courses start thinking about the show at the beginning of the final term, because these shows are not part of the curriculum (they are usually ungraded) such events can often be considered as an afterthought – 'The priority for students is getting the work in, and getting the degree. The summer shows are an after thing' (Clark, 2015). Although the work that is

showcased is always to a high standard, the quality of exhibition design can vary between shows. Again, this is generally thought to be due to the lack of time between hand-in and installation.

Due to this quick turnaround and because it tends to be ungraded, a varying level of engagement occurs at different colleges, between diverse courses. If there is a group of students that want to immerse themselves in their show, then of course it should happen and the college can play a supporting role. But when that engagement wavers, the college and course can have a more involved role. When we spoke to Katy Oswald, Associate Lecturer at LCC, about how involved students have been in the past, she responded 'I think they should be involved but it's something you can't force' (2015). During the course of these interviews, it became apparent that the students are not expected to take on the responsibility of these shows by themselves, especially as they occur at an already stressful time of year. We also discovered that sticking with the same format every year could, potentially, discourage student involvement. At the same time, the opportunity for student initiative and influence should be present and clear. Katy suggested: 'If it was part of their curriculum, that might be easier, and then by the time it got to the last term you might end up with a steering committee and everybody would be more involved in their own work at least' (2015).

The future of degree shows

The future form and function of degree shows is unclear, given that they have evolved beyond being a basic student showcase. The concept of them becoming more like a festival — which Alice spoke to us about — is quite promising, as degree shows are already quite successful in their current format, even if the purpose of the shows varies. Kellie Bryson, LCC's Communications Manager said: 'I think we will work towards being more focused about what it is, because I do think it can't always be a party' (2015).

We believe that degree shows and the learning curve that they involve could be used to the college's advantage if they were more closely connected to the student's educational experience. The festival concept might also be extended into something more inclusive of local communities and the art and design world.

Conclusion

Our stakeholders agreed that the degree shows are an important part of creative education, even when they did not agree on what the primary function of these events is. The attention such showcases receive is more than one would expect, considering that this element is not always part of the curriculum or formally assessed. Degree shows present the opportunity for students to gain invaluable experience working in an exhibition context.

Student ideas relating to these shows vary from year to year and course to course. Some students feel the need to engage fully with the degree show, as if it were a self-contained project. One could argue that it is the first 'live' or 'real world' project many students encounter, yet some students are happy to hand-in work, take a step back and let the staff do the work. Unless it becomes part of the curriculum this will always be true of degree shows. The process through which degree shows are organised and run might well be improved through mutual reflection and improved communication between staff and students.

We have compiled a set of guidelines based upon from our project findings, aimed to encourage students to consider their shows more carefully, beyond the one-off party at the private view.

Student degree show tips

- Make your work look professional.
- Think about the longevity of any social media platforms you use.
- Use your college's social media to your advantage. Let them help you raise your profile.
- Consider the other shows around yours.
- Always consider the best and worst case scenarios.
- Know your roles and responsibilities.
- Don't let it impact your coursework.
- Organise yourselves. Know what work is going where. Have it ready to install the week before.
- If you want something, ask: beg, borrow and steal if you have to.
- Don't worry: it *will* work out in the end.

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Biographies

Rachel Littlewood and *Sean Wyatt-Livesley* graduated from BA (Hons.) Design for Graphic Communication at LCC in July 2015. They are currently freelancing in the graphic design industry.