THE POP-UP CAMPUS: A UNIQUE LEARNING EXPERIENCE THAT BRINGS BUSINESS AND DESIGN STUDENTS TOGETHER TO SOLVE COMPLEX COLLABORATIVE CHALLENGES

Donna K. Kidwell 1, Bjørn Tore Flåten2, Erik Arntsen2, Berit Lindquister3

1 The University of Texas System* (UNITED STATES)
2 University of Agder (NORWAY)
3 The Oslo School of Architecture and Design (NORWAY)

Abstract

Since 2014, the University of Agder (UIA) and The Oslo School of Architecture and Design (AHO) have gathered together in the small city of Risør, Norway, to create a unique learning experience for Master’s students from both universities: the Pop-Up Campus. This paper will explore the Pop-Up Campus model: a creative learning experience that blends entrepreneurship, design thinking, and regional development. The Pop-Up Campus has created new opportunities for learners, local businesses, the community of Risør, and both of the participating universities.

Our paper will explore the lessons learned over three years of the Pop-Up Campus. We will discuss the experiences and reflections of the students, the faculty, and the companies that they helped. We will discuss what worked, what did not, and what might be enhanced in future instances of the Pop-Up Campus.

Keywords: entrepreneurial education, design thinking, team based learning, regional innovation, explorative pedagogy.

1 INTRODUCTION

The small and beautiful coastal city of Risør is called “The White City”, due to its traditional white wooden architecture. It is widely known as a place for artists and designers and has a long and exciting maritime history. Risør is a vibrant and attractive place in the summer. But as lively as it is during the hot summer season, it is dead and dark in the wintertime. The tourists are gone and so are the jobs. Not unlike many other rural small places, Risør has a demographic gap, missing the future generation aged 19 – 35 years, who have left and moved to bigger places for studies or work. Faced with this challenge, the city authorities contacted the University of Agder and the Oslo School of Architecture and Design to consider possibilities of running Higher Education activities locally. In 2014, this challenge was addressed in the first Pop-Up Campus, which ran again in 2015 and 2016 and is planned for 2017.

The Pop-up Campus Innovation through Design and Entrepreneurship, links together Subjects (Design and Entrepreneurship), two Universities (UIA and AHO), staff members from different Faculties (Technology, Design, Economy), urban and rural areas, municipalities and industries, new and established companies. Last but not least, it brings together 40 young people from 16 different nations with different cultural and social backgrounds, focusing on innovation and development of sustainable concepts and future solutions.

The Pop-Up Campus brings together two unusual collaborators: a business school (UIA) and a design school (AHO). Risør hosts the experience, bringing an influx of university students to a region that does not have a university, and inviting them to solve challenges facing local firms. The learning experience focuses in design thinking, with the recognition that students entering the work force are increasingly asked to be problem solvers in complex and ill-structured situations. Business schools have recognized design thinking as a pedagogy that combines analytic reasoning with a more exploratory skill set. [1] “Design thinking is an iterative, explorative process involving visualizing, experimenting, creating, and prototyping of models, and gathering feedback.”[2].

The students experience a hybrid pedagogical design. They work prior to the Pop-Up at their home universities, join together for a weeklong team based Pop-Up experience, and follow up the week by...
analyzing and reflecting on their experience. Professors from both universities guide the students and act as mentors with probing questions to help the students deepen their inquiry and exploration. They ensure that the students push through any roadblocks they may encounter.

The students are grouped in inter-institutional teams, with a combination of Master of Science in Business Administration (MSc) and Master in Design students on each team. The culture and learning experiences from the two campuses are quite distinct. MSc students, from UiA, have been trained in business modeling, financial analysis, and market analysis. They use state-of-the-art tools and methodologies such as Alex Osterwalder's "Business Model Canvas" [3]. These students have an approach to business modeling that focuses on financial sustainability and viability, as without these, a business venture will not be able to achieve its goals.

The design students, from AHO, have been working with user-centric approaches and leveraging design-thinking methodologies. For these students, the human element of the project starts first, as any solution to a challenge must be driven from a deep understanding of the needs and situation of its users, both for end users and in a business-to-business context. These two lenses provide an unusual context for the student teams. Students learn to value and respect the lens of each other.

2 METHODOLOGY

Our methodology considered the observations of the participating faculty and their partners in the Risør community across the three Pop-Up Campus events. These were discussed against the backdrop of anonymized student reflection papers. As part of the Pop-Up experience, students were asked to submit reflection papers on their experience. Students were given considerable freedom in their approach to these reflection papers, and as such, the papers varied in approach and discourse. The faculty considered these reflections for emergent patterns and recommendations from the students.

3 RESULTS

They students typically chose to reflect on themes of: the challenges of fast acting team based work in highly divergent teams; the challenge of learning to work effectively with local firms in a short period of time; and the challenge of bridging the cognitive distance between the business and design methodologies taught in the two different institutions.

3.1 The Challenges of Fast Acting Team Based Work

Many of the students found that it was challenging to create highly functioning teams in a very short window.

One student remarked that the first three days were very difficult, but stated that

“... I was amazed of the working spirit that the entire team showed during the last day prior to the presentation, and I learned that things doesn’t have to be done in my pace or my way in order for the result to be satisfactory.” (Student 6550)

Other students noted that they needed to remain agile and attentive in their teams.

“I also learned that you have to stay “light on your feet” when working in cross disciplinary groups. One must try to not get attached to any one idea, but be able to play equally well with them all.” (Student 6544)

3.2 The Challenges of Working with Local Firms

The students appreciated the opportunity to work on a project that had clear potential to impact a community.

One team was given a challenge related to finding homes for refugees throughout Norway. A team member reflected:

“… I loved the topic was given to us as I thought there was much to be done and the problem itself is for betterment of entire system and right now it is very critical for Norwegian society, plus feeling of creating a system that will bring better and smart solutions to victims had nice impact in my heart at least.” (Student 6546)
All of the student teams challenged the firms. Indeed, some teams even reframed the underlying inquiry and suggested new strategies that highly exceeded expectations from the business itself.

### 3.3 The Challenges Bridging Cognitive Distance Between Business and Design Methodologies

Some students expressed tension between the two primary approaches and methodologies: business versus design.

#### 3.3.1 Approach Considerations:

The students consistently found that the two different approaches led to tension, and sometimes disagreements, within the teams. One student humorously stated that at first they did not understand the difference between the business and design students, but that as soon as they started brainstorming, it was obvious:

> “Three students were using permanent markers on paper sheets, and two students sat with their respective Macs. Not necessary to state who’s who.” (Student 6543)

This student found that while the two ‘camps’ often had different understandings of a concept, the ultimate collaboration was very good.

Another observed that:

> “On one side, the design students wanted us to market, budget and so on before we even knew what our product/service or concept was. And if we worked on a business plan for one concept, and thought we were really going somewhere, the designer had already ditched that concept and moved on to 5 different ones.” (Student 6542)

While the business students where diligently moving through the business model and sustainability of a single idea, the design students where rapidly prototyping many ideas to see what variations were possible. One student was used to working deeply on one idea, “the more you work one something the better it gets”, found the “kill all our babies and start all over again” approach to be quite strange.

Ultimately the team came together, and they acknowledged that they had been exposed to an entirely different problem solving approach.

Student 6553 also reflected on the difference of approach between design and business students. They articulated that management students approach the problem with the theories they learned, while the design students brought talents they did not have: visual ideation, narratives to capture the audience, technical skills with visual design tools, and an attention to issues like a ‘customer journey’ as opposed to the policy and financial framework of the business at hand.

#### 3.3.2 Presentation Considerations:

The students encountered tensions between the level of effort required to articulate important financial and business modeling alongside expressing a compelling design narrative. One student (6546) expressed an underlying debate on which was more compelling for the final product: design or a compelling business case?

Student 6551 found the brainstorming between the teams very productive up until the presentation, where they found the challenge of creating a compelling presentation to be very difficult. They expressed “from this day, I have a new perspective of how exhausting team work can be.”

### 4 CONCLUSIONS

The faculty and students enjoyed the various challenges and opportunities presented in the context of the Pop-Up Campus.

The teams consistently found that the cultural differences in approaches and methodologies led to tensions. As faculty, we look forward to creating new learning activities that could be used prior to the weeklong session to help socialize the thinking between cohorts. We are considering online approaches and activities to allow the teams more time to consider the mindset and frameworks from their colleagues in the other institution. This may also help to alleviate some of the time pressures felt by the teams during their intense week together.
The students and faculty alike found that the firms did not know what to expect from these unusual teams. Future versions of the Pop-Up Campus could include more distinct preparation for the firms, to help both set expectations and to accelerate the knowledge transfer process between the firms and the student teams.

We also suggest that future work could explore the potential of the Pop-Up Campus to bring the innovation, enthusiasm and creative problem solving skills of students to areas that do not have access to university resources.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The authors would like to graciously thank Kamilla Solheim and the community in Risør for their incredibly hard work, enthusiasm and innovative energy in supporting the Pop-Up Campus.

REFERENCES

