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A service design course at ELISAVA School of Design: some highlights and reflections

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Abstract

This position paper describes and analyses the Service design and innovation course taught at ELISAVA School of Design, Barcelona, Spain.

The Service design and innovation course is mandatory and tailored to the 4th year design students (last year students); and spreads over the first 10 weeks of their academic year.

ELISAVA

Founded in 1961 and located in Barcelona, ELISAVA is the leading design school for innovative, creative, cross-disciplinary training and research in the field of design in Spain.

ELISAVA is closely aligned with the professional world and it works extensively with companies, institutions and universities at local, national and international levels.

ELISAVA is a learning centre affiliated to Universitat Pompeu Fabra (UPF), which offers official undergraduate programmes in design, engineering building and engineering in industrial design (within the ESHE framework). The degree in design involves four years of full-time education. ELISAVA also provides graduate programmes, including Spain's first official master's degree in design & communication, as well as specialist design courses for professionals and companies.

Currently there are ca. 1500 undergraduate students and 500 graduate students enrolled.

Basic structure of the degree in design

The degree in design comprises four years of full-time education. After completing the 2nd year the students are entitled to choose the pathway that best suits their interests; this pathway will lead their remaining two years of degree.

ELISAVA offers the following design pathways:

- » graphic and interaction design,
- » product design,
- » interior and furniture design.

Within the chosen pathway, the students need to take a set of mandatory courses associated with their interest. These courses are mainly process-orientated and are normally based in a standard project structure - moving from briefing to realization; but there are also other more general mandatory courses such as sociology and economics, which altogether can be combined with a broad set of optional courses.

The service design course

The “Service Design and Innovation” (SDI) is a mandatory course for all 4th year students at ELISAVA. It differs from the rest of mandatory project-oriented courses in the sense that it is a course in which all students work together in multidisciplinary teams - in this way, and after a year working in their own “new” discipline they converge again to be confronted with different project approaches and ways of thinking.

SDI objectives

- » To introduce students with design-driven innovation.
- » To enable students to build experience with the design of the intangibles - services and experiences.
- » To provide students with a set of techniques, which will enable them to discover new user needs and business opportunities as well as it will aid them when conceptualising and prototype new services.
- » To let students collaborate, work together and find common ground across different design disciplines.

Instructional load and logistics

The total instructional load is 60 hours distributed in 10 weeks, the hours are allocated as follows:

- » 20 hours for lectures,
- » 30 hours for workshops
- » 10 hours for mentoring.

In 2008-2009 most theoretical lectures were gathered in the first 5 weeks of the course.

In order to fulfil the assignment the students are also expected to work on this project outside class time. The course has a duration of 10 weeks for instruction and mentoring + 1 week for self-study. On the 12th week the students present their projects and deliver a folder which includes the required partial deliverables and the final outcome.

In 2008-2009 we had 130 4th year students. These students were first divided in 2 big groups of 65 students for the theory lectures and 6 smaller groups of ca. 21 or 22 students for the workshops. Each of latter groups was subdivided in three-people teams and an occasional four-person team. The team members were chosen by a random process allocating students from different disciplines to each group.

Lecturers

Four lecturers were involved in this project, three of them also functioned as workshop facilitators and team mentors. The lecturers' backgrounds are: graphic design, human-computer interaction, design engineering and business.

Main theme and assignment

Every year the course is structured around a main theme. For the 2008-2009 we chose *Financial services for the youth* as the main theme. The assignment was to envision, conceptualise, prototype and specify an innovative financial service for people in the age range 14-25.

“la Caixa” collaborated with us on this project. “la Caixa” is Europe’s largest savings bank and has its headquarters in Barcelona. “la Caixa” functioned as a real client providing business goals, real constraints, context and an institutional framework.

Topics covered

The theoretical classes covered the following topics.

- » Innovation models: from ideas to value; institutional culture; closed vs. open innovation. Review of case studies.
- » Design thinking: *abductional* reasoning; design as transformation; design-driven innovation and strategy; design as a cosmetic factor vs. design as an strategic factor.
- » Service design essentials: from designing things to designing the user experience, human-centered innovation. Users, context and companies. Values.
- » User experience: moving from discovery to implementation; customer journeys; touch points; needs, wants and abilities; dimensions of user experience.
- » User research and modelling: qualitative and quantitative user research methods; different uses of user models.
- » Presentation techniques: crafting a story, storytelling, visualisation, tips and tricks.

The lectures were complemented with self-study and class discussion of bibliography (included below).

Workshops topics and techniques

The workshops were structured around topics techniques that students could use in that moment of the evolution of the project.

- » Discovering the company: understanding a service design brief; stakeholders; designing for different company cultures and contexts. Benchmark: measure the company against its competitors (in a broad sense).
- » Interviewing and observing: types of interviews, contextual inquiry, probes, finding meaning. Designing with users, co-discovery and validation.
- » Idea generation, selection and concept refinement; affinity diagrams and other visual thinking tools.
- » Modelling users: personas and scenarios; mapping mental models.
- » Prototyping: from abstract to concrete; prototyping for different uses and different targets.

Students could draw upon knowledge built during earlier courses such as sociology, anthropology, prototyping, user and interaction modelling and design management.

Results

Each team produced a multilayered final deliverable consisting of

- » a presentation (audiovisual or power point) describing the user experience and the value proposition.
- » an executive summary highlighting the main features of the service
- » a report that contained intermediate deliverables, the final service specification and a chapter reflecting on the work process.

For the final deliverable, the students compile and review partial deliverables that are submitted for evaluation during de project.

Lessons learnt

We are consolidating the course curriculum around designerly activities: this course used to be too focused on management and business issues and too little on design.

We want our students to be able to talk to and understand CEOs and management, we want our students to be able to find common ground and understand how their work fits in a bigger context, and even lead the corporate strategy, but we don't want them to become management executives.

The issue that still needs quite a bit of fine-tuning is the planning of theoretical lectures and workshops, there is still a lot of room for improvement as they sometimes do not match the evolution of the project.

Having a real company as "the client" has been a major improvement over previous academic years; a real client gives the assignment extra credibility, which motivates the students even more.

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