

eSTeEM project leader, Nicole Lotz, shares her thoughts from the Digital Design Learning Conference 2017, which took place on December 14-15, in Cologne, Germany.

## Food for thought

The conference dinner was held in the school's own 'Food lab' by a team of academics and students at KISD – Köln International School of Design. The lab is designed to do social experiments, in which food becomes the mediator of conversations and the lab a space for co-creation of products and services. The conversations that emerged at the table set the scene for a themes that could be picked up in the follow day's conference: social learning, the role of the university in learning and analogue and digital blend of learning.

## Social learning environments in design education

Just before the 2017 Christmas break, KISD had organized a conference on Digital Design Learning to celebrate an achievement. The school has been developing their blended learning offerings for 10 years now. Following the motto: 'Designers build their own tools' the faculty started to adopt a blog environment to blend online and face-to-face learning, and has developed it into a well-used social learning environment called KISDspaces [<https://kisd.de/kisd/spaces/>in German, and <https://vimeo.com/228662963>in English].

Simply put, the environment offers information on what students and staff currently do or have done (e.g. design projects and dissertations). It also offers an overview of events and resources that are available to them, such as labs or academic writing surgeries. Following the flat hierarchy of the school's structure, both, staff and students can create project spaces. Project spaces present an overview of the design projects students currently work on in their Studios. Students at KISD always work collaboratively in teams of mixed levels of study and expertise. Projects will be achieved once the project is finished.

Building on the success of the tool to support blended collaborative learning at the design school, the environment is now adopted in other faculties and schools across the university and aims to be made opens source in the future.

The Technical University in Potsdam has developed a very similar space called INCOM [<https://fhp.incom.org>] which already is open source. It is very similar to KISDspaces in that it concentrates on presenting the designers and their projects, but in comparison it lacks a collection of resources like an online library or academic writing resource.

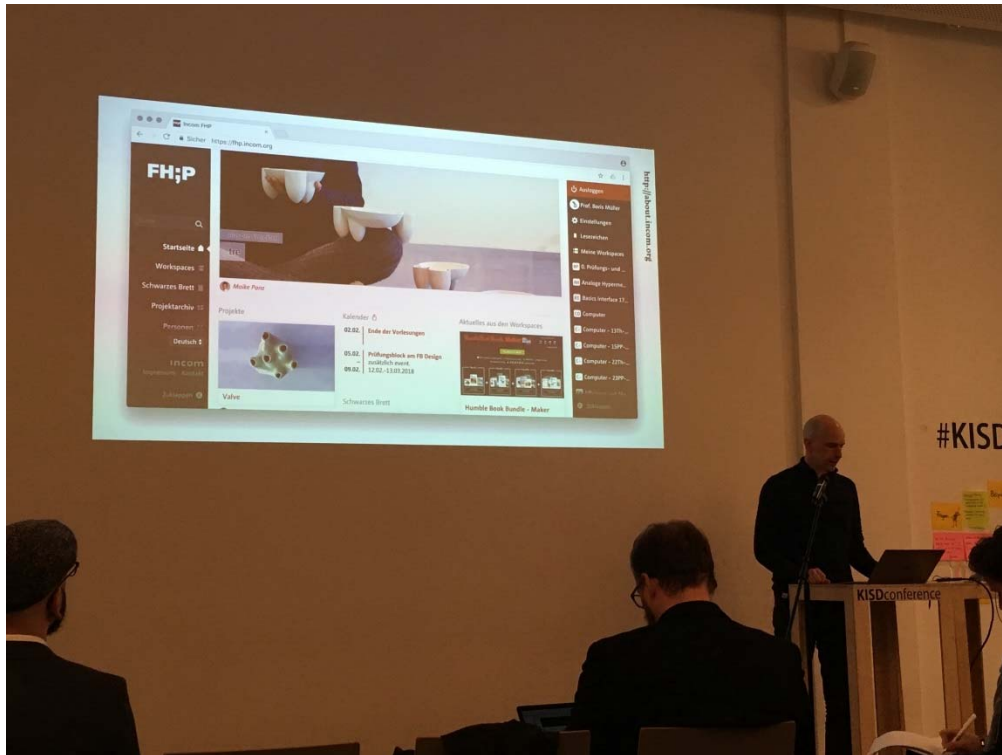


Image: Digital Design Learning Conference 2017 session; Nicole Lotz.

The main insight the academics reported on gaining in the development of these social learning environments was the effective use of co-creation approaches. Students became active participants in the conception and development of the tool. 'Designers design their own tools'. The presenters of KISDspaces and INCOM agreed that if you give agency to co-create a social learning environment, then it is more likely this space is going to be used and evangelized by the co-creators.

Prof. Boris Müller beautifully highlighted the benefits of their open source social learning environment. INCOM creates a sense of community to show 'this is us'. This social environment can be used to co-create an image of a group or school constructed by the project work the design students choose to show. The image is then communicated to external stakeholders and the general public. Project pages and design student profiles are a mirror of the culture and identity of an institution. They create not only a community but offer a source of networks beyond the degree.

### Perseverance and progression – the role of the university

In the increasing digitization of higher education and with private online learning offering springing up everywhere, the role of the university as a place for learning was fiercely debated. Shifting, swaying, travelling getting lost and ending up at a place not imagined before where metaphors for university learning that contrasted the current trend of a very linear and clearly goal-oriented role of the modern university degree. Students merely 'buy' degrees whose sole value is that of a job in industry after completion.

There is a stark difference in the kinds of motivations this new trend seems to produce. Extrinsic motivations dominate a university student's actions, rather than intrinsic one. This short term thinking

leads to a loss of perseverance to accomplish difficult learning goals and progress despite the odds.

The university needs to allow students to find their own ways to become critical, reflective and responsible citizen, which is more and more neglected in favour of a straight and easy path to a degree. But especially design education should set learners on such a path of exploration and discovery. Design actions have real world consequences. A design student should be allowed to take action and evaluate their impact in a safe space, that of the university. Through a partially guided trial and error process, students will find ways to change current situations to preferred futures that benefit all of society. And for this complex learning to happen, student have to struggle, they have to make mistakes, because we learn best when we fail. Design students should engage in difficult, empathetic, deep and long conversations. Bit-size chunks of information and content that dominate digital media need to be contextualized by conversations with a university academic, and some said, preferably face to face. This is creating intrinsically motivated learners, which was recognized as the key to retention in digital design learning.

## The perfect blend of digital and analogue

While some universities move further and further away from a blend of remote and face-to-face teaching towards sole online learning, other universities in Europe and the USA seem to get the mix right. Prof. Claudia Roeschmann, Director of the blended MFA programme in Design at the Texas State University highlighted that Design is taught in hybrid learning environments in which learners can choose their own blend. Some students attend more face-to-face weekend courses than others. Weekend intensive events such as 'Creatons' and 'Hackatons' are employed to develop skills and competency in book design, typography or team project work, which are difficult to teach at a distance.

The audience joined this debate on blending digital and analogue designing, questioning whether design could be taught at a distance. Digital media change our perception and cognition, which has effects on designing and the designs argued Prof. Oliver Wrede, FH Aachen. Key to the discussion was how to give helpful critique of a design without being misunderstood through mediated conversations. At the end a dichotomy between digital and analogue designing and design learning was deemed unhelpful, as you simply 'have to learn to understand the medium'. However, the technologies that facilitate digital conversations move on so quickly that it is difficult to learn the language of the medium to properly support learning through mediated conversations. For this reason, face-to-face conversations were still considered core to design learning. Design learners are asked to make judgements with real world consequences, but if the context for making judgement is unclear (clarification would happen in a conversation), a greater insight cannot be gained and reapplied in similar future situations, and learning might be lost. This closed the loop to the first presentation by Prof. Dr. Gerhard M. Buurman, Hochschule Pforzheim who stunned us with the argument for more analogue design conversations for teaching digital design learning.

See all tweets from the day at #KISDddl [<https://twitter.com/search?q=KISDddl&src=typd>]