AC 2007-721: PROJECT MANAGEMENT THROUGH EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING

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Prior to teaching, Peter worked in animation and interactive production being involved in all areas of digital media including visualization, multimedia, and web development. His job titles have varied from animator, project manager, multimedia programmer and web developer. His main role has always been to bridge the gap between design and technology. He has worked with industrial, corporate and education clients including: Compaq, Ford, Daimler Chrysler, VW, Delphia, Siemens, and QWEST.

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Project Management through Experiential Learning

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Abstract

Classroom-based projects are insufficient, in of themselves, when preparing students for positions in the digital media field today. David Kolb and Roger Fry argue that effective learning entails the possession of four different abilities: concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization and active experimentation.[2] Encouraging students to participate in community-based projects outside the classroom can help build the necessary skill sets in learning how to work in a real-world environment. Community-based learning teaches the student on three distinct levels: intellectually, socially, and emotionally including feelings, values, and meanings. Digital Media students should involve themselves in community projects to exercise their skills and broaden their experience. Working on community-based projects allows them to build their portfolio while affording the opportunity to start working under the constraints of actual projects with timelines and budgets. Students learn what an individual's time is worth, what mistakes can cost, and how to deal with a client. Students also learn how to manage a real world project with deadlines. This paper describes our approach in having students come together to enhance their digital media skills by contributing in the development of a community-based animation festival. This paper also addresses how students learned to plan and manage a festival event while working with a community-based organization.

Introduction

In the fall of 2004 we wrote a collaborative grant submitted to the University of Kentucky for a program entitled "Appalachian Ideas Network". This grant was established with funding from the Appalachian Regional Commission (ARC) to enable universities in the Appalachian region to develop programs in social entrepreneurship. Our intent for this project was threefold. First, we wanted to develop a project that enabled the university and local artistic community to join forces such that the unique skill sets of each group would be recognized and enhanced. Secondly, we wanted the university students to gain hands-on project management experience; learning how to plan, organize, and communicate with a diverse group of individuals. For students in digital media, the opportunity to participate in the preparation and management of a community event with critical deadlines and stringent budgets would provide an invaluable learning experience. Finally, we were pursuing a project that would be self-sustainable, contribute to the economic growth of the region, grow in reputation and provide a platform where future participants could learn from their predecessors and enhance the offering on a yearly basis.

Our university has gained a regional reputation, and growing national recognition, for its digital media program. Creative works developed in digital media are not the traditionally recognized fine art forms (i.e. watercolor, sculpture, lithography, etc.) but are presented in the form of digital animation, digital video, web design and multimedia. Because of the growing reputation of our program and unique nature of the media, we decided to establish an animation festival that would run annually. The animation festival focused on promoting high quality, family-oriented short animations produced by independent animators, commercial studios and students.

To jump-start the animation festival we initiated contact with an existing music and arts festival which had been operating on an annual basis for the past decade. In allying ourselves with an established cultural event, we were guaranteed an audience already involved in the arts. University faculty met with downtown district artists and business leaders to propose the inclusion of a university led animation festival as a new component of the community-based event. The animation festival would consist of a juried competition with submissions solicited from around the world. A student-based team with academic production skills in digital media technology would provide the manpower for needed operations and act as the liaison, interfacing with festival committee members.

The strategy to support this animation festival has evolved from enlisting help from the student-based Digital Media club to working with a small group of student volunteers. In each case, the organization or student team that worked on the project received no academic credit for their work beyond enhancement of their resume. Initial enthusiasm was high but tended to decline as the time for finishing the project extended beyond the current semester and other activities or demands competed for the students' participation. This year, students will receive academic credit, as well as a stipend for working on the team, to facilitate the festival planning, implementation and assessment (funded through a different grant).

The Project

The basic structure of the animation program consists of a juried competition focused on promoting content that targets youth-oriented audiences. The festival accepts animations with mild violence, nudity, or language, but will not accept animations that are excessively violent or obscene. The festival accepts animated shorts from artists of all skill levels solicited nationally and internationally with the following guidelines:

- o Medium: any form of digital or traditional animation.
- o Run Time: Maximum of 10 minutes, including credits.
- o Format: QuickTime or AVI file at 720x480 (progressive preferred)
- o Entry fee: Non-refundable $25.00 (US) per student animation or $35.00 (US) per independent or professional animation.
- o Deadline: Entries must be received by May 1.
- o Submissions: Must be completely animated. No demo reels or work in progress.

All of the entries are exhibited at the annual community festival in various downtown galleries. Animated programs created specifically for children are exhibited at the regional Hands-On Children's Museum. Winning entries are selected by notable representatives from the animation industry. The local community is further engaged by having children participate as jurors for a special "Children's Choice" award. Winners receive cash prizes in specific categories. Participation in the competition requires an entry fee. As the festival grows, these fees will be used to fund the prizes, pay jurors an honorarium for judging the competition, and cover other expenses associated with the festival. The competition, currently funded through grants, has a goal of making it self-sustaining within five years**.**

Managing the Festival

Students begin working on the festival in the fall semester. Initially meetings with the Animation Festival Committee members occur once a month; as the festival date approaches, the frequency increases to once a week. Students also meet with the Downtown Arts and Music Festival Committee once a month to coordinate the animation festival with the main arts and music event.

During the development phase of the first animation festival no one amongst the student volunteers had any competition planning experience. Students researched national festivals to identify such details as: entrance fees and competition guidelines, category designations, marketing plans and a mission statement. Partnering with a regionally recognized arts and music festival helped initiate promotional announcements. The public event also provided a gauge for determining a schedule. Working backwards from the dates of the arts and music festival, the students outlined a timeline of their own; calculating deadlines for everything from submission dates to judging, voting and promoting the contest.

Due to constraints on time and financial resources the students produced the necessary marketing material. Another schedule was required in order to deliver the material in a timely fashion for use as publicity. Promotional material and development of key literature, as well as the design and launch of an interactive website, were critical to the success of marketing the animation festival.
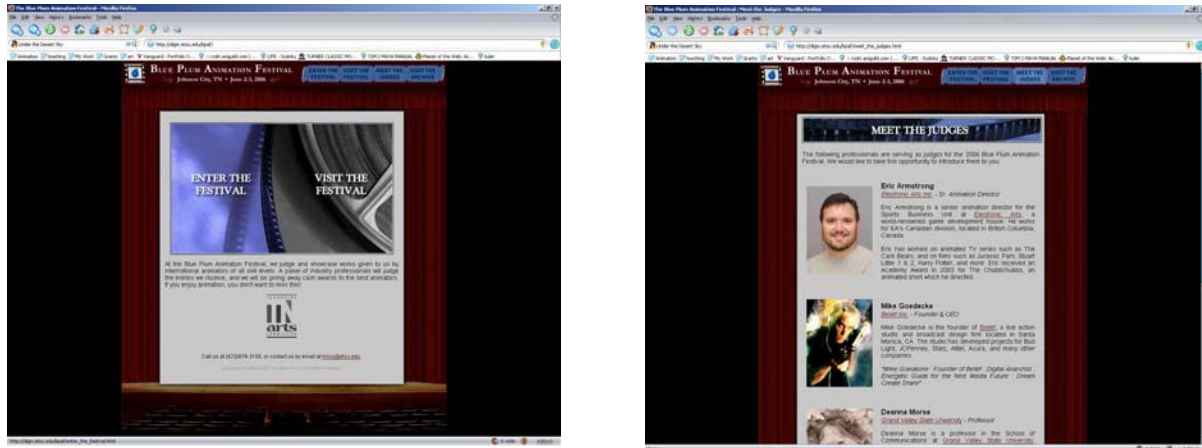
Image 1

An announcement in the form of a postcard (see image 1) was sent to approximately one hundred colleges and universities offering a concentration in animation. The student planners were provided with information about festival activities and asked to create marketing material for the competition, addressing criteria for submissions into the festival. The students realized these cards needed to be sent out early enough in the year so potential participants would have enough time to put together an animation entry. Once completed the postcard designs were evaluated by members of the Animation Festival Committee as well as the Downtown Arts and Music Festival Committee.

"By presenting the work to other people and receiving comments and then revising the work I got a sense what a business project may be like."
–Student Participant

Students not only realized how to pull together the design under the scrutiny of a committee of clients, they also learned to produce a product with a specific delivery time and which was crucial for publicizing the event.

Image 3

Another marketing initiative is provided through the design and development of the Animation Festival Website (see image 3). Student volunteers administer this key communication forum with very minimal management intervention by the faculty committee members. Faculty members serve as mentors only on this part of the project, allowing the students to manage, design, and implement the website themselves. This encourages the students to develop their entrepreneurial skills in time management, administration, self-motivation, and marketing.

In review of other recognized festivals (Ottwa International Animation Festival, Kalamazoo Animation Festival International) the Animation Festival Committee decided the festival's entries should be reviewed by a panel of professionals selected from the animation community. Scores are based on criteria of artistic merit, story, and technical proficiency. Accepted submissions are ranked by score and a cash prize is awarded for the animation that receives the highest score in each of the following categories:

- Animations by Student Animators
- Animations by Independent Animators
- Animations by Professional Animators

In addition, a Critic's Choice Award is presented to the animation that achieves the highest tally overall.

Judges were identified and selected based on professional notoriety and availability. The student teams contacted individuals through email or, when possible, by phone. This task also had a critical deadline so participating judges could be announced for promotional appeal in garnering interested participants. Some individuals declined the invitation to judge. The student volunteers had to cope with rejection and resolve another source.

Image 4

As previously stated, the Animation Festival is especially geared to content targeting a youth-oriented audience. From the upstart we decided to have the local community engage in identifying award-worthy animation entries including a special "Children's Choice" merit. To accomplish this, we solicit help from children at the local Hands-On-Museum; their involvement is encouraged in the judging process. The student team designed a coloring page ballot system for participating youngsters. Children cast their vote by coloring their favorite animation and placing the page into the ballot box. (see image 4)

> "Project management and event management are very critical skills to have. You need to know how to follow something through from beginning to end, and you also need to know how to operate an event that will be attended by the public. It takes practice. Marketing is also a large part of what we do. Most of the work comes from managing the festival and making it a reality - it's more of a practice in business than anything else.
>
> Technical skills are also important, such as experience with video, Web design, and graphic design. These come hand-in-hand with the need to market the festival through print and on the Web. An understanding of animation is also important, and someone on the committee needs to know a lot about video so we can compile the DVD's." –Student Participant

Managing the very first animation festival was a big endeavor for the student initiates; not only did they learn to focus their technical skills in developing marketing material but also gained experience planning, managing, and promoting a community event. Succeeding student volunteers continue to benefit from the experience, grasping the significance of scheduling and deadline commitments. We often practice the creation of self-promotional portfolio material in the confines of the classroom but never get to actualize the intensity of real-world time constraints. Students involved in this project gain skills in production management, development and most importantly comprehend the reality of a deadline.

Teamwork

> "For me the benefit was the experience of working in a team environment and getting to work on a project that was neither class related or personal. Plus it looks good on a resume I think." –Student Participant

> "Yeah, being able to work in a team environment was very beneficial in the experience acquired. Working with Eric was interesting due to our different work styles and ideas and having to find a suitable compromise between us. Much like it would be in a work environment."
> –Student Participant

Teamwork is a key element behind successful development and rapid implementation of innovative project solutions. Its role has been proven in carrying out a number of organizational tasks [4]. To successfully deliver an animation festival the students needed to work as a team, delivering a product at the end, an animation festival. This was a new experience for many of the students.

> "This is a real-world project, not a simple class assignment that will never see the light of day. Its depth also sets it apart - it takes an entire year of work, and it encompasses a wide variety of skills in business, marketing, project management, and technical production. It would be difficult, if not impossible, to find a class that brings all of those things together."
> –Student Participant

Projects within each academic discipline are generally inwardly focused, and students are not challenged to work collaboratively with others. Each student team member always worked on their assignments individually and up to this time in their academic career had not worked on a team project.

> "Everyone on the committee brings their own ideas to the table, and we have all worked together to implement them. We have also been dividing tasks, and we are responsible for individual parts of the project. This is definitely a team effort - we have all had to work together to make it a success." –Student Participant

Appreciation of team diversity is commonplace in industry settings where team members from diverse functional responsibilities work together on developing solutions to problems. Many times these teams develop unique solutions that would not be realized if teams were more functionally homogenous. Students also learn and practice project planning and facilitation, goals projection, budget management, collaboration and coordination with members of the professional community. They work on the project from beginning to end over a 9-12 month period, and our involved in project evaluation and planning for future sustainability of the event. Most classes do not include students from multiple disciplines, so even when projects such as this are simulated in a classroom, it is rare that students are able to work with the entire skill set that an interdisciplinary team can deliver. Industry recruiters have repeatedly stressed a desire for students to have team project development experiences before they graduate. This project does this, and makes it "real world." This is a definite advantage to the participating students as they seek employment after graduation.

Conclusion

> "Overall I really enjoyed being involved in something that is city wide and outside of the class format. I do regret that I won't be back next year to do it again, because it was a learning experience and one that I would do a little differently if given a chance to do it again." –Student Participant

The development of meaningful hands-on experiential learning projects for undergraduate students is difficult for most university professors and is further complicated when students are required to interface with non-university personnel. It is this interaction with the "real world", however, that creates some of the most meaningful learning experiences.

> "It has been a very positive experience, and I'm glad I took the initiative and participated. There are some negative points, the most crucial being the workload. Although it's spread out, in May it gets fairly hectic, and it does take up a lot of time during the year. At times I've found it difficult to balance all of my projects, but it was well worth it." –Student Participant

Recognition of faculty and students participating in the animation festival is critical to the long-term success of project. This year we will reward student's participation by creating a paid internship and provide course credit for working on the festival.

> "This has been a great experience and it's a very positive addition to a resume. It has taught me a lot and it allows me to demonstrate many valuable qualities, such as teamwork (being on a committee), dedication (working outside of class on a year-long project), and project management (helping to organize the event). It also represents a good community service project, and entrepreneurship in my case, since I was a founding member. It was well worth the extra work. If you want to get something out of college, you have to put something in." –Student Participant

Training students through experiential learning teaches students to build the necessary skill sets in preparing them for the working world. Working on the animation festival allowed the student teams to build their portfolio while affording them an opportunity to work with others under the constraints of an actual project with a timeline and budget. Students learned what an individual's time is worth, what mistakes can cost, and how to deal with a client, and appreciate the value of deadlines.

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