

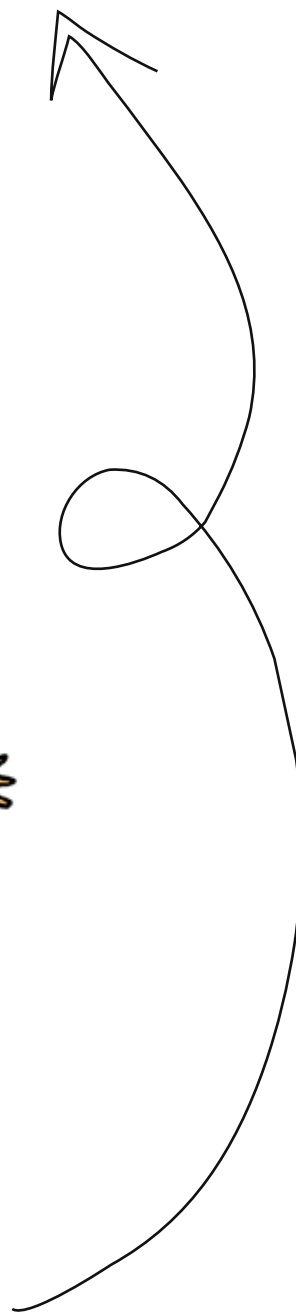
# CREATIVE COLLABORATION

A REPORT FROM CREATIVE REVIEW AND DROPBOX



A special report from Creative Review  
in partnership with Dropbox

# CREATIVE REVIEW



Introduction



Discussions around collaboration are often abstract, despite it being generally acknowledged that good collaboration can promote strong creativity and innovative thinking. Problems are solved and ideas flourish when talented teams combine forces. After all, together we know more.

Modern creative teams know all too well how important it is to create a culture that fosters the best environment for ideas to live and breathe naturally. Often though, we are so busy making the work, getting to the end output, that we overlook how we get there.

At Dropbox, we care about the ‘how’. We care about the process that facilitates strong collaborative behaviour because the output is arguably all the richer for it.

We embrace the brilliantly messy, organic, and explosive process that results from creative collaboration.

That’s why we launched Dropbox Paper – to make it easy and enjoyable to work in teams – liberating and nurturing the creativity and imagination of creative collaborators around the world.

We’ve also partnered with D&AD for this year’s New Blood Awards with a brief to help unleash the collaborative creative energy of the next generation of graphic designers.

And that’s why we’ve teamed up with Creative Review to surface fresh insight into the art of collaboration and its practical implementation in the creative industries. Together, we’ve asked leaders of creative businesses and educators how they see collaboration working in practice, why they value working together, and the positive outputs it can lead to. We hope you enjoy the read.

Collin Whitehead  
Head of Brand Studio, Dropbox

Dropbox

Welcome to our special report on creative collaboration, produced in partnership with Dropbox. The report investigates the importance of collaboration as a skill for designers, whether it is being effectively taught to students, what skills employers value in this area and what they would like to see from graduates. We have interviewed five leading academics from universities and educational establishments in the UK on the role that collaboration plays in the education of design students and the way in which those skills are being developed. To discover the relative importance of collaboration for design employers, we conducted a survey among CR’s community, asking employers to rate the skills that they value highest. And finally, we spoke to three employers, asking them what skills they look for in graduates and how they help develop collaboration at work.

Creative Review

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## Overview



“The notion of the lone designer is an old one,” says Joe McCullagh, Head of Design, Manchester School of Art, Manchester Metropolitan University.

He is not alone in his thinking. For this report, CR surveyed over 200 employers about their attitudes to collaboration in design, and over 96% of respondents stated that it was “very” or “fairly” important that design graduates could demonstrate collaboration skills.

Matthew Beardsell, Operations Director at Music cites the ability to work collaboratively as one of the top skills sought by the creative agency, and it is a need widely acknowledged by tutors. Dr Cathy Gale, Senior Lecturer and Level 5 Year Leader, BA (Hons) Graphic Design at Kingston University says collaboration is embedded into the course from the first year, while Tash Willcocks, Head of School at digital creative business school, Hyper Island says it is one of the company’s core methodologies.

While most graduates learn to welcome working in teams, this appreciation can take time. At the University of Suffolk’s School of Art, Design and Humanities, Nigel Ball, Senior Lecturer, Course Leader: BA (Hons) Graphic Design agrees that students are generally reluctant to work together on projects at first. But as he points out, “how you communicate the rationale for collaborative working is paramount

**“COLLABORATION  
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IDEAS”**

to getting the students onside, and ultimately, to the project’s success.” He cites clear structures in terms of the way in which collaborative groups are organised and the work is expected to progress, explicit explanation over what is expected from each student and the group in general in a collaborative scenario and continued support from staff as key enablers.

Equipping graduates with the skills for collaboration is a challenge acknowledged by employers. Beardsell says he understands the difficulty for universities and colleges to teach collaboration, particularly when countered by the intense competition for jobs, but he points out that, in the workplace, such learning takes place organically between team members. Stuart Radford, Executive Creative Director, at Superunion adds that it is something that comes with practice “and something many designers work actively at their whole careers”.

At Kingston University, Gale says a common complaint when students are learning to work together arises from the perceived unequal distribution of work. But the University has found a solution, aided by the Design Council’s Double Diamond model, by asking that every student designs a process book for each project. Developed by the Design Council in 2005, the Double Diamond breaks the design process down into four phases: Discover; Define;

Develop; Deliver. “Using the developmental stages of the Double Diamond, this research book illustrates the breadth and depth of a student’s contribution to a project,” Gale says.

The Double Diamond plays an important role on many courses. At Hyper Island, several of the designers from the Double Diamond design committee are involved in the course, while McCullagh states that the model has been “transformational” for many students at Manchester School of Art: “They can see how working collaboratively and using design as a verb rather than a noun, by engaging with different bodies and groups of people, helps them to position their work in new ways and, in doing so, questions what they do.”

At the heart of successful and productive collaboration are a myriad of soft skills, which Tom Harding, Head of Design at product innovation studio, Made by Many says are “as, if not more” important than many hard skills. Tutors place huge value on these, with self-development, empathy, respect and flexibility being actively taught.

Willcocks says Hyper Island’s Digital Management course is as much about students managing themselves as managing digital, while McCullagh says that developing the students as people is central to the teaching at Manchester School of Art.

The importance of empathy is

also stressed by Willcocks, “for each other and for customers, for humans.” She adds, “We may work in digital but there is always a human involved.” It echoes the importance Beardsell places on “emotional and social intelligence” as being key to working within a successful team.

Being respectful is underlined by McCullagh as one of the most important skills for students to learn. It is something which Beardsell agrees is integral to working collaboratively: “Collaboration should result in constant reflection. It’s an opportunity to interrogate each other’s ideas while allowing your own point of view to be questioned. This fosters mutual respect, which is at the heart of any successful collaboration.”

Adaptability and flexibility are also hot topics. Pam Bowman, Subject Group Leader at Sheffield Institute of Arts, says group working is frequent, believing this equips students to respond positively to the fast pace of change within the visual communication field. Ball adds that the fact that there are more design graduates than jobs means teaching students how to be agile will help them to find employment.

Tutors also cite the value of teaching transferable skills, with McCullagh stressing the need to, not just design something that works creatively, but to fully articulate and cost that work, and understand how it will function.

Ball believes that transferable

skills are vital, but says one area some students lack is the ability to juggle workload pressures within the timescales demanded by the commercial world. Indeed, ‘time management’ was cited by nearly half of Dropbox’s survey respondents as a skill that was lacking. This can only be learnt through experience, and as such the University of Suffolk makes aspects of its Graphic Design course experiential, “giving graduates a chance to either avoid work placements, or cut down the amount they may need to do”.

Online collaboration tools are widely used but McCullagh makes the point that, “talking and meeting together in person over a coffee is still a great tool”. Digital and face to face complement one another.

Harding adds that Made by Many uses Dropbox Paper to document its process during projects, photographing and videoing each step. “It’s good for communicating progress, generating assets that show how our way of working is different, and acts as an aid to help us look back at research.” He makes the point that it not only benefits the agency, but it’s beneficial to its clients too.

There may never be universal agreement on the most effective ways to collaborate, but it is high up the agenda, and its importance in design is not in doubt. As Willcocks says, “It is about being bigger than the sum of your parts.”



## The tutors



### Tash Willcocks

Head of School, Programme Leader MA Digital Experience Design, Hyper Island

*Which course do you teach and what are the aims of the course in terms of 'hard skills' and 'soft skills'?*

I design, develop and facilitate the Digital Management and Digital Experience Design Masters in the UK, working with industry on client briefs and learning by doing.

Digital Management is as much about managing yourself as a person as managing digital. The students become adaptive, collaborative and creatively driven. We encourage them to go beyond conventional thinking practices to create effective teams and business value.

With Digital Experience Design, the role of designers is constantly evolving so we look to equip them with the right tools and mindset, as well as strategic and creative skills. They develop confidence to work across disciplinary, cultural, and geographical boundaries by working in depth on their research activities and within teams.

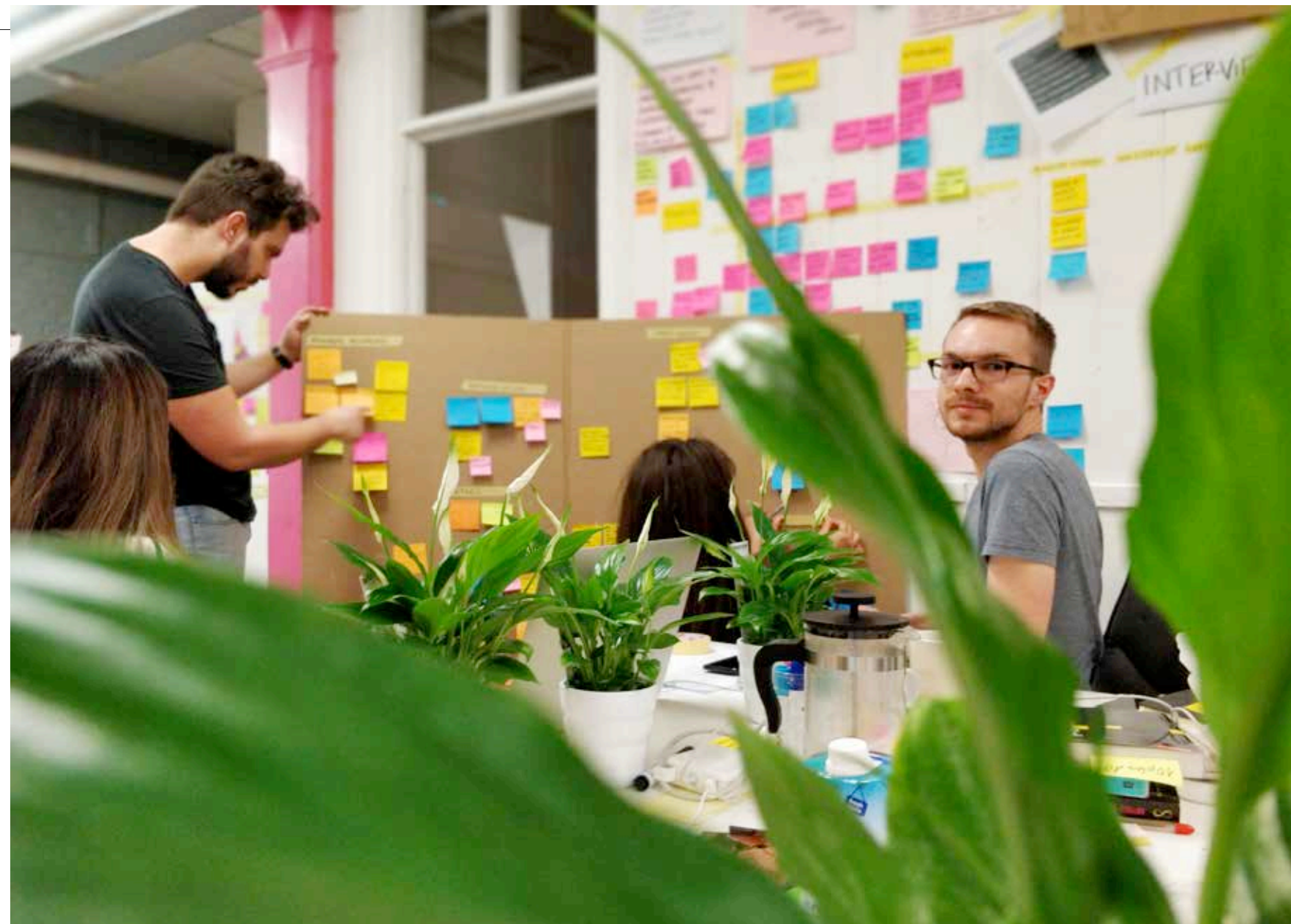
*What are the most important skills for students to learn on your course?*

A willingness to learn. Hyper Island doesn't have teachers in any of its hubs, from Brazil to the UK. It is about students learning through experience – industry led, as well as talking and doing workshops with them, layered with the Hyper Island methodology. But students need that appetite to go and find the answers themselves.

Another one is empathy – for each other and for customers, for humans. We may work in digital but there's always a human involved.

*Does your course attempt to develop collaborative skills among students?*

From the second they walk through the door, students are learning from each other. They work in teams every week. We really encourage them to work together, not just within their teams, but with peers, alumni, industry, clients – that is where learning comes from, asking the right questions and getting diverse answers to find your own critical voice.



*Has this emphasis on collaboration changed over time?*

It is the core methodology of why Hyper Island was set up – encouraging students to learn from each other. It is about being bigger than the sum of your parts.

*Do you use the Design Council's Double Diamond model in your teaching, and is this useful for developing collaborative skills?*

It's one of the many tools in this area they work with, we have several of the designers from the Double Diamond design committee involved on the course. The students learn it – but we expect them to develop their own ideas of working with it or experimenting with other models, such as Dan Nessler's DD Revamped, IDEO's HCD Process and Stanford school's DT process, as well as build-

ing their own. The area is not static.

*How do you get your students working together on design projects?*

Aside from ongoing reflection and feedback, we have 'team terminations', where we close the team down and take the goodness into the next team. We also encourage prototyping, where teams build something together and go out on the street and test it; it's a bonding experience.

*How do your students respond to being asked to work together on projects?*

They are excited by it, every four weeks they are put in a new team. They see the power of what they can produce together, rather than as individuals. We form teams of four or five people so that no-one can hide – it's still big enough to have that necessary creative friction. The best

ideas come from diversity and creative conflict.

*Do you think students actively seek inspiration and develop their ideas with others, with fellow students and tutors?*

We don't have teachers, we have Programme Leaders. They love getting involved and have an open door policy. Visiting industry experts arrive ready to collaborate too – just because they are stood in front of the students doesn't mean they have all the answers; it's a conversation not a monologue.

*Is there enough emphasis in design education on the journey of a project?*

It is embedded in the work here – students have to evidence their process. They do journey mapping, including emotional journey mapping, and they have really embraced that. I would

like to encourage more sharing of the process, by doing a Medium post once a week, for example.

As an industry we need to keep evidencing the work in progress, showing that it took an individual or a team effort, and what they learnt and where.

*Does the measurement of success cause students to be perfectionists about the final product rather than celebrating the messiness of the overall process?*

Hyper Island globally does not rely on grades, but as the Masters courses are accredited, it is part of the course. Client briefs are intentionally not marked as I feel grades can encourage risk-averse behaviour.

Students should have an adventure and be able to fail, experiment, play and learn unrestricted.

Above: Students at Hyper Island Manchester



## The tutors



**Joe McCullagh**

Head of Design, Manchester  
School of Art, Manchester  
Metropolitan University

*Which course do you teach and what are the aims of the course in terms of 'hard skills' and 'soft skills'?*

I am lucky to teach into a number of programmes from different levels from across BA degrees to postgraduate and research degrees within the broad area of Design.

Central to the teaching is about developing not only the student work, but them as a person, helping them to meet their potential. We pay a great deal of attention not only to their design work development but also to develop soft and importantly highly transferable skills such as project management, risk taking, negotiation skills, budgets, teamwork, conflict in groups, networking, collaboration and communication.

Both hard and soft skills are developed and nurtured simultaneously.

*What are the most important skills for students to learn on your course?*

Students have personal development planning that enables them to reflect on the skills that they need to develop in conjunction with their design work.

Clearly, being critical, having humility and empathy, being reflective, communicative, respectful, and having a contextual awareness and understanding of their role in the world are [important but] more like attributes than a skill. But overall, they need to understand how to be flexible, adaptable and also versatile.

*Is there a focus on developing transferable skills for the workplace?*

We develop our curricula through working with relevant industries so that it is responsive. Creativity is simply not good enough, and students need to have a further edge - that is about transferable skills that show an understanding of commerce, business acumen/emotional intelligence and aspects of IT, and this is focused upon their area of industry.

For example, it is not simply good enough to design something that works creatively and is well executed; they also need to be able to fully

articulate their work, have the skills to cost a project, and show a strong understanding of how their work would function in practice.

*Does your course attempt to develop collaborative skills among students?*

The notion of the lone designer is an old one. Students need to work in interdisciplinary teams in order to solve problems and be purposeful in relation to complex situations and issues. The skills or approach to deal with uncertainty is a real skill.

*Do you use the Design Council's Double Diamond model in your teaching?*

The Double Diamond process has been transformational for many students. They can now see how their practice can work within other areas such as health, social and political, and policy. They can see how working collaboratively and using design as a verb rather than a noun, by engaging with different bodies and groups of people, helps them to position their work in new ways and, in doing so, questions what they do.

*What are the forms and models of collaboration that you think apply to design?*

Our students work a quarter of the year on interdisciplinary design work as part of their curricula. If you include the fact that they work theoretically too, through their contextual studies across disciplines, you could say that the year is 50% interdisciplinary and collaborative.

This has led to students being more highly employable and networked. The contacts they make through all of these connections - both with each other and as we are externally faced, through this network - is subsequently huge.

*Does the measurement of success cause students to be perfectionists about the final product rather than celebrating the messiness of the overall process?*

Sadly, with increased fees and living costs there is a danger that students

feel they have to play safe and do what they think is the right thing to get a job. This is a real and tangible pressure on many students that can affect their work. Within this, however, we encourage students to believe in their work and ideas and articulate them. We want students to achieve their potential with us.

Don't run with the crowd, as ultimately it won't get you where you need to go.

**"THE NOTION  
OF THE LONE  
DESIGNER IS  
AN OLD ONE.  
STUDENTS NEED TO  
WORK IN TEAMS"**

*Are there any tools you recommend to your students to help them work more collaboratively?*

Talking and meeting together in person over a coffee is still a great tool.

Amazing tools exist digitally too: WhatsApp, Instagram for direct messaging and uploading work. Dropbox is popular with staff for sending files to students, and we use our own virtual learning environment via Moodle.

Students working internationally use WeChat, as it has a built in translator, which is a great tool for international collaboration.



## The tutors



**Pam Bowman**

Subject Group Leader/  
Principal Lecturer – Visual  
Communications, Sheffield  
Institute of Arts



*Which course do you teach and what are the aims of the course in terms of 'hard skills' and 'soft skills'?*

I lead the Visual Communication Subject Group at Sheffield Hallam University. Our courses are Illustration and Graphic Design. Graphic Design includes routes in Advertising, Packaging, Motion Graphics, and User Experience Design.

Some specialist areas require considerable hard skills but across the routes there is an emphasis on common soft skills, such as: writing for different purposes (academic and non-academic), presentation skills, team work, research and developing confidence and industry knowledge. We invest heavily in these soft skills and see a return in the raised aspirations of our graduates.

*What do you feel are the most important skills for students to learn on your course?* Self-reliance, flexibility and confidence. We aim that our students become confident practitioners ready and excited to respond positively to the fast pace and change within the very broad field of Visual Communication.

*Does your course attempt to develop collaborative skills among students?*

We are lucky to have great studio spaces for each year group so that students can 'own' their spaces, and studio working is encouraged at all levels. Group working is frequent and strengthens everyone's practice.

In final year Graphics and Illustration, students share studio space and the environment encourages group working and commissioning between cohorts. Most set projects also encourage group responses as much as individual, and it has become normal practice for our students to work independently and in groups throughout the academic year, and beyond.

Our structure and assessment processes also encourage shared experiences and critical reflection. In the past, or within a more limiting modular structure, group working may have been stifled by the need to assess all projects individually. This is not a problem we have.

*Do you use the Design Council's Double Diamond model in your teaching?* It's a useful model, alongside others,

but doesn't support group work necessarily. We have, over recent years, been working with the BBC UX design team on a week long design sprint that really does deliver on the need for team working and efficient, effective testing. This produces an enormous amount of work in a short space of time and introduces team working methods effectively. It can be uncomfortable at times but is something we and students really value.

*How do you find your students respond to being asked to work together on projects?* Initially it can be difficult but it soon knocks the corners off and is normally a thoroughly rewarding process.

*Do you think students actively seek inspiration and develop their ideas with others, both with fellow students and tutors?* Studio practice ensures this happens almost by osmosis, and we all value it.

*Is there enough emphasis in design education placed on the journey of a project?* This is something we have been working on over the years, and making sure that the craft and final finish is

**"IN THE PAST,  
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only part of the story has supported us in ensuring that every kind of student is able to achieve highly. It has been the case in the past that only highly crafted work achieves highly, but focusing on the journey means we can reward both process, and those students whose aim is different from the old idea of what a 'Graphic Designer' or 'Illustrator' can be.

Our aim is for our students to work with their strengths, whether that is as a researcher, highly-skilled operational manager, presenter or finisher. Many of our successful students are not in traditional roles at all and we are keen to work more with employers to see what new and, as yet, unidentified roles may develop.

Again, this is something our assessment processes are designed to be able to reward.

*Does the measurement of success cause students to be perfectionists about the final product rather than celebrating the messiness of the overall process?*

Not in our case but this is a deliberate step away from an older educational model.



## The tutors



**Dr. Cathy Gale**

Senior Lecturer & Level 5 Year  
Leader BA (Hons) Graphic  
Design, Kingston University

*Which course do you teach and what are the aims of the course in terms of 'hard skills' and 'soft skills'?*

The BA (Hons) Graphic Design course/programme does not make direct distinctions between 'hard' and 'soft' skills, partly due to the binary nature of these terms in the context of the fluid digital sphere and software therein, and the integrated nature of contemporary communication. This is an uncertain and precarious environment in which to study and work.

There is also a growing tendency coming from students to want either/or distinctions within this precarity, so more hybrid notions are more helpful. As such, technical support is integrated into a variety of projects across digital media, film, photography, event management, typography, print etc.

*Is there a focus on developing transferable skills for the workplace?*

I set up a Studio Visit programme a few years ago to help give the graphics students an insight into how creative practitioners work rather than basing knowledge on design outcomes. Small groups of 10-15 visit a design studio, advertising agency, printer, freelancer or artist to interview them. This is supported by an annual International Field Study Trip.

There is also a Strand programme which I instigated a few years ago to encourage more open-ended discussions with staff to help students feel more confident to make choices about future creative directions, but also to help build transferable skills. The Strands cover photography, film, advertising, type and publishing, STEAM (STEM + Art/design).

*Does your course attempt to develop collaborative skills among students?*

Collaboration is embedded into the course from the first year within the graphic design student cohort. In the second year I encourage collaboration across disciplines and institutions directly through a partnership between the BA (Hons) Fashion and

graphics to help build Promotional Packages for graduating fashion students, and through joint research days with BA (Hons) Illustration Animation.

In addition, I set up a collaborative project a few years ago in which the graphics students are encouraged to collaborate with anyone, as long as they are not on the same course, they are alive and not fictional.

*Do you use the Design Council's Double Diamond model in your teaching?*

The Double Diamond is introduced in their first Self-Initiated Project in October and then forms the basis for future self-directed research and design processes. It is, in my opinion, a valuable yet flexible structure for any project. It is quite intuitively followed by most designers and students: the model is simple and cyclic and helps students to become more reflectively aware of their own design process and therefore to use it better.

*What are the forms and models of collaboration that you think apply to design?*

There are a variety of teaching and learning methods that can help collaboration, such as Edward de Bono's Six Thinking Hats, which allows students to contribute to a team-based project from a critical position rather than as a personality. Often, students develop socially entrenched positions as confident leaders, silent makers, organisers, non-attenders in the studio which are hard to disentangle. The Six Thinking Hats (on rotation) allows each student to articulate their thoughts but with a different voice.

*How do you find your students respond to being asked to work together on projects?*

The Kingston students really enjoy team-based projects and often carry on in collaboration after they leave. Trust develops in the process of team-based projects and, by varying the partners in each project, students discover like-minded peers with whom they can build future collaborations.



**"I ALLOW STUDENTS TO 'FIRE' OTHER TEAM MEMBERS WHO DO NOT COLLABORATE"**

Where there are complaints it's usually because some students do all the work and their partners do nothing. One solution we have developed is to demand each student designs a process book for each project. Using the developmental stages of the Double Diamond, for instance, this research book illustrates the breadth and depth of a student's contribution to a project.

I also allow student teams to 'fire' other team members who do not collaborate, as long as there are not personal/health reasons for this.

*Does the measurement of success cause students to be perfectionists about the final product rather than celebrating the messiness of the overall process?*

The pressure to succeed is increasingly leading students to be terrified of failure. Messiness is not a problem because everything remains possible and every sketch might develop into a genius outcome at this stage. It is when decisions need to be made and

ideas tested through iteration that progress stalls or stutters.

Our students are encouraged to enjoy the process of designing as much as possible and test as early and often as possible: a test can often become an outcome that retains a high level of energy or messiness yet can also be a resolved outcome.

*Are there any tools you recommend to your students to help them work more collaboratively?*

Keeping a research diary or process book (more visually-led) helps document the process, including each individual role, group dynamics and discoveries.

Trying different group set ups can help if the first team-based project is difficult.

Finally, we get speakers in from a range of professional practitioners to describe their work in collaboration: the external professional always has more credibility and influence than the tutor!

*Above: The Kingston Graphic Design Degree Show, 2017*

## The tutors



### Nigel Ball

Senior Lecturer, Course Leader: BA (Hons) Graphic Design, University of Suffolk, School of Art, Design and Humanities

*Which course do you teach and what are the aims of the course in terms of 'hard skills' and 'soft skills'?*

I teach on, and am Course Leader for, the BA (Hons) Graphic Design and BA (Hons) Graphic Design (Graphic Illustration) courses at the University of Suffolk.

While we teach technical skills that the design industry requires, we embed soft skills throughout the curriculum in the majority of practical modules. We place a big emphasis on creative and critical thinking at every stage of the course, as this underpins design practice.

Any graphic design course has to recognise that there are more design graduates coming out of Higher Education than there are jobs available, so it is vital to teach students that being agile, flexible and able to adapt to different scenarios are important qualities that will help them to navigate the jobs market.

*Is there a focus on developing transferable skills for the workplace, and are any of these skills lacking?*

Transferable skills are vital. If there is any one area of transferrable skills that some students lack, it is knowing how to juggle workload pressures within the timescales expected by commercial practice. Learning to adapt to this, and adapt quickly, only comes with experience. But the insistence by many design firms that they will only consider junior designers with one or two years' experience is tough for those leaving university.

By making aspects of our course experiential, we at least give graduates a chance to either avoid work placements, or cut down the amount they may need to do.

*Does your course attempt to develop collaborative skills among students?*

It is absolutely vital that students develop collaborative skills. In the first year we do this by running group learning activities so they get used to working together. We do a lot of this through teaching idea generation techniques and collec-

tive drawing exercises.

In the second year we have a professional practice client-facing module, through which we run live briefs. Students are put into teams and asked to present themselves as an emerging design studio. We then bring in someone from outside of the university as a client and set a live brief. The fact students are told they have to present a united front, and not let the client see any internal conflicts there may be within the team, is a testing but important learning experience for them.

*How do your students respond to being asked to work together on projects?*

Initially they are generally reluctant, but like any area of education it is important to take the students with you. How you communicate the rationale for such collaborative working is paramount to getting the students on side, and ultimately, to the project's success. Anxiety is a huge problem within today's student body, so clear structures, explicit explanation, and continued support has to be in place.

*Do you think students actively seek inspiration and develop their ideas with others, both with fellow students and tutors?*

Absolutely, however, while it is important that the students learn to conduct peer reviews and develop their abilities as critical friends to each other, it is equally important that the tutor starts to remove themselves from this process towards the latter stages of the course. If students do not learn to evaluate their work for themselves they just rely on the tutor telling them what should be done. That is counter-productive for the workplace.

*Is there enough emphasis in design education placed on the journey of a project?*

We expect a student to analyse and justify the choices they make. Every decision needs to be backed up critically. Even visual approaches that



might have been hit upon accidentally, or developed through experimentation and intuition, need to be rationalised as to why they are the right choices for the brief in hand.

The practice of spending three years having to justify their decisions through these documents at university means such analysis becomes ingrained in our graduates' thinking and a natural part of their persona as a designer. Due to the (often considerable) expectations we place upon them, they become design thinkers, whether they actively realise it or not.

*Does the measurement of success cause students to be perfectionists about the final product rather than celebrating the messiness of the overall process?*

Yes, measuring success can restrict students. This can, at times, be less about the successful outcome of a project, and be more about the grades they may get. Such concerns

can stop risk-taking in its tracks and tighten up a student far too soon in the creative process.

That said, perfectionism in the final stages of a brief is no bad thing. Messiness, or rather creativity, needs to be part of an explorative process that is then followed by rational thinking. These two things, at times, can counteract each other; a student who is too controlled in the early stages is likely to produce less exciting work, while one that is wayward and lets their experimental work run wild can lose sight of what they are working towards. Students have to learn how to balance the subjective in creativity, and the objective in application.

**"IT IS ABSOLUTELY VITAL THAT STUDENTS DEVELOP COLLABORATIVE SKILLS"**



Creative Review Design Employer Survey Results

When looking for design graduates to employ, how important is it that they can demonstrate each of the following skills?

55

55% are looking for graduates with **communication skills**

50

50% are looking for graduates with **time management skills**

46

46% are looking for graduates with a **commercial mindset**

42

42% are looking for graduates with **client-facing skills**

53

53% are looking for graduates with **research skills**

63

63% are looking for graduates with **attention to detail**

68

68% are looking for graduates with **conceptual thinking**

55

55% are looking for graduates with **collab/team work skills**

54

54% are looking for graduates with **developed craft skills**

55

55% are looking for graduates with **tech/software skills**



Having a curious mind is the first step.

Why is collaboration/team work very important to you when recruiting design graduates?

The best ideas come through collaboration.

Design is a team effort.

No one person or skillset holds all the answers.

Everyone needs to communicate. Without this

basic principle we're screwed.

Very rarely, if at all, is anything great achieved individually

Working in different teams is daily business. No one can work in the cave.

It's not a linear process. Everyone can make an idea better. It's so important to be collaborative.

Nothing done at this level

is done alone, every project requires different skills and only becomes great through collaboration with others.

It's the best way to learn new skills, from more experienced peers. A key ingredient for growth in the role.

Because creative work isn't created in a vacuum and is dependent on the input of others to make it the best it can be.

Which skills tend to be the most lacking in the current batch of graduates?

36

36% believe graduates lack **communication skills**

44

44% believe graduates lack **time management skills**

48

48% believe graduates lack a **commercial mindset**

37

37% believe graduates lack **client facing skills**

21

21% believe graduates lack **research skills**

55

55% believe graduates lack **attention to detail**

40

40% believe graduates lack **conceptual thinking**

17

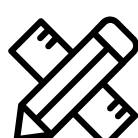
17% believe graduates lack **collab/team work skills**

25

25% believe graduates lack **developed craft skills**

15

15% believe graduates lack **tech/software skills**



It's all about collaboration these days at all levels

How can new graduates improve their collaboration skills in the workplace, and is the development of this skillset something you would help with?

Humility in all things. Yes, we try and help but it seems like you really need to hire for it.

Having a curious mindset is the first step. Being up for talking to new people, finding out what they're working on

and asking lots of questions.

Working on team projects – it's learning by doing really.

Internships and working outside the educational system (part-time, freelance etc.) is the fastest way to develop these skills.

As new teammates coming out of school they have to experiment in real context to develop these specific skills.

And it's where we can help them to learn.

More team-based projects in school could help as well as joining design-focused groups outside of school to potentially work with others.

I find that when the work process objectives are clearly explained, the graduates are quite willing to make the process work.

## The employers



**Matthew Beardsell**

Operations Director, Music

*What are the top three skills you look for in recent graduates?*

Our top three skills would be creativity, the ability to work collaboratively, and being organised, and in a creative organisation such as ours these skills aren't role specific.

On the whole, I consider graduates to be well prepared for employment, but employers still have a responsibility to carry on a graduate's learning in their new commercial environment.

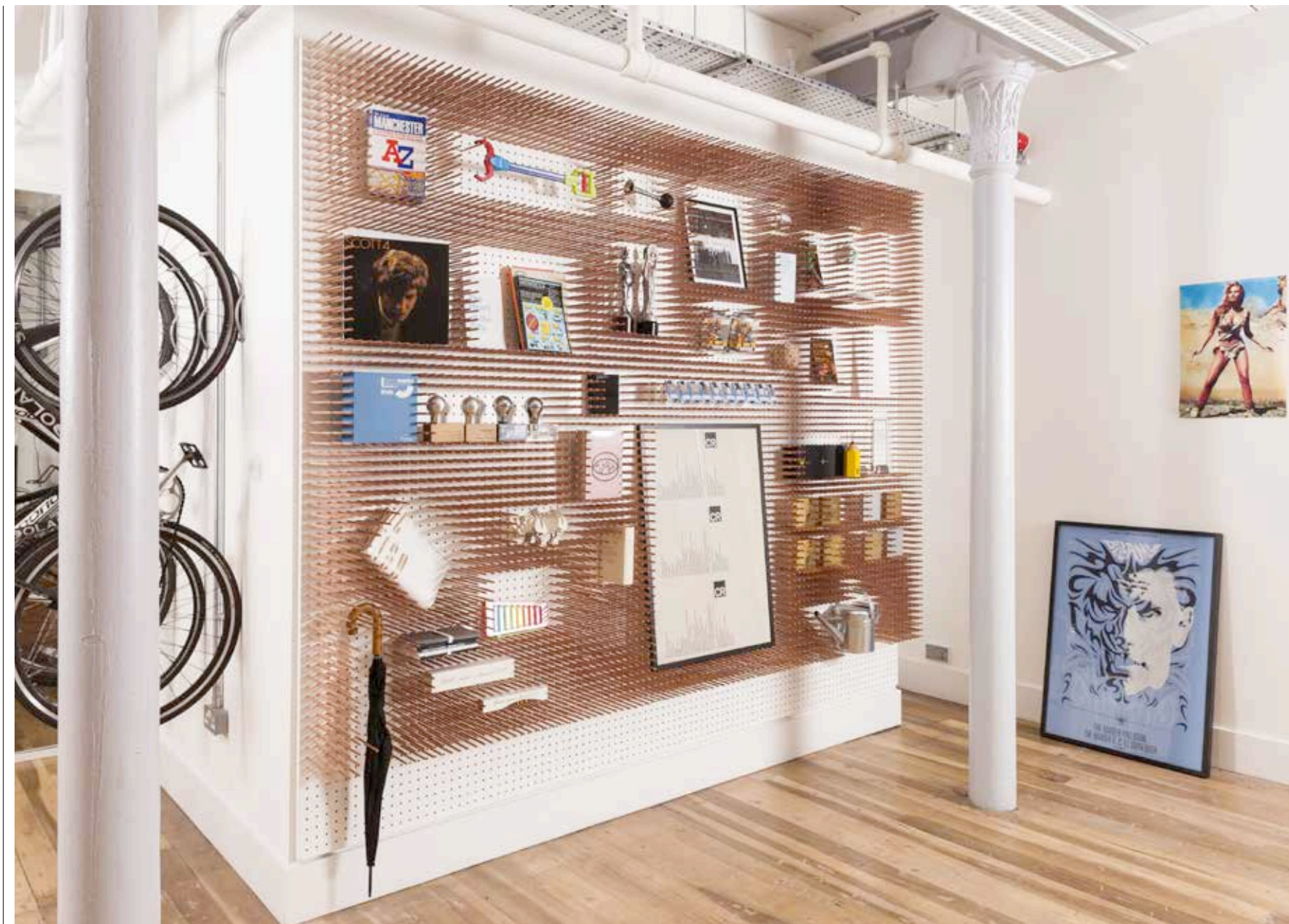
I understand how collaboration might be a hard thing to demonstrate in a college environment, where a common discussion may be the 'competition' for jobs. But in the workplace, much of this learning takes place between team members rather than being handed down by a tutor.

*How are today's creative teams consisting of a more fluid workforce: freelancers, vendors, agencies, and cross-functional in-house teams, as well as multidisciplinary, and scattered across continents?*

Our offering is multidisciplinary and our team has cross-functional skills. It sets the bar slightly higher for recruitment but allows graduates a broader wealth of experience. We use freelancers frequently, which creates the opportunity for individuals to work in different ways, with different people, on different projects. This flexibility allows individuals a greater opportunity to develop the interpersonal skills crucial to effective collaboration.

With a few exceptions, freelancers always work embedded within the studio, making them a de facto member of staff. We carefully pick freelancers from a trusted network and to treat them differently would erode the trust we believe is essential to collaboration.

*What does it mean to work well collaboratively/with others in your workplace?* Collaboration should result in constant reflection. It's an opportunity to interrogate each other's ideas while allowing your own point of view to be questioned. This fosters



mutual respect, which is at the heart of any successful collaboration.

*How can new graduates improve their collaboration skills in the workplace?*

Graduates should try and choose a working environment which will allow them to work flexibly across teams. Internships are a great opportunity to practice collaboration, and they also afford graduates the perspective they need to select an agency that will offer them the opportunities they need.

If we accept that it is not often that easy to pick and choose jobs, they should still push hard to be allowed to contribute on other people's projects, and not lose heart if their ideas aren't picked up immediately.

*What are the conditions that need to be in place for effective collaboration*

*between teams in the workplace?*

Areas of responsibility should be agreed and clearly communicated. This affords individuals the respect that is crucial to embracing each other's point of view.

A co-working environment is also important. We work in an open plan studio, and ideas are generated and developed in collaboration with one another. If you accept the statistic that 55% of communication is non-verbal, face to face interaction is the most efficient way to collaborate. In instances where collaboration between companies is required, locality becomes important so we can maximise the amount of time we spend in face to face discussion. As an example, our digital partner is based in the office opposite, which is not entirely coincidental.

Experience tells us that although

not impossible, remote working in virtual teams can make a difficult task harder.

*Has the nature of collaboration changed over time?*

The last 15 years has seen the creative industry fracture into multiple specialisms. This has resulted in a greater need to collaborate, which I believe has made us better at it.

Although we can't predict the future, I don't doubt the next 15 years will see even greater upheaval, and the need to collaborate will become greater than ever. In my experience, the most successful client/agency relationships have always relied on collaboration rather than a strict 'task and deliver' approach.

*Are there any tools you recommend to your employees to help them work more*

*collaboratively?*

I'm not a massive fan of virtual teams, but I understand the need for them in situations where co-working isn't practical.

Slack, Google docs and Trello have all been tried with varied degrees of success, but I don't see them as a better alternative to a co-working environment. In my experience, these systems are often used/misused as a repository for associated information, which can quickly become woolly and cumbersome. Team members have a responsibility to absorb, translate and distill information before contributing based on their own specialism. I don't believe we are 'streamlining' a process by making everything accessible to everyone, at all times, everywhere.

*Above: The Music studio in Manchester*



## The employers



**Tom Harding**

Head of Design,  
Made by Many

*What are the top three skills you look for in recent graduates?*

When hiring a design graduate, we look for core skills such as research, creative problem solving, prototyping and delivery. Passion, articulation, knowledge of their craft and emotional and social intelligence are also hugely important. How someone expresses their emotions and handles different relationships is key to their ability [to work] within a successful team.

Collaboration and teamwork are two skills that you learn in the workplace. Universities are brilliant places for students to experiment and push their own creativity. Some workplaces aren't as open to this idea of 'play', and while there are some exceptions to the rule (Made by Many being one of them), many times the opportunity to fail and develop are limited. Studying is a great opportunity for this. But when it comes to collaboration and teamwork, you can learn that on the job.

*How are today's creative teams consisting of a more fluid workforce: freelancers, vendors, agencies, and cross-functional in-house teams, multidisciplinary, and scattered across continents?*

We work in small cross-disciplinary teams at Made by Many, where the pace is fast, collaborative and efficient. We are collaborative with our clients, working together throughout the entire process. We often move in

with them, or they move in with us. When we need to, we'll partner with specialists such as writers, animators and sound designers for expertise we don't have in-house.

One of the biggest challenges our clients face is creating design and technology teams within their organisations. To build successful and happy teams you need to establish the right culture to attract the right people, which means the structural and cultural ecosystem needs to be thoroughly considered. All of these things are interlinked and have a knock-on effect, so it's important to consider them in tandem.

For example, you need to look at how to support and develop a designer's career, training or hiring good leaders in order to establish the right organisational structures to let them do a good job. It's complex and difficult. We're increasingly helping our clients to tackle these challenges.

*What does it mean to work well collaboratively/with others in your workplace?*  
It means:

- ➔ Knowing when to collaborate and when it's best to work alone
- ➔ Recognising your strengths and weaknesses
- ➔ Being empathetic to others – understanding their opinions and perspectives
- ➔ Having an interest in what everyone has to say
- ➔ Being responsive to the team's mood
- ➔ Presenting a point of view and being open to potentially being proven wrong
- ➔ Facilitating conversation and striving to get the best out of the team
- ➔ Playing back what you've heard to check understanding
- ➔ Seeking to create common goals
- ➔ Clarifying roles and responsibilities
- ➔ Taking pride in the team's achievements and progression as a team



*What are the conditions that need to be in place for effective collaboration between teams in the workplace?*

It should be the responsibility of every organisation to help its employees to continuously learn and develop their skills. At Made by Many, we believe that soft skills such as working in teams and communication are as, if not more, important than the hard skills such as research, prototyping and production.

We've put a lot of thought and effort into creating an environment that is built for learning and collaboration. Last year we launched a professional development handbook for each of our disciplines. This has given our people the opportunity to improve through very tangible, practical means, and has provided a working chart where we can assess each person's development.

The handbooks provide ideas, activities and opportunities that help develop skills at every level, while being organised around core craft and professional skills. In this way, we can recognise that everybody has different career trajectories, and we can cater for them.

*Are there any tools you recommend to your employees to help them work more*

*collaboratively?*

Most of the software we use is collaborative: Dropbox, Google, Adobe, Sketch and Slack. Slack is a great tool that's changed how we work together. It works for us here, but I've seen it have a negative impact in some organisations. Discussions can lack context and can whizz by without the subject being given much thought. The constant jumping in and out of multiple conversations can be disorienting and demanding. But the biggest downside for me is that it can prevent people from having open, interesting and constructive human conversations in the studio.

The best tools for collaboration are a table, chairs, paper and pens.

*Do you already use Dropbox Paper?*

*What is your experience of the tool?*

Yes, we use it as a tool for documenting our process during our projects. The team photographs and videos every step we take. It's good for communicating progress, generating assets that show how our way of working is different, and acts as an aid to help us look back at research and the way in which we can articulate our thoughts. Not only does it benefit us, but it's beneficial to our clients.

*Left and above:  
Group working at  
Made by Many*



**Stuart Radford**

Executive Creative Director,  
Superunion

*What are the top three skills you look for in recent graduates you're seeking to employ?*

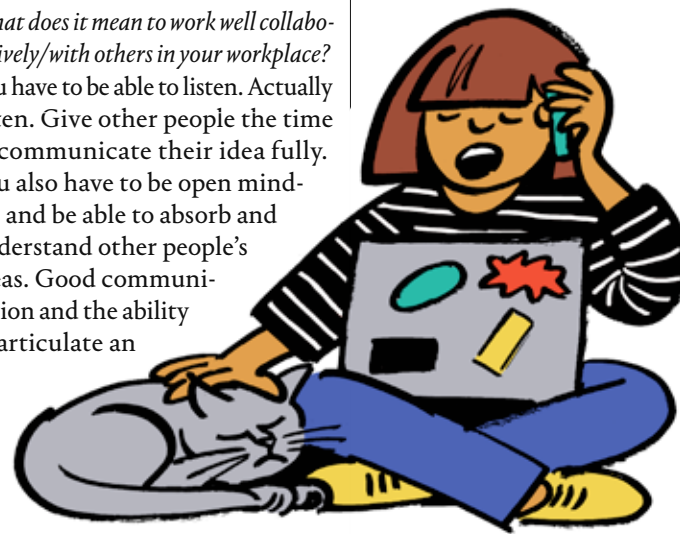
Talent, attitude and the ability to communicate.

*Today's creative teams are often made up of a fluid workforce (freelancers, vendors, agencies, and cross-functional in-house teams) and often work across continents – how does this impact working collaboratively?*

This is especially true for us and it demands that people work together. Collaboration is always harder when you're working with someone for the first time. With our recent merger, we're all starting to work with new people – so things like listening, being open-minded and wanting to collaborate have become even more important.

*What does it mean to work well collaboratively/with others in your workplace?*

You have to be able to listen. Actually listen. Give other people the time to communicate their idea fully. You also have to be open-minded, and be able to absorb and understand other people's ideas. Good communication and the ability to articulate an



idea/thought are important, as well as feeling relaxed and comfortable with the other person/people you are working with.

One of the most important things overall is to have a shared ambition for the work.

*How can new graduates improve their collaboration skills in the workplace?*

*My advice to any new graduate would be that this isn't something to worry about.* It's something that comes with practice and something many designers work actively at their whole careers.

Many designers are very good at

working alone and graduates have often only really experienced this type of working. Once you're in an agency, working in teams, watching how people communicate with each other, you'll pick it up quickly. Some people will find this easy, others won't. I know a lot of designers who are great at working through problems by themselves – they've trained their brain to do it – so they can struggle in brainstorm situations – but just as they trained their brain to work independently, given time and practice, they can train their brain to work collaboratively; it's just a different approach.

*Is the development of this skill set something that you would help them with?*

Yes. In a brainstorm situation, where it's a group activity, we'd try to make

them feel at ease and encourage them to share their thoughts. Generally we would help them through encouragement, trying to make them feel comfortable within the agency, and exposing them to the types of situations where they will have to work collaboratively.

*What are the conditions that need to be in place for effective collaboration between teams in the workplace?*

Collaboration is an inherent part of the design process and it happens every day, naturally, through conversation. Just asking someone's opinion



about an idea is collaboration. In its most basic form, it's a chat between two people; at its most complex, it's a bunch of people in a room solving a brief.

The best conditions are a clear creative ambition, so that everyone knows what it is they are working towards and the people in the teams have good relationships and open conversations.

*Has the nature of collaboration changed over time? How is it changing and why?*

In my experience, design has always been a collaborative process. That said, collaboration has become more of an everyday part of the process over the course of the past 10-20 years. This is mainly because, as projects get bigger, more integrated, more complex, collaboration becomes a fundamental requirement to achieving the best work.

**“COLLABORATION  
IS AN INHERENT  
PART OF THE  
DESIGN PROCESS  
AND IT HAPPENS  
EVERY DAY”**

We're working with more and more people with different skill sets – animators, artists, 3D modellers, developers. Technology has made it easier to work with different people too – you don't even need to meet or be in the same country (let alone the same room) – we recently worked with a digital artist from New York all by phone and email.





## Conclusions

### Effective creative collaboration

...forms a vital part of design education. Students are taught to work in groups and develop the essential soft skills needed in the workplace. Self-development, empathy, respect and flexibility are being actively taught at university today

...is an essential workplace skill: over 96% of respondents to our survey stated that it was “very” or “fairly” important that design graduates could demonstrate collaboration skills

...has become increasingly important as the creative industry has fractured into multiple specialisms

...is a skill that designers continue to learn after leaving formal education. Creating the right collaborative culture within studios is a major, ongoing challenge in the workplace. This is being recognised in the provision of training which reflects that soft skills are as important as hard skills for career development

...is an inherent part of the design process and happens in every studio, every day

...is increasingly enhanced and facilitated by new digital tools which complement and support face-to-face or group sessions



**“We use Dropbox Paper as a tool for documenting our process during our projects. The team photographs and videos every step we take. It’s good for communicating progress, generating assets that show how our way of working is different, and acts as an aid to help us look back at research and the way in which we can articulate our thoughts. Not only does it benefit us, but it’s beneficial to our clients.”**

— Tom Harding, Made by Many

### The Collaboration Toolkit Essential tools and services for effective collaboration

**The Double Diamond:** developed by the Design Council in 2005, this universal model proposes that the design process should have four phases: Discover; Define; Develop; Deliver. Following it helps ideas to be developed, tested and refined a number of times, with weak ideas dropped in the process. See [designcouncil.org.uk](http://designcouncil.org.uk)

**Moodle:** a free and open-source ‘learning management system’ widely used by universities to share resources and facilitate group work

**WhatsApp:** creating specialist WhatsApp groups can be a highly effective means of collaboration within groups

**Dropbox Paper:** designed specifically for creative work, Dropbox Paper helps teams collaborate in real time, assign tasks, make to-do lists and much more

**Table, chairs, paper and pens:** there are brilliant online and digital tools out there, but they are often at their most effective when used to complement face-to-face collaboration

*Left:  
Collaboration in  
action at Made  
by Many*

