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Title: Exploring project-based learning in graphic design for the attainment of self-directed learning outcomes

Present-day education programs in design must account for comprehensive humanistic contexts that prepare graduates for the complex problems of a multidisciplinary industry. An accounting of human contexts and society includes increased research loads on behalf of design students and practitioners that must be undertaken to complete projects successfully. To effectively meet the challenges of complex problems and become critical and creative thinkers graphic design students must develop self-directed learning (SDL) competencies.

Several design departments in South Africa must contend with an incumbent student population emerging predominantly from high schools where design is seldom, or never offered as a subject choice. As such, many first-year graphic design students arrive with little or no knowledge of art and design prompting the curriculum to focus on basic design skill acquisition at first-year level and resulting in a steep learning curve for most incoming graphic design students. This results in a high attrition rate especially at first-year level and impacts negatively on student motivation in the second year.

Project-based learning (PBL) focuses on disseminating core subject knowledge through a project-based teaching strategy which is often based on 'real-world' problems. Further, PBL is underpinned by John Dewey's notions of experiential and student-directed learning and challenges students' roles as participants engaged in knowledge production. At the University of Technology (UoT) engaged in this study, project-based pedagogy is common in graphic design instruction and includes an emphasis on the studio method that through collaborative engagement with community participants, the design industry or design

competitions develops solutions to such 'real-world' problems. This requires a level of autonomy and self-discipline from the students. Thus, graphic design students at this institution actively participate in PBL through "cognitive apprenticeships" and the fundamental activities of their projects develop new understandings and skills as part of the creation and transformation of knowledge.

At the UoT it is acknowledged that due to a lack of foundational design knowledge and a limited time-frame in which students must achieve self-directed learning (SDL) competencies in a three-year Diploma, the attainment of these remains inadequate. This research proposes methods of re-evaluating existing PBL instruction in undergraduate qualifications in graphic design with a view of improving graduate competencies in SDL. It is argued that a foundation for self-directed practitioners can be laid at the undergraduate level within a graphic design programme. Further, on a practical level, the study informs design education practice in the development of appropriate teaching and learning programmes on theoretical, philosophic and practical levels and may assist in devising courses of actions aimed at monitoring existing curricula content and teaching methodologies.

Keywords: graphic design education, self-directed learning, project-based learning.