

Reflections of an Experiential Learner

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As an adult student, I have been studying graphic design in DePaul's School for New Learning. This competence-based program allows me to personalize my curriculums and select courses or independent study options to learn what is most relevant for me. I was able to self-deign my program of study and emphasized graphic design theories and skills as my concentration, or what we call focus area. This reflection chronicles my experience with experimental learning and collaborative learning.

Many of the design courses had centered on working with clients. I have received countless tips of advice from countless instructors on how to best produce something with which the client will ultimately be happy. My classes were typically taught by young, motivated, and successful designers. Therefore, my instructors' insights to us as students typically came from similar perspectives. In the course, "Managing Adult Learning in the Workplace," Dr. Strohschen provided me with a different approach to learning of how to interact with a client. Instead of telling me how, she provided me with the opportunity to experience working with a client directly. She put me in contact with Jim Pfeiffer, who is an independent video producer and photographer in his company Metro Media Strategies (<https://vimeo.com/user5720458>). In this experience, I quickly discovered that what I had been previously taught only partially prepared me to work with a "live" client in real a time setting. Shortly after first meeting Jim, I realized my learning experiences would be different than the ones for which I had prepared myself.

Contrary to what I had been taught in my courses that described methods and models, the goal for this project was not entirely clear to me in the beginning. My classes had described working with clients, but class projects typically involved clear guidelines and the interactions with the client were simulated. I had never been given the opportunity to attempt to extract information from a real-life client, and I struggled. Jim was making a documentary, cataloging the closing of Chicago's historic Underground Wonder Bar. He needed a poster made embodying the bar's last open summer and heralding its closing celebration. I met Jim in his house, not an office or boardroom. There was no proposal, no conference calls, and no work contracts to go over. Instead, we discussed the music bar and its history. He told me about the owner, how long they've known each other, the artist that performed there, and that the Underground Wonder Bar fostered an environment that supported Chicago musicians and artists for three decades.

I only later understood why this information was important to Jim, but I was only initially unprepared for anything other than a traditional design pitch. I was caught off guard by Jim's passionate retelling of the atmosphere of the bar, and I was unsure what information I needed to retain and what information was unimportant. Jim did not tell me that he had a company, or that he was filming a documentary. He first wanted to show me the pictures of the bar he took, the artists that played there, and his various ideas for the future. Jim did tell me that he wanted something they could put on Facebook for the bar. I did not realize the full scope of the project at first and what I would learn from it.

The collaborative learning skills that I gained after working on this project have helped me reflect on this interaction. I know now that I should be the one leading the conversation if I am the one creating the work. Perhaps, this could have been told to me in courses, but I can now say for

certain that I have learned why this important.

Once I began working on the poster, I started to recall many of the things I learned. However, it was the little but important things that I found that I never truly “learned” in my courses before. For instance, I explicitly remember one of my old professors advising us to copy and paste any information that was provided to us by the customer that would ultimately end up on the final composition. When working for Jim, I ultimately produced many typos for the client. What I failed to learn previously, is that spelling errors are extremely easy to make when you are zoomed in 200% on each letter of a sentence. I was told to be mindful of spelling errors in my courses, but it wasn’t until I made the error myself did I finally truly learn.

It’s these types of road bumps that I encountered when working with Jim that made my learning experience extremely valuable. I anticipated the client to have multiple suggestions to improve the composition, but it wasn’t until I was put in a situation to receive, examine, and then produce a revised copy, did I finally truly learn what I had been taught previously. I was so focused on producing a work that the client loved as well as something I could show to prospective employers, that I hadn’t fully considered the smaller detail that I had been taught.

I am someone who learns best by doing. Being a graphic designer means that I will have to collaborate frequently with a client to produce something that they are happy with. This also means that I will need to grasp the clients’ vision is for a project as well as help clients to understand what my goals. The more we can learn from each other, the more we can help each other reach our respective goals. Before this course, I was unprepared to do that. Working with Jim helped me learn how to better work with someone in the future.

Learning by these methods made my course with Dr. Strohschen also one of my most valuable design classes, even though design was not the focus of the course. I applied principles of adult learning in the context of managing a creative design project collaboratively. We are commonly told to learn from our mistakes, but we are also commonly taught in environments where the chances for mistakes are mitigated by instruction. Learning through doing ended up being the most effective way for me to learn how to design and how to work collaboratively with a client.