Common Ground: Exploring the intersection between information, technology, art and design

Jaime Snyder*
Michael A. D'Eredita
Robert Heckman
Jeffrey M. Stanton
School of Information Studies,
Syracuse University
245 Hinds Hall
Syracuse , NY 13203

* jasnyd01@syr.edu

ABSTRACT

University research is becoming increasingly multidisciplinary in both the nature of the problems being investigated and the make-up of the teams of researchers that tackle these complex challenges. Information schools are in a unique position to participate across a range of these projects. This poster describes an initiative to discover potential areas for collaboration between Syracuse University's iSchool and the College of Visual and Performing Arts, focusing on the synergies between information, technology, art and design.

1. INTRODUCTION

Multidisciplinary research can take many forms. Recognizing a strong synergy between information, technology, art and design, the iSchool at Syracuse Universoty has engaged in an informal partnership with the university's College of Visual and Performing Arts (VPA). The two schools are spearheading a year of exploration entitled *Common Ground*, referring to the rich and fertile territory encompassed by multidisciplinary projects, especially those that bring together information technology and the creative arts.

The goals of the initiative include:

1) Engaging and enlightening faculty and students about the benefits of multidisciplinary approaches to creative problem solving.

2) Providing a foundation for future programs such as dual majors, certificate programs and new multidisciplinary majors.

These goals are being reached through a series of special projects, presentations and classroom activities that will bring together researchers, designers and artists to focus on tough real world problems that could be solved through multidisciplinary thinking.

2. SELECTED PROJECTS

2.1 Innovation Studio

The Innovation Studio was created to facilitate teaching and learning inspired by the creative arts fields, where the studio is the hub for creative experimentation, collaboration and community building. The goal of the Innovation Studio is to enable iSchool faculty and students to engage in hands-on, design-focused learning experiences.

Studio learning generally involves one or more of the following:

- Posing problems to students that might not have just one "correct answer"

- Allowing students the freedom to explore possible solutions independently, according to their own paths of development

- Encouraging regular exchange of constructive criticism between peers

- Maximizing the time spent working in a communal setting where successes and failures are shared with all the participants in the class

- Allocating a minimal amount of time to lectures in exchange for more time spent designing, evaluating, improving and fabricating creative products

The iSchool recognizes that fostering this type of environment includes dedicating a space equipped with appropriate furniture, hardware and software, and also developing a culture that explicitly values creativity and innovation. As part of the *Common Ground* initiative, faculty from art and design are engaging with iSchool instructors to share their experiences and expertise in studio-based practices.

2.2 The iSchool Windows Project

Launched in April 2009, the iSchool Windows Project began as an open call for proposals for the creation of six site-specific artworks to be installed in window wells located in the ground floor of the building that houses the School of Information Studies. The initial success of this unique collaboration with colleagues in the art and design fields paved the way for expansion of the *Common Ground* initiative.

The project's commission sought to raise awareness of the iSchool's accomplishments and scholarship; explore connections

between information, technology, art, and design; provide a commission opportunity for university artists; and build on the expanding partnership between the iSchool and the College of Visual and Performing Arts.

Due to an overwhelming response from the university's artistic community, a total of eight commissions were awarded for original art works to be permanently installed throughout the building. The artworks feature a range of materials, including ceramics, video, fiber arts, metal, and acrylic plexiglass. The pieces have become part of the university's permanent collection and are showcased in six ground floor window wells, on video monitors throughout the building, and in the first-floor lobby area.

2.3 Multidisciplinary courses

The iSchool and VPA have jointly hosted several multidisciplinary course offerings over recent semesters. A selection of these courses is described below. Both schools hope that the *Common Ground* initiative will yield more opportunities for instructors and students to collaborate together in the classroom.

2.3.1 What's the Big Idea and Idea2Startup

A two-part course, spanning fall and spring semesters, provides students with the skills and support to develop their own entrepreneurial ventures, with topics of instruction ranging from jump-starting the creative process to patent searches. Designed by iSchool faculty member Michael A. D'Eredita, *What's the Big Idea?* and *Idea2Startup* are co-taught by instructors from the iSchool, VPA's Department of Design, the School of Management, College of Engineering and entrepreneurs from industry. The first part of the multidisciplinary course, entitled *What's the Big Idea?,* focuses on developing and building student ideas, informed by market forces and basic business fundamentals; refining the ideas, based on "customer" needs, wants and interests; and gaining a firm understanding of market potential, competition, drivers, trends, and factors. The second part, *Idea2Startup*, is focused on developing a competitive strategy, resolving issues related to intellectual property, building financial models and devising a "go to market" plan. At the conclusion of the two-part course, students have a working proof-of-concept and a realistic business plan for launching their product or service.

2.3.2 Responsive Environments

In Spring 2009, a multidisciplinary class entitled *Responsive Environments* was co-taught by iSchool doctoral candidate Jaime Snyder along with Michael McAllister and Olivia Robinson from VPA Departments of Design and Art, respectively. During this studio-based course, students from across the campus learned how to use video and audio-based information technology to engage with and manipulate their environments through the creation of site-specific art installations. Course material included programming microcontrollers, use of sensors and emitters, and the manipulation of various data and information sources, such as video and sound. Activities provided students with the opportunity to investigate the functional, conceptual and expressive possibilities of weaving together materials, technology and interaction. Studio projects were presented at an exhibition entitled "Wired Space."

2.3.3 Global Enterprise Technology

As part of the iSchool's new *Global Enterprise Technology* minor, Robert Heckman, faculty member and senior associate dean in the iSchool, is using studio-based classroom experiences in order to teach his students about the cultural and social aspects of distributed communication in the corporate world. Through simulations and critiques, he is opening a dialogue with students to foster self-reflection, critical thinking, and hands-on learning. As a result of his studio-based approach, the students are learning the unique skills needed to successfully communicate across continents and time zones by doing, making and responding, rather than just watching.

2.3.4 Design + Virtual Worlds

Design and Virtual Worlds was taught by another senior iSchool faculty member, Associate Dean Jeffrey M. Stanton, along with Michael McAllister, former director of VPA's center for collaborative design (called COLAB). Virtual worlds are graphical computer applications in which users navigate through a 2D or 3D environment with a representation of the self called an avatar. This course provided to students a brief introduction to virtual worlds and the opportunity to test design tools in one virtual world, Second Life. Students also explored the social, educational, entertainment, and commercial uses of virtual worlds. Undergraduate and graduate students from the iSchool, VPA, School of Management, and College of Engineering learned about the operation, limitations, and potential of virtual worlds for various applications. This class met both in person to address technology issues and provide basic tutorials on the use of Second Life, and later in the semester, "in world" at the appointed class time to take guided tours and tutorials.

3. FUTURE PLANS

At the time of this writing, future plans for the *Common Ground* initiative include facilitating interaction between faculty in the art and design fields and their counterparts in the iSchool. This includes:

- Workshops focused on sharing pedagogical techniques and approaches related to studio learning

- Opportunities for interested faculty to identify potential research partnerships

- Support for multidisciplinary proposal development and funded research submissions

- Identification of cross-over topics with possibility for guest lecturing across classes

The purpose of these activities is to provide faculty with the resources to engage students in multidisciplinary practices that span the realms of information, technology, art and design.

In tandem with faculty-centered activities, planned student-focused activities include:

- Dissemination of information about special programs for students hosted by faculty in art and design, including performances, design competitions, field trips and film viewings

- Identification of aspects of department specific capstone programs where design and information students would mutually benefit from collaboration with their peers (such as assignments involving the presentation of information where

information students could contract out the creation of visual communication materials to design students)

- Development of creative and visual thinking courses designed to appeal to a broad range of students

The goal of all of these activities is to provide students with ample opportunity and skills to become broad-spectrum thinkers prepared to engage in a range of multidisciplinary professional activities.