

## LINKED: An Experiment with Cocreation

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35 MICA students in Baltimore, MD; 22 Miami students in Oxford, Ohio.

Our project began with this question: How can 57 students in three sections from two very different institutions collaborate across time and space? How can they cocreate?

As designers, elbow deep in visual culture, we felt the pull of participatory design. Our interest in bringing cocreation to our classrooms grew out of our awareness of the general shift from consumer to creator.

### WHAT IS PARTICIPATORY DESIGN?

Graphic Design has always been about control—controlling the audience’s eyes, controlling the typography, controlling the concept. Participatory design turns this idea on its head.

Participatory Design requires user content for completion. No more delivering clean, finished products to a passive audience. Instead, designers can create open-ended generative systems.

Look around and you will see our audience is transforming. Viewer has become user. Professional creatives suddenly face this newly activated public. No longer content to simply digest messages, these users increasingly approach design with the expectation of contribution.

1. Dmitri Siegel. “Designing Our Own Graves.” Design Observer blog, June 27, 2006. <http://www.designobserver.com> (accessed April 28, 2008).

Designer Dmitri Siegel calls this “The Templated Mind.” Users approach a design with the expectation that they will have to fill in the blanks—actively insert content. The use of web aps like blogs, Flickr, Facebook, Amazon, google rankings, YouTube, Vimeo etc, are transforming consumers into creators. The public is being conditioned to contribute.

“The templated mind searches for text fields, metatags, and rankings like handles on a suitcase. The templated mind hungers for customization and the opportunity to add their input—in essence to do-it-themselves”

Technology drives this on many levels. Apps condition the public to fill in the blanks while putting the means of production and distribution directly into their hands.

Sites like Threadless and Etsy, for example, encourage citizens to produce their own products relying on the expertise and production/distribution methods of the sites. Using lulu.com the public writes, formats, uploads, prints and disseminates publications. Both amateur and professional photographers inexpensively share their work through Flickr with millions of people. Blogs threaten mainstream journalism as citizen journalists flood the web with freely written, freely distributed content.

Technological advances in the mechanics of production, particularly digital printers and RM (rapid manufacturing), are revolutionizing printing/production making small runs and print-on-demand publications/products viable. As the means of production and distribution open up to individual hands, distributed content creation surges. The amateur creative emerges.

### *Passive Consumer >> Active Creator*

Such activated users provide a great opportunity for designers who understand how the co-creation process works. Through experiments with co-creation designers can understand how to reposition themselves as developers of flexible creative frameworks rather than just producers of finished products. Our students face a future of activated users and, so do we.

## PROJECT SPECIFICS

The more we thought about cocreation and participatory culture, and recognized it around us—from Threadless to Facebook, from Flickr shows to the Behance network, our question became more clear:

*How do we bring participatory thinking to the classroom? How do we mobilize our resources—57 students and the vast expanse of the internet—toward an experiment in the structure, but also the form, of cocreation?*

We dug through our roster of recent projects and realized that each already had a participatory quality:

1. *Sustain Yourself* and *Scavenger Handbook*: A publication project in which students laid out spreads separately and then combined them into books produced on Lulu.com with the option of making their own cover design. The theme of both books was turning trash into treasures—clementine crates into shelves, soda cans into ipod cases and videotapes into mailboxes.
2. *Fashion Graphics.org*: A website allowing each student to upload their own project in a course about making and branding fashion.
3. *Delicious*: A website promoting the free font Delicious that aimed to build a virtual community of people who used and posted icons made by using the typeface.

Although these earlier projects engaged the user and considered new means of production/distribution they didn't reexamine the design process. The design process itself did not truly involve co-creation. By contrast, we wanted our experiment to address both the structure and form of cocreative work. We decided our project had to be:

1. *Inclusive*: To accommodate a diverse group of students.
2. *Modular*: Getting to the essence of cocreative work, according to Yochai Benkler.<sup>2</sup>
3. *Accessible*: Easy to carry out, avoiding losing our students in convoluted technical schemes.
4. *Critical*: Digging deep into contemporary culture to explore a relevant idea.
5. *Type-driven*: Built on design basics.

How could we set up a workflow that would connect students from our two schools in a way that embraced a broad range of skills?

*55 students*

*Four weeks*

*Three online platforms: Googledocs, Flickr and Vimeo*

*60 jpgs*

## LINKED: THE PROJECT

As we put our brains together, the project premise started to unfold. The word LINKED emerged as our topic, our theme, and as our project structure. We divided the students into six groups, one for each letter of the word. After choosing Trade Gothic as our typeface, we set up a template, slicing the standard HDTV video format into six segments:

2. See Yochai Benkler, *The Wealth of Networks*, (New Haven: Yale, 2006).

“‘Modularity’ is a property of a project that describes the extent to which it can be broken down into smaller components, or modules, that can be independently produced before they are assembled into a whole. If modules are independent, individual contributors can choose what and when to contribute independently of each other. This maximizes their autonomy and flexibility to define the nature, extent, and timing of their participation in the project.”

	WEEKS ONE AND THREE		WEEKS TWO AND FOUR			
	Bri Antonaccio Megan Barber Lisa Blum Dustin Rezac John Lovelle	Alex Coyle Nathalie Garfinkle Meghan Harris Philip Yung	Colin Nyborg Joe Skilton Nathan Tavel Molly Maskin Arianna Krakeller	Shannon Craver Ellen Cuipepper Kathina Kelly Leigh Bonhost Alysa Eversole	Vannian Roy Sabrina Kogan Huong Le Kara Isaacson Joanna Mosenzon	Kalile Parrish Alex Sloves John Sperandio Jason Walters Bethany Rudabaugh
	Kristin Carlson Carey Chaisa Cheryl Chinna Kristen Yagley Jennifer Rezac	Kristin Carlson Carey Chaisa Cheryl Chinna Kristen Yagley Jennifer Rezac	Derek Tersani Ruth Tiang Melissa Barst Allison Backovski Hailey Biel	Greg Gadowsicz Coco Kao Zoe Keller Jason Carter Emily Drumm	Andy Levin John Lyons Cain McCreath Colleen Yates Erin Killinger	Garrett Varady Carolyn Williams Jiahong Huang Lauren Romano
	390 px	160 px	320 px	310 px	300 px	420 px

### An Experiment in Cocreation

*Students from two graphic design programs collaborating across time and space to produce one motion graphic.*

57 STUDENTS  
4 WEEKS  
3 WEB PLATFORMS  
*GoogleDocs, Flickr and Vimeo*

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We asked our students to think about ways in which they saw themselves as members of their social groups and citizens in a connected society. We assigned each one a letter, and asked them to create a module, a two-second animation of it. That way, we would end up with about ten modules per letter. At a standard video rate of 30 frames per second, each student was responsible for creating a sequence of 60 frames.

The rules were few but stringent: The module had to critically explore the notion of being linked. The size of the animation had to match the pixel size of the template for that letter; And to help transitions, the letterform had to start and end in the template position. Beyond these restrictions, the animation specifics were up to the students. They could use motion graphics software, or generate their jpgs in any other way, using photography or screen grabs, or the Illustrator Export feature, and then animate them in Quicktime, Photoshop, or Motion Stop, a simple stop-motion tool we found on the internet. We encouraged experimentation.

We drew up an alternating, four-week schedule in which each week, half of the students were asked to create their module and post it to designated places on the web: GoogleDocs for file storage, Flickr for viewing and discussing each modules, and Vimeo for screening the edited works-in-progress, as well as the final piece. As we sat back and watched, students formed a community of makers and critics. With each posted module, our Flickr discussion group became the primary forum for feedback and dialogue about the work.

At the end of each week, student editors spliced the modules together into full-size animated works-in-progress of the whole word that we would in turn view and discuss in class. At the end of the fourth week, the final animation took shape.



<http://vimeo.com/1199276>

Our project was INCLUSIVE, in that it accommodated a broad range of students from three classes, including sophomores, juniors, and even non-design majors. They could use their own skills to generate images any way they liked. This inclusiveness also meant that we could open the project up to members of the general public in the future, if we wished.

Since our classes did not meet at the same time, it was impossible to stage a video-conference. Our students actually never officially met, even remotely, but they spontaneously formed their own alliances. As soon as we passed out the team lists, they followed each other on Facebook and Twitter. And further, it was on their demand that we set up online critiques on Flickr, where lively comments flourished under module posts.

It was MODULAR. Although they welcomed feedback, each student produced their 2-second sequence independently and then contributed it to the larger work. This sort of flexibility, as Yochai Benkler has noted, makes it possible for individuals to collaborate across time and space. They recognized the give and take of authorship and quickly realized that the quality of each individual segment affected the quality of the whole. With a collective stake in the outcome, they urged each other to do better.

The use of ready-made, existing web platforms made the project ACCESSIBLE and affordable. Already at ease with online tools, students naturally took to the project parameters and required little training.

In reflecting on the topic, students crafted CRITICAL visual metaphors: string winding around pins, the way mental sinews wrap around idea nodes; garbage assembling into letter form, in a shout-out to sustainability; the handle of a door opening and closing, forming the letter L in typographic mimesis, to name a few.

To stay focused, simple, and close to our discipline, we asked students to distill complex messages to clean, clear letter treatments, thereby keeping the project TYPE-DRIVEN. We wanted to strike the right balance between restricted and unbridled form making, and type offered just the right framework.

#### DEMOCRATIZATION OF COMMUNICATION

The project that we ended up with inspired classroom discussions about possibilities for the democratization of communication. For decades media activists like Kalle Lasn of Adbusters have pleaded with designers to answer for the societal damage resulting from frenzied advertising-driven consumerism.<sup>3</sup> The design community itself has called for more social responsibility through treatises like the *First Things First Manifesto of 2000* or the more recent *Designers Accord*.

By building projects, like our LINKED experiment, that express and link individual voices, designers can combat singular top down visions of culture, making room in both culture and commerce for a multiplicity of voices eager for expression. Rather than endorse global universal visions we can encourage and sustain the expression of local voices. We can contribute to the democratization of the communication.

We are in a period of unbalance right now in which the proprietary market-based models of information are struggling against the new individual, social, peer-produced model—the cocreation model.<sup>4</sup> How will it end? We don't know. But we owe it to our students to make them conscious of this struggle and help them redefine creativity and communication in a progressive, sustainable way.

#### REFLECTION ON FINAL PROJECT

We created a structural framework populated by student designers. We inspired our students to think beyond their own classroom to evolving forms of cocreation. We encouraged them to celebrate individual perspectives and voices. Where do we go from here? How can cocreation claim agency, urgency and currency for the profession?

3. See Kalle Lasn, "The Future of Design" (lecture, TYPO Berlin, 11th International Design Conference, Berlin, May 2006).

4. For more about the Designers Accord visit [www.designersaccord.org](http://www.designersaccord.org).

5. For key discussion of the democratic potential of decentralized participation see Henry Jenkins, *Convergence Culture* (New York: New York University Press, 2006), 240-260.

1. *Reach Out to Broader Audiences*: In our experiment, the students were both the makers and the users of the project framework. How could this system be opened to different groups? How can designers use systems like this one to engage audiences in active making? Think competitions, target audiences, viral marketing.
2. *Engage Clients*: Work with clients to encourage design-driven interactions with customer bases. Cocreation models work well between institution and institution but what about between institution and industry?
3. *Move Beyond Experiment*: Find ways to integrate cocreation into design assignments in a way that focuses on problem-solving.
4. *Automate and Decentralize*: Write scripts to automate the process of gathering, editing modules and viewing the work-in-progress. Let the project unfold on the internet in an even more transparent way. Streamline the process to the point where anyone could start and carry out their own cocreative project.
5. *Encourage Grass-Roots Voices*: Place agency in the hand of the user. Allow users to determine the theme and topic. Be more open-ended in order to stay more focused. Let this system be a tool for empowering communities, be they local or remote.

We want to know what you think.

*Thank you to our students for making LINKED happen.*