

2022 Fellowship Final Report - Design for the Mind - Addiction
Pratt Institute Center for Teaching and Learning

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Introduction

Design for the Mind names a series of courses I've developed since 2016 at Pratt Institute's School of Design. As this title suggests, the way this coursework evaluates the merits of student outcomes is through their emotional and relational qualities. The design thinking it cultivates sets the expectation that successful work makes life more livable rather than eliminates problems. Every three semesters, this pedagogy focuses on a different socially oriented topic and partnered with a non-profit to offer students feedback from people with professional expertise and lived experience. Past topics have been living with an Alzheimer's diagnosis, living in the United States without legal status, and managing a mental illness. During the two semesters of this fellowship our studio joined with The Partnership to End Addiction to develop designs assisting recovery. Positioned between the departments of interior and industrial design, this course was open to graduate and undergraduate students from different fields.

Initial Goals

My Center for Teaching and Learning Fellowship was initiated by the self-critical observation that some student design outcomes from the two iterations focusing on living without legal status and mental illness were built from students' assumptions that simply promoting positive attitudes through design would be enough to improve the life quality of individuals living with entrenched pain.

Goals I expected to realize were to:

- Find ways to guide students beyond Pollyannish understandings of how design can operate.
- Better promote more meaningful interdisciplinary collaborations.
- Learn new pedagogical methodologies from peers that could enrich the learning environment I foster.

Goals discovered through the fellowship were to:

- Develop of a framework to critically reflect on my teaching efficacy.
- Tactically adapt coursework that was in process based on insights discovered reflectively.
- Expand and nuance the ethics of engaging vulnerable persons through design pedagogy.

Project Accomplishments

While it would be disingenuous to claim that all of these goals have been satisfactorily achieved at the fellowship's conclusion, hearing the frustration of other faculty fellows as they struggled to meet their ambitions has made me more comfortable in sitting with the disappointment that accompanies growth. I've become more patient with myself thanks to their vulnerable honesty.

Framed in this way - as in process - I am comfortable sharing the following the following achievements with a sense of fulfillment.

- When my goal of critical self-study emerged during fellowship discussions, reflective journaling was suggested by the fellowship directors Judit Torok and Maura Conley. Before this context, I had not actively considered what activities might offer a vantage from which to observe the way I teach. Turning to my journal after learning milestones or when student work gave me the sense that my teaching conduct might need recalibration. Discovering the efficacy of writing honestly and privately about my teaching toward its improvement is perhaps the most rewarding of these accomplishments.
- During the spring semester of 2022, I allowed students to design toward addiction in general hoping that they would be more engaged by a specific situation that resonated with them. During the reflective journaling after our final review I wrote, "I am not calibrating the topics of student projects with the expertise of our partners [opioid addiction]." For the fall semester, all students were required to design for people caring for a loved one struggling with opioid use or managing their addiction to these narcotics. With this limitation, students were able to share their research with one another more easily and did not lose time considering which form of addiction their work would address. An unexpected but valuable insight to this approach came from a student who shared that by engaging a form of addiction that they did not struggle with; they were able to draw from their own lived experience with another substance without triggering its accompanying trauma.
- In processing another journal entry after the spring semester, "collaborative projects [intended to promote interdisciplinarity by mixing students from different departments] all look like industrial design projects, I am concerned that they are not really exchanging ways of thinking.", I experimented with the required form of fall collaborations. Rather than smaller groups of three developing objects like their individual designs, two groups of six were instructed to develop design protocols rather than material prototypes. By removing the scale of projects that differentiates departments students were able to work toward their similarities.
- Limiting the topic to opioid addiction aggregated students research into a deeper and more rigorous body of knowledge for them to collectively draw from in the fall. While perfection is elusive, a greater number of projects were convincing as viable propositions toward recovery.

Data and Analysis

When political advantage was perceived by characterizing efforts in the United States to manage substance abuse as a war, success was evaluated through a zero-sum worldview. This has led to an increase in stigma around addiction and an attitude that abstinence from narcotics is the only valid outcome. This position has formed social-norms for decades and are broadly experienced as truths. As I was teaching this course in the spring, my journaling revealed the degree to which my own views were shaped by these inherited values. I wrote “I’m feeling uneasy about supporting projects by students that facilitate the safe use of narcotics.” I brought this internal conflict first to colleagues from The Partnership. Drawing from credible evidence, these experts argued that harm reduction was a more realistic addiction management ethos. They shared that people recovering from addiction often have relapses before removing narcotic use from their lives. Now, in the era of fentanyl, keeping people alive until that last relapse is imperative. While this approach is convincing, I worried that by promoting harm reduction as a goal, students might interpret this more nuanced understanding as condoning narcotics use. During one of the CTL fellowship check-ins, I shared my concerns with peer educators seeking their feedback. Positions varied among faculty and our discussion ended without a clear direction. Emerging from reflective journaling after this conversation was the idea to set aside classroom time for students to discuss this. As we debated the advantages and dangers of this ethical quandary, I was able to clearly communicate that neither I nor the policies of Pratt Institute encourage students to use dangerous narcotics. However, in acknowledging the limited power of this discouragement, it is also possible to compassionately engage people who are using and become advocates for their wellbeing through design. The following projects exemplify this attitude of care for individuals enacting self-harm.

The Partnership to End Addiction identified the stigmatization of people struggling with addiction as a major impediment to recovery. These projects developed awareness campaigns aimed at breaking the silence that the shame of stigma produces.

Several students responded to The Partnership’s evidence-based assertion that strong personal relationships are the most effective recovery tool. These projects build empathy and compassion for their loved one’s struggles with addiction.

The next two projects from spring 22 and fall 22 show the difference between interdisciplinary collaborations working toward objects and protocols respectively. The latter group developed a strategy for using small things to create spaces that can be implemented in general.

Next Steps / Reflection

With the Spring 23 semester remaining to further refine this methodology through experimentation I plan to test the adaptations that follow. Each was initiated from student

feedback shared in the student course evaluations and during a reflective discussion with students at the end of the fall 22 semester.

- Students felt that they did not have enough time in conversation with experts. This next semester, I will approach The Partnership with the request of designating a representative to answer student questions over email or zoom outside of formal reviews.
- While I was satisfied with the interdisciplinary outcomes of collaborative works, several students shared that this course did not open design thinking from another field to the extent that they had hoped. In the spring 2023 semester I will ask students to articulate what they would like to learn from and offer students outside their department and pair students whose wishes align.