

## **STRICTLY BALLROOM OR DANCING IN THE MOMENT? Methods for Enhancing the Partnership of Design and Business.**

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### *Abstract*

*The relationship between design and business has been the subject of considerable research in the field of design management. The success of this relationship, in particular between business clients and design consultants, determines the effectiveness of design projects in meeting business objectives. It is in the design briefing process that these issues are brought most fully into focus. This seeks to formalise mutual and coherent understanding of the project in terms of a written agreement of objectives, drivers and requirements for sign-off. A study of the process, suggests that this can be problematic in several respects – most notably the reluctance of designers to raise questions concerning business, which reflects their lack of confidence in using business-related language. Whilst previous studies have proposed detailed guidelines on the issues that should be covered in design briefing, these can be too prescriptive and focus exclusively on the content of the brief rather than the process.*

*It is the contention of the authors that the briefing process provides a vital opportunity for sharing the tacit knowledge of both business and design, which is a key determinant of project success. The dynamic interaction of the client and designer during the briefing process, striving to achieve shared goals in the project context, is described by the authors as "dancing in the moment", and is contrasted to the "strictly ballroom" approach of conventional briefing guidelines.*

### **Introduction**

“It may be possible to do without dancing entirely. Instances have been known of young people passing many, many months successively without being at any ball of any description, and no material injury accrue either to body or mind; but when a beginning is made -- when the felicities of rapid motion have once been, though slightly, felt -- it must be a very heavy set that does not ask for more.”

Emma, by Jane Austen

If we were to regard the association between a design consultancy and their client in terms of a human relationship that aspires perhaps to a marriage of business and creative interests, the first design brief forged between them is the equivalent of that crucial first date. Get it right, and the confetti of commercial success will soon rain down upon them. Get it wrong, and it's back to the singles' bar of the unpaid pitch.

We view the briefing process as a dance – a shared experience that seeks a dynamic movement that exceeds the sum of its parts, relying upon mutual trust and a willingness to learn quickly the strengths and distinctive styles of each partner. It

should be an enjoyable experience that enables flexibility and – within agreed parameters – risk taking. But what sort of dance is appropriate? Much of the literature on briefing is of the ‘strictly ballroom’ school – a prescribed choreography within a very formal setting. The research upon which this paper is based suggests the value of a more improvised approach. It is our contention that the briefing process provides a vital opportunity for sharing the tacit knowledge of both business and design, which is a key determinant of project success. The dynamic interaction of the client and designer during the briefing process, striving to achieve shared goals in the project context, is described by the authors as "dancing in the moment", and is contrasted to the “strictly ballroom” approach of conventional briefing guidelines.

Tomes and Armstrong (1997) have described briefing in terms of a process of “verbal-visual translation” whereby business objectives are expressed visually by designers in an iterative process that progressively moves the partners towards a point of agreement. Based on primary research conducted on the briefing process in a major UK-based design consultancy, we propose an approach that builds on this ‘translation’ perspective, providing a framework that seeks explicitly to share tacit knowledge through an approach that uses storytelling, visual exchanges and metaphor. This paper summarises the underlying research, sets out the case for this approach, and discusses its implications in terms of business and design education and professional development.

## **Two worlds**

Despite efforts made by governments in the UK for a century and a half, there remains a stubborn and seemingly unbridgeable gap between design and business. The recent Cox Report highlighted the lack of awareness that too many enterprises have of the value of design (Cox, 2005). Designers are perhaps seen as the “felt-tip fairies” with their clients finding it hard to understand them and the potential value that they bring. Equally, designers, having no formal business training at University or art school, can find it difficult to communicate their ideas to their business-savvy clients, without years of experience. As Walker (1989) has observed: “Managers are good at dissection, cutting through irrelevancies, getting to hard facts and the basic structure of problems. They are very problem oriented. Designers by contrast are good at assembling, bringing unlikely things together. They work by leaping to detailed end results. They are solution led.” With different strengths, different ways of thinking and different ways of seeing the world, designers and businesspeople are often seen as two tribes, too often in conflict. During a design project, communication is key. But when client and designer come from such different backgrounds, both with differing perspectives, communication can be difficult and somewhat strained.

This gulf in communication can become most apparent and visible during the briefing process. The aim of the briefing process, simplified, is to define the parameters of the project, the scope, deadlines, limitations, resources etc. Studies in the literature do not, however, talk of a briefing process. They tend to talk of “the design brief” — that is, the finished product; the piece of paper for sign off. However what is important is the actual process in which designers and clients engage in order to arrive at a mutually agreeable brief for the project to commence.

To be successful, briefing should provide a focus for a whole process that precedes the finalisation of the “piece of paper”. Olson, Slater, and Cooper, (2000) describe the three stages within briefing as follows:

1. Clearly articulate the firm’s competitive strategy to designers and design managers.
2. Develop a detailed understanding of the design requirements inherent in the adopted competitive strategy.
3. Ensure open lines of communication among the design group and other functional units.

We propose that by client and designer actively engaging in a briefing process; by interacting to satisfy both client and designer goals, the barriers in communication as defined in the introduction, can be broken down.

This paper looks at the work of Tomes, Oates, and Armstrong (1997), and Nutt (1993), in setting the scene for the importance of increased communication during the briefing process, and in contrast, the rigid manner of Phillips (2004) in “creating the perfect design brief”. The perspectives of Tomes, Oates and Armstrong (1997) will be examined in detail, in particular, their suggestion of the need for verbal and visual translation to enhance communication. In addition, the authors’ fieldwork in the design industry, drawing on a case study of a leading UK-based design consultancy, will propose guidelines for briefing, as “dancing in the moment” as a comparison for the “strictly ballroom” approach, as advocated by Phillips (2004).

### **Briefing – the Peter Principles**

Design briefing carries with it a whole series of contradictions and complexities. This section of the paper will now outline these perspectives.

#### *Briefing: a rigid, structured process*

There are practitioners and authors who advocate a strict and highly formalised briefing process. For examples, the RIBA have devised a formal “Plan of work” which structures the process architects use to form a brief. This process is highly rigid and systematic, and does not allow for creative and spontaneous interaction. This may be appropriate for architectural briefing, however, its application is limited when faced with the design of an interior or a brand for example. It is therefore not a cross-disciplinary approach, which is the shape of design today – health, social sciences and design are collaborating more now than ever before, and if the briefing process were as rigid as the RIBA’s plan of work, this would limit the creative interaction vital to the momentum of these projects. The RIBA’s plan of work is indeed appropriate for large architectural design projects - after all, these must be rigidly planned and structured. Their vast body of work is highly commendable and relevant to the discipline of architecture, however, their linear models and principles cannot easily be applied to other design disciplines.

Peter Phillips (2004) is regarded as the leading authority on defining the briefing process and has become highly influential in business and design. He stresses the need for definite content of a design brief and, in his book “Creating the Perfect Design Brief”, emphasises the need to focus on the content themes of a brief, rather than

engaging in an interactive process with the client whereby the content naturally emerges. He proposes a number of content themes in a design brief which are briefly outlined below.

#### *Project Overview and Background*

Phillips articulates that this part of the briefing process must articulate the scope of the project, the business needs and objectives of the project, the desired outcomes, and ownership of the project. He further explains that this part of the brief also serves as the executive summary, “rich in information without being too long or labored” (Phillips, 2004: 30).

#### *Category Review*

Phillips defines this as being a review of the industry and context within which the company is operating, or “in which the product/service is involved,” (Phillips, 2004:33) In short, this stage serves to define where the organisation and its products/services are in terms of trends, competitors and self. If the brief identifies these factors, this will help direct the project in the right manner.

#### *Target Audience Review*

According to Phillips, this is the most “understated section of a design brief” (Phillips, 2004: 37). He iterates the necessity of visiting and questioning target groups and identifying them in depth – not just by age, but by more explicit characteristics.

#### *Company Portfolio*

This stage in the process serves to define the organisation and its activities as wholly as possible. This could also include views, ethos, underlying nuances and corporate values.

#### *Business Objectives and Design Strategy*

This is the most important section, but according to Phillips, the one that is most often omitted. Phillips argues that for a design solution to be effective, it must solve a problem – granted, that goes without saying. However, the problem must then be clearly stated, but also, the business objectives of the solution must also be articulated. Only then, according to Phillips, can “a coherent design strategy be developed” (Phillips 2004: 31). Phillips argues that if the business objectives were outlined at this stage, very clearly, then the design strategy would be underpinned by these core business objectives.

#### *Project Scope, Time Line and Budget (Phases)*

These are the necessary operational details which help frame the brief. A Gantt chart may help illustrate this, with key milestones identified.

#### *Research Data*

These are the research questions needing to be answered in the design solution.

#### *Appendix*

Any additional information which is particularly lengthy is added here. This could take the form of scoping studies before brief construction, or market research reports.

#### *Executive Summary*

This is also the project overview and background, to clearly define the project and objectives, followed by a comprehensive discussion of target audience. The next part of the executive summary will be a discussion as to how the design strategy is linked to the business objectives. And finally, the phases, which includes project scope, time line and budget.

*Briefing: the need to embrace spontaneity*

Phillips provides a highly worthwhile contribution to the literature of design briefing, by providing a sense of structure and order to what seemingly is a haphazard and complex process. However, we suggest that there are limitations to the application of his proposed process.

Phillips' work is mainly concerned with the graphic design industry and the management of in-house design teams. As more and more design projects move towards becoming inter-disciplinary, crossing the boundaries between graphic and interaction design, interior design and branding, the process needs to be more flexible in its application. Therefore, the fact that Phillips' work is based on his experience of one discipline suggests it may be difficult to apply his principles outside of this domain. In addition, the fact that Phillips' work is mainly based on the work of in-house design departments suggests that his principles may not take account of the more problematic role that an external design consultancy may have. Consultancies face a more challenging situation, as the information surrounding their client's business is not as freely available to them. They have to make more of an effort to "get under the client's skin" and to probe into the culture and values of a new organisation for each job they undertake.

In their study of client and designer relationships, Bruce and Docherty (1993:416) highlight trust as being paramount for extracting information. They found that "an intimate working and personal relationship with a client is considered conducive to, and necessary for obtaining the quality and understanding, which makes for appropriate design solutions". In addition, they emphasise that building strong relationships is "particularly important for the designer to obtain information". Therefore designers need to become adept at forming strong, trust-bound relationships with their clients, and the briefing process must provide a framework for enabling them to do this.

Whilst this paper does not support the idea that briefing should be completely unstructured and left to chance, there must be space for interaction, flexibility, and spontaneity. If the process is too structured and "to-the-book", this may damage client-designer relationships developing, and may actually stifle the interaction between client and designer – their excitement and enthusiasm which could drive the project forward, their relationship becoming deeper and more trust-bound, and more importantly, the new knowledge and creativity emerging as a result of enhanced and joint participation. Indeed, this is borne out in the findings of this paper.

Tomes, Oates and Armstrong's work (1997) has given valuable insights into design briefing as a more inclusive, negotiated and flexible process. They have described design briefing in terms of a "verbal-visual translation", whereby the briefing process moves between verbal and visual – and addresses the gap in communication in terms

of designers being more likely to communicate visually, whilst the client communicates verbally – a skill which some designers with less experience may find difficult. Indeed, the development of visual communication through the design process can be regarded as a critical means of bringing together the disparate knowledge and perspectives that are essential to innovation. In their recent ethnographic study of design projects, Ewenstein and Whyte consider that “drawings act as a holding ground and negotiation space for different knowledge forms”. Tomes, Oates and Armstrong provide valuable insight into the need of fluency between designer and client in formulating a design brief. They have also highlighted the fact that designers are less confident in articulating their ideas verbally, whereas clients expect them to be able to do so. This suggests a gulf in communication, which could hinder a fluid and mutually satisfying briefing process.

This paper will now build upon the work of Tomes and Armstrong in outlining how designer and client can engage in a mutually satisfying, fluid, interactive and enjoyable briefing process, which, for external design consultancies, can lead to long-term relationships with clients, and additionally lead to the client’s experience of briefing being enhanced, by actively engaging and educating the client throughout the process. Furthermore, we will outline guidelines for a fluid yet structured, mutually satisfying briefing process, with high energy and interaction. This process, based on the findings from the authors’ fieldwork also seeks to educate designer and client throughout the briefing process.

### **Case study method**

In order to understand the nature of design briefing and how it actually operates within industry, the research is concerned with accounts of actual employees within the case study. Therefore an inductive, qualitative approach was adopted. In order to examine the phenomena of new knowledge emerging through interaction between the participants, the research methodology was carefully constructed to gain rich data from a holistic perspective. The research design employs case study analysis, defined by Stake (1981, p. 4, cited in Merriam, 1991, p. 13) where “previously unknown relationships and variables can be expected to emerge from case studies leading to a rethinking of the phenomenon being studied”. In addition, case study research can be seen as a suitable methodology where a holistic and in-depth investigation of phenomena is needed (Feagin, Orum & Sjoberg, 1991).

#### *Case Selection*

The case was selected on the grounds of suitability to the research, in terms of quality of data gathered, and access. The co-author is deeply embedded in the research case, having worked in this company for three years. This enables rich access to data necessary in a holistic inductive study of this phenomenon. The company chosen, Graven Images Ltd, is a cross-disciplinary design consultancy, specialising in graphic, interior and exhibition design. The company's thirty three employees work across traditional technical specialisms for a client roster that includes the BBC, Standard Life and Radisson SAS. The company had a relatively loose briefing structure in place, usually carried out by more experienced designers. However, during a re-shaping of their briefing process, and the development of a new briefing tool, less-experienced designers can now engage in the briefing processes with confidence, contributing to their personal development.

### *Data Collection*

The data collected in this study has come from four main sources:

- A series of workshops facilitated by one of the authors in a leading UK design consultancy;
- Observation carried out by one of the authors in this leading UK design consultancy.
- Interviews with staff from the design consultancy, and other leading designers
- A discussion between the authors regarding their knowledge of design briefing in the literature and personal experience

### *Interviews*

Twelve in-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted, ranging from twenty minutes to two hours in length. The participants were selected in order to give a fair representation of the company. In addition, two in-depth interviews were carried out with leading international designers, to validate the data and test certain issues.

A topic guide was used to form the framework of the interviews. The topic guide has been described as “A résumé of the main areas of interest to be explored... designed so that whilst covering the general areas of interest it should allow unforeseen areas to emerge.” (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Lowe, 2002, p. 37). This provided some structure to the data collection to ensure the desired areas were covered, whilst allowing freedom to explore issues that naturally emerged as the interviews progressed. The interviews were digitally recorded.

### *Observation*

The author, as participant observer, has also carried out eighteen months of observation at Graven Images. The data gathered in this context is rich and original, given the author’s unique access to the participants, gained from having worked there for three years. The observation data was gathered through daily journals by the author, reflecting on the working day, and interactions between colleagues. All participants were told of this at the commencement of the study, and because of the author’s close relationship with them, there is a high degree of mutual trust felt between all, and integrity shown by the author (and known by the participants) and therefore, the observation was unnoticed and relaxed, but very in-depth.

### *Staff Workshops at Graven Images*

Two workshops on design briefing also forms part of this paper’s findings. In the first workshop, 23 staff agreed to take part in these workshops, held at the company’s studio in Glasgow. The participants were asked to take a brief from the same client (to ensure continuity). The author then held a session with the participants to explore the concept of briefing further, in terms of its complexity and difficulties. The data was gathered by recording the sessions on DVD and then transcribing the sessions in order to extract broad themes and then categories, and qualifiers. This was further validated using the topic guide.

During the second workshop, issues which emerged from the findings of the previous workshop were validated and refined. Twenty five staff members participated in this three hour workshop, and all staff agreed it made them think more positively and confidently about design briefing. In particular, new designers with less professional

experience agreed that the emphasis put on the client's business was a perspective they would now consider more deeply. In addition all designers enjoyed the opportunity to learn from their peer designers through the discussions and activities during these workshops.

## **Data Analysis**

The interviews, and workshop proceedings were recorded digitally, and then transcribed. The data was analysed using the process of coding, as defined in Strauss and Corbin's grounded theory approach. This approach requires the researcher to be sensitive to the data, and able to notice emergent themes and categories during analysis (Denzin & Lincoln 2000, Strauss & Corbin, 1990). This method was adapted and will now be described.

### *Stage 1: Audit of Existing Knowledge of Design Briefing*

This stage was necessary to bring together the authors' previous knowledge of the concept of design briefing. This stage was fundamental in the recognition and development of the new guidelines for briefing identified in the research, as it helps to capture how the previous knowledge had shaped the new knowledge. The co-author's personal journals and observation notes were consulted, and the themes that emerged during learning were noted in order to be in a position to compare the new observations from data gathered in the case study in this research. In addition, both authors engaged in a semi-structured discussion on their existing knowledge of briefing as a means of capturing their areas of knowledge, and which themes were deemed as needing further research in the literature.

The act of recording these themes, as aforementioned, is a means of making this knowledge explicit for accurate comparison in the latter stages of data analysis.

### *Stage 2: Identification of Broad Categories of Examples of Design Briefing Factors from Interviews and Workshops*

Beginning with a focus on the interviews, the interview transcripts were analysed seeking patterns and variance in descriptions in design briefing tools. Categories of techniques and important factors were drawn out from all interviews, and then probed through further examination of the transcripts.

### *Stage 3: Revising and Building Upon These Initial Categories Using Cross-Cases From Observation, to Frame into Single Factors*

These initial categories were then examined by analysing the observation data, to validate the categories formulated. In addition, further categories which emerged were then cross-examined with the interview and workshop data.

### *Stage 4: Validating These Factors Using Qualifiers From All Fieldwork And Further Observation, and Formulating the Actual Guidelines From These Factors*

These factors were then cross-examined using qualifiers from all data collected. The explicit identification of these factors was followed by further qualification and verification of these issues through seeking further examples of these from the data. The very act of making these factors explicit meant that further synthesis of the data could be conducted more effectively, as it was possible to actively seek relevant information related to these specific issues. In addition, because the author was



extremely close to the data, and because of her experience with the company and employees, was sensitive to cultural nuances, or any impeding factors on the data, such as "buzz-words". Glaser (1978) refers to this skill as "theoretical sensitivity". It is the fact the author works at this company and has a good relationship with the staff, together with knowledge of how the business works, provides her with this theoretical sensitivity.

## **Case study findings**

### *1. Newly-trained designers are not confident in asking business-related questions*

Tomes, Oates and Armstrong (1997) highlighted the issue that designers find it difficult to communicate verbally. Since then, design as a discipline has come under pressure to be able to communicate to clients the impact that it can have on the bottom line. Designers are now more adept in the skill of communicating their ideas verbally, and so it would appear that this is no longer a gulf in communication between client and designer. However, for a designer to simply be able to communicate verbally instead of visually is no longer enough. Clients want designers to understand their business and are more confident in designers when they ask business-related questions. Phillips (2003) places the emphasis on the need for designers to adapt to the language of business: "The primary challenge for designers is to be able to think more completely in business outcome terms. Traditionally, professional design curricula have focused almost entirely on training people to become designers. Very few prepare designers to become business partners. Often designers will need to learn a new language - the language of business" (Phillips, 2004).

An interview with Terry Irwin, an experienced designer and design educator, illustrates the importance of understanding business:

"We...and we would do this as soon as possible, would try and get into their place of business, with as many people as we could afford" (Terry Irwin, interview, 10.10.05)

Terry further enforces the importance of designers needing to really understand a business when designing for them:

"And then pretty quickly we want to go their place of business...and really see how they lived, what is the spirit of the place - I mean, because companies are like personalities, you know, Apple Computer has a completely different culture to Sun Microsystems, which is completely different to Microsoft...different people...and unless you go and walk in the door and really...unless you have gone in an experienced that, I think you can't really deliver an appropriate design solution." (Terry Irwin, interview, 10.10.05)

In addition, 1 in 5 design businesses would like to develop their designers' business awareness (Design Council, 2005).

During the first workshop at Graven Images, it became apparent that the newly-trained designers and some of the more experienced designers did not feel confident in asking business related questions. They enthused about the design-related elements

of a project but needed prompting to address the business-related part of the brief. Suggested questions from the tool prompt included “who is your market?” and “what are the current industry trends?”.

One designer remarked that they would feel uncomfortable in asking business-related questions:

“I’d feel a bit stupid asking about industry trends. “  
(Participant 8, workshop 1)

In addition, during the natural lulls and gaps in a conversation about briefing, even though the briefing tool prompt outlined specific business-related questions which the designers had all agreed were important beforehand, on the whole, the designers were reluctant to ask these – even when there was a lull in conversation. They tended to talk about design-specific issues to fill a gap (whether a building was listed, for example), almost as if they were using their design knowledge as a safety net.

This is clearly a problem. If designers—who are not founders— do not tend to ask business-related questions, then how are they going to gain access to the client’s tacit knowledge about their business? This certainly suggests the need for the subject of business to be introduced and taught in as part of the design undergraduate curriculum. Prendiville (2005) has contributed to this debate surrounding design education significantly by drawing the similarities between business studies and design history. Prendiville (2005) suggests that because these two seemingly different subject share similarities, they could be taught to product design students simultaneously, as they are not too dissimilar subjects. In addition, Gornick (2002) has tirelessly emphasised the need for industry-based research projects for graduates to help them understand the commercial world they will be working in.

## *2. Briefing is most effective when client and designer exchange their domain-relevant knowledge*

Domain-relevant knowledge exchange is prevalent in the briefing process, and this is the real holy grail of briefing. Imagine the scenario: the client and the designer sitting at the table, each with an abundance of their own domain-relevant knowledge. The designer has a great deal of knowledge about design, and the client has a great deal of knowledge about their business. As Terry Irwin (2005) put it:

“To me it’s more like a discovery process. They want to find out about you...you want to find out about them but you also want to find out about their organisation.”

In order to inform the briefing process, i.e. to gather enough information to form a brief, the exchange of this domain-relevant knowledge needs to occur. The domain-relevant knowledge of both client and designer needs to be made explicit—ideally, an optimum trade-off between the designer’s expertise and knowledge in design, and the client’s experience and knowledge of their business. Both are deemed as central to the briefing process. On one hand, the design information related to the project is terribly important—the designer needs to know that information:

“I think that the project-related stuff is stuff we would ask for naturally...there is no question about that—we have to find that information out otherwise we cannot do anything” (Participant 8)

However, the designer also needs to know about the business in order to design for the client's business, shareholders and users and also to understand the context of the project. In addition, clients feel that the designer has his or her business interests at heart if they take an interest in their business and extract the business information; they need to be genuinely interested in the client's business. Both sides are important, and during this study, the designers agreed.

The co-founder of the company expressed the need for business-related information to drive the brief, at the very start:

“From the beginning...before the project starts...I think in every case we have to understand the business argument as well, so its like “you want us to design something...well what is the business case for doing that? What are your financial objectives? What are your cultural objectives? What about behaviour?” (Participant 1)

Through the workshops held in this research, by highlighting the importance of both of these opposing sides of the brief, designers are more aware of the fact that they need to gather both types of information—and the consequences of failing to do so, thus resulting in these designers gathering more complete and holistic briefs. The industry can take heed from this important breakthrough in design briefing.

### *3. The briefing process is driven by process, yet framed by content*

Phillips (2004) argues that content is important in briefing. However, it is the process; the interaction and dialogue between client and designer that produces the information specific to that situation—therefore it is the process that is important. If designers focus too rigidly on the content of the brief, and try to use a rigid format for the sake of gathering correct content at the expense of letting the process “flow”, then they could actually miss out on vital information and creative energy which inherently emerge during a fluid briefing process. It is both process and content which are inherently important, however the process will allow the correct content to emerge. One designer emphasises the importance of getting the content themes of a brief right:

“I think that with the process...I mean one of the things that is really fundamental in that process is that it's not like a series of separate questions...it's a conversation...” (Participant 5)

Another designer feel that the content is not important, it is the process of asking the right questions—which may be relatively open:

“Problems aren't usually that specialist - they are usually quite general things that are often common sense based – and it important that you listen and ask questions and take an interest. If you know nothing, then take an interest. Always be interested. Always ask questions...that is when you start to find out really useful things.” (Participant 5, workshop session 2)

It is our view that it is the process that drives the content. If one were to use a rigid template, it would not be applicable to every project at Graven as there are graphics,

interiors and exhibition projects, and every project is different. This can be said for any company, as undoubtedly every project is different, even if it is in the same discipline. Therefore, you would have to devise a new template for every project. However, if you are experienced in the briefing process, the content will emerge no matter what the project entails; the principles are the same for extracting different content.

In briefing, the designer is experienced in design projects, whereas the client may not be. The designer therefore has the confidence to take the client through the process, making sure that the correct themes (content) are covered along the way. S/he focuses on getting the process right, such as making sure the relationship is built steadily, and the culture is open to encourage trust and creativity, mutual learning and enjoyment. It is clear that through building trust and long-term relationships with clients that this tension can be managed.

#### *4. The brief must focus, but must be broad enough to inspire*

The aim of a brief is to frame the project. The scope and parameters are defined, as well as timeline and key project phases. As one designer put it:

“It is important to have a set scope of work – and then it stops the client moving the goalposts slightly – and extending your remit when you have not budgeted for that.” (Participant 8)

However, the brief needs to inspire, as one designer remarked:

“I need to be inspired by the brief... a stepping stone. It brings out a few things—that we just need to have dialogue about”. (Participant 9)

This new observation carries with it a strong push and pull tension. On one hand the client (and to an extent, sometimes designers, and their financial department) is fighting for the brief to be simple and defined, and very concise. The designer does agree, in some cases, and a brief that is too broad can be confusing and uninspiring. Yet the tension strikes when the designer clashes with those who want the brief to be concise, (and this can mean a clash with himself!) and the desire for the brief to be broad enough to inspire. This is a clear tension.

This new observation although prevalent and challenging, helps to focus the designer on the project. They are careful when extracting the project brief and engaging in the process with the clients, that they gather enough “soft” parts of the brief to inspire, yet they have to make sure they detail their scope enough to pin down the parameters of the project, and to extract the finer details of budget, sign-off procedures and timescale. Through the practitioners at the company actively addressing these two conflicting elements of a brief, the briefing process can be more informed. Practitioners will be more focused on the process holistically, as they know the “nuts and bolts” of the information they have to get rather than just getting enough to inspire. The value in structuring the process was positively viewed in the company: “This is a marvellous thing...it...(the process) needs to be captured so that others can learn from it.” (Participant 10)

#### *5. Roleplay can add a new dimension in understanding a project brief*

This builds upon Tomes, Oates and Armstrong's emphasis on the verbal-visual translation as enhancing communication. At Graven Images, clients are actually taken on a journey and involved in every stage of the process. The studios designers actually place themselves in the role of the user and encourage the client to do the same:

“I think that this is a really important method—and a really important part of the process—I think that in this team it would be good to put someone else's hat on because then we can just learn from it. Like Aunty Betty is 90. How is she going to use this space? Where is she going to go? And it is really fascinating just to do that. It's like that's the company, that's the project. This could be a way of finding this out—asking those questions to yourself in the shape of Aunty Betty—be her and ask yourself those questions.” (Participant 6)

## **Conclusions**

When we dance, we share knowledge, reach mutual understanding and create a worthwhile experience that fulfils some sense of a shared objective. And we have fun. That shared knowledge and mutual understanding provides the basis for our objectives to be more ambitious the next time we hit the dance floor with our partner.

So it is the same with design briefing. This paper has emphasised how it is the process that is critical, providing the means by which knowledge can be shared, content defined, and focussed objectives agreed. Design briefing is a complex, unpredictable process that is not conducive to prescribed methods of support. “Strictly ballroom” is a rigid approach to briefing which suppresses the energy and mutual learning which a “dancing in the moment” approach nurtures. In order to be able to “dance in the moment”, designers need to be able to be confident in asking the client about their business, and for the sake of the future of the design industry, this skill should not be left to develop from experience alone, and indeed may take years to develop. However, from our research it appears that the experience of “dancing in the moment” can be a liberation for designers, providing an engaging and challenging context for their practice, and a means of working in harmony with a commercial partner. This is particularly important in the fast changing new context of design in which the relationship between client and consultant itself is of critical competitive significance. Gornick (2006) has argued that we are shifting from ‘design consultancy’ to ‘innovation consultancy’ in which strategy and creativity become intertwined: “We can begin to see complementary goals and processes emerging between companies and their design consultants, giving their collaboration the unique value of being both creative and strategic. Long-term success goes to the designers who can deliver a fusion of strategy with creativity in their client relationships.”

The urgent need facing the design community is two-fold. First we must explore approaches and tools that encourage and enable more flexible and responsive approaches to briefing to develop. Second, it is apparent that design educators and the design curriculum need to build the confidence of designers to work in partnership with business. This is about building skills in communication, collaborative working styles, and creative partnerships. Designers must be able to talk the talk, walk the talk, and dance the talk.

It is time for the curriculum to change, and, like the design industry, become more inter-disciplinary. This move to inter-disciplinarity in the design industry has evolved as a result of the industry becoming increasingly competitive, with consultancies collaborating with other disciplines to make their design solutions and approaches more holistic and relevant to their users. It is time that the design curriculum did the same.

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