Title: “Grown-up Show and Tell (or the Shaping of a Personal Design Process through eLearning)”

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Abstract

There is a traditional ritual practiced in American grade schools wherein students bring something to class that interested them, and that they think will interest the rest of the class. This recurring event is known as Show and Tell. In today’s college classrooms, we can play and learn via a more sophisticated version of Show and Tell, one that offers students an opportunity to take responsibility for their education and bringing them to what Wenger described, in his book “Communities and Practice”, as “education in its deepest sense”. This is the opening up of one's self-awareness and identity by way of exploring “new ways of being that lie beyond (one's) current state”. Wenger was writing about education in its fullest manifestation — education with a capital “E”. But his words can easily be applied to the education of a designer, and linked to perhaps the most important discovery a young designer can make: a personal design process, or, put another way, the unique steps each designer takes to solve a given problem.

This paper examines how students can gain an understanding of their personal design process, and become open to self-awareness and their potential as designers as they work on design projects, document their thinking and making of each project, and interact through their personal electronic journals. In other words, show and tell. Writings about all phases of thinking are a vital part of each student journal. Through writing, the students learn about and practice the art of reflection, while overcoming their qualms about baring their creative souls. Learning communities develop where knowledge and skills are shared as students discover they each can contribute uniquely to the group. In this way, the students become teachers, empowering them to take responsibility for their learning. Along the way, they discover how they learn best, which is a large step in their search for a personal design process.

Other topics explored include linking Csikszentmihalyi’s concept of Domain - Field - Person to the uses of, and the student interaction with, the electronic journals; open-minded wayfinding into design solutions by way of questions; figuring out the implications of both problems and solutions; and how to abstract in order to make unexpected connections.
“Education, in its deepest senses and at whatever age it takes place, concerns the opening of identities — exploring new ways to of being that lie beyond our current state.” — Etienne C. Wenger

SHOW AND TELL

Remember Show and Tell? It was a way for us to learn about our outside-of-school selves by way of presentations about experiences and things we had discovered. In learning about ourselves, we became more of a community instead of a random collection of children in a classroom. Sometimes Show and Tell was a story about an adventure, such as hiking in the woods or going on vacation. Maybe it was about a curious object, like a grandmother’s fountain pen or an uncle’s folding carpenter’s ruler. Or maybe it was about some process, like building a kite or making paper masks. Fathers and mothers came to Show and Tell to let us learn about their jobs. Now, I don’t want to wax to nostalgic about Show and Tell; there were some dull stories, too. But Show and Tell, at its best, sparked our curiosity and wonder when all or some aspect of a story captured our young imaginations, taking us to a place we’d never been or introducing us to something we’d never seen. By way of Show an Tell, we discovered new things, and we learned even though we probably didn’t realize it.

The Internet permits a more sophisticated form of Show and Tell, one that I use in all of my design classes, though not in exactly the same way. I will go into more detail later. Show and Tell (and I call it this for purposes of this paper) is a blended learning experience that aims to accomplish the following core things: to improve student thinking skills, to help them discover their personal creative process and become more self-assured creators, to feed their imaginations and discovery, and to help to build a community of learners. These add up, I hope, to personal growth as lifelong learners and thinkers, as well as designers.

Show and Tell came about because I don’t believe we can teach students everything they need to know about a design before they graduate. We graduated without having been taught everything we needed to know. Yet we made our way in our fields because we recognized that learning never ends, and we had the desire to keep on learning. We could (and can) imagine something more, and we went out (and go out) to explore and discover it. We must encourage the same imagination, curiosity, and desire to discover in our students. To do so is to lay a foundation for a lifetime of learning in them. The basic information, skills, and theories to be taught can be debated, but the need to think effectively and the desire to learn more should be at the heart of any college education, no matter the discipline.

What we must give students is real learning in their eLearning experiences. As James Paul Gee writes, “real learning is not about ‘facts’ — but about having deep experiences of the world... Real learning means learners cannot just talk about what they learned, but actually do things with it. Real learning should be assessed by asking how the current experience has prepared learners for future learning. If the experience makes them do better later on — perhaps even more important — learning task, who cares how many ‘facts’ they get right or wrong today.” (Novak, 2005).

I believe Show and Tell can help accomplish this.

THE KEYS TO SUCCESS OF SHOW AND TELL

There are several keys that must work well in order that Show and Tell work well. They are:

1. A healthy student learning community.
2. A motivated and responsible student.
3. Thorough documentation of each phase of a given project.
4. Willingness to slow down to learn.
5. Acceptance that we can learn from mistakes and failures.

I will flesh these out in the paper.
IT BEGINS WITH A COMMUNITY

As I mentioned earlier, Show and Tell helped to bring school children together as a community. My grown-up version of Show and Tell depends on a vital student Learning Community in order to work effectively. When I speak of Learning Communities, I am using White’s (2002) definition of Learning Communities: a community of practice that encourages connection between the members of the community through shared values and needs.

To explain the Show and Tell Student Learning Community, imagine a group of young people brought together by a shared interest. They set up their individual spaces to allow them comfortable access to each other. On designated days and times, they meet together as a group, while the rest of the time they work in their spaces or visit the spaces of the others. No one person knows everything, and none of them are equally skilled. But each of them have unique skills they contribute to the group, and by doing so, they learn about each other and themselves. The growth of each individual is determined by the skill, knowledge, and contributions of the group, and his or her own motivation to learn.

Now imagine what I just described is a group of students coming together because of a shared interest in design. Instead of spaces, the students have pages on an Internet site that will allow them around-the-clock access to each other’s spaces/sites. No one student knows everything, and none of them are equally skilled. But each of them have unique skills they contribute to the learning of the group. As in our first scenario, the growth of each individual is determined by the skill, knowledge, and contributions of the group, and his or her own motivation to learn.

This is the structure of Show and Tell in a nutshell.

In order for Show and Tell to work effectively, a healthy sense of community must occur. A sense of community is the foundation to developing better thinking and learning in students (Astin, 1984, Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991, and Zhao & Kuh, 2003). Fortunately, the current generation of students — with their cell phone, text messaging, and social network programs like MySpace and Facebook — is a very social generation (Oblinger, 2003). McConnell writes that a key feature of a learning community is that the responsibility of learning is shared among community members, and that no one member is responsible for knowing everything; the shared knowledge and skills are distributed among members (McConnell, 2004).

The time it takes to establish Student Learning Communities can vary depending on the size of the class and how long the students have known each other. It helps community building if I talk with and treat the students as a community from the first day of class and show them the online community interaction from previous classes. The students who have had me before as a teacher already know that community is emphasized, and, after a few semesters, the community is sustained without much encouragement from me because everyone knows each other.

The community is extended beyond the classroom through the online student pages. This is the primary place where Show and Tell happens, and they are available on any day and hour. The contents of the pages include any information researched and gathered by the students, and the thinking surrounding the class projects such as reflective writings, sketches, digital images, and so on. This comprises a storehouse of information and knowledge put online for the use and discussion of the community members. The members question, evaluate, and make suggestions about all phases of the work done for each project and exercise, and in turn, respond to the input they have received.

The exchanges are part of the ongoing Show and Tell.

Everyone’s working process is visible to the community. So it is possible to see the right and wrong turns in each member’s process. The idea is to provide something of a safety net, not to prevent failures and errors, but to see how and why they occurred, and to learn and benefit from them. In the end, students come away with a better understanding of how they think, reason, and create — their personal creative process.

My role is that of a facilitator, and I rely mainly on questions to communicate possible thoughts and actions to students. I don’t try to be invisible or silent, as I interact with the students, but I don’t try to be the focus of attention. Show and Tell is designed to permit college students to take responsibility for their learning. It is based on the assumption that if the student was motivated to get into college, he or she is motivated to stay there.
WHAT IS A PERSONAL CREATIVE PROCESS AND WHY IS IT IMPORTANT

I have mentioned personal creative process several times. Process is such a simple word. But for a graphic designer — or any creative person — to understand his or her personal creative process is a significant achievement. Process is the unique steps followed by the individual to obtain a successful result. I say unique steps because everyone's process will be different in some way. That's the difficulty with finding one's process; it is specific to the individual; one size does not fit all. Many things make up a personal creative process. These include an individual's personal thinking style; how the individual goes about finding and solving a problem; how expansive is the individual's knowledge of the world and the world of ideas; and how well the individual can make abstractions and find new connections between existing information.

And if that is not enough, the young designer must understand (for it isn't good enough to simply tell him or her) that a personal creative process, once discovered, need not be reinvented for each new project. Occasionally a young designer understands this instinctively, but the majority do not. Maybe this is because it seems counter-intuitive to view each new problem as unique, but not the problem-solving process.

It is vital that the students see design as a process and not a product. Otherwise, process will mean nothing to them, and they will only see design as a product. This will cause them to always leap to conclusions based on what already exists rather than work through real and unique solutions.

If the students have documented their work well, Show and Tell permits them access to the thinking process of each student. Everyone can see who begins with and works through the process and who is leaps to the product. Then they can judge the results for themselves.

EFFECTIVE DOCUMENTATION IS NECESSARY

As I just mentioned, good documentation of all phases of a project is a key to the success of Show and Tell. I post suggestions about what effective documentation might include, and there are certain items that must be included (weekly reflection on learning, ideation sketches and notations, for example).

In my first-year survey class, we spend a week (three class periods and online work) on process and creative journals. We talk about the reasons why process and creative journals are kept, and why they are important for documenting ideas quickly. The students examine not only journal pages of designers, illustrators, and others people in the Arts, but scientists, mathematicians, historians, and writers, as well. I want the students to see that creativity is not exclusive to designers and artists, and also, how each journal is specific to its owner. The first-year students keep a journal of their own for the week and later, these are shown and discussed. Journal week gives the first-year students a feel for how to document their thinking and the reasons for making the effort.

SLOWING DOWN TO LEARN TO THINK WELL AND THE REWARDS OF FAILURE

Show and Tell is also about slowing down in order to learn to think well. It is also designed to give student opportunities to make mistakes and learn from them. When we first learned to ride a bike, we didn't jump on the bike and speed down the sidewalk. Instead we needed to master the mechanics of riding a bike. As we learned, our skills and confidence increased, and we rode the bike better and faster.

We made mistakes, too, and those mistakes taught us how to be better bike riders. So we learned how to ride on wet pavement, make curves, and cross railroad tracks without falling off. And our bike mishaps didn't turn bike riding into a drudge or a dread because it was something we wanted to do. So our desire to bike helped us to overcome adversity.

Slow and persistent thinking and learning was the key to learning to ride a bike.

And so it is with learning how to think well. The learning process must be slowed down at first as skills are mastered. We often hear of eLearning and mLearning as taking place in a kind to rapid fire exchange very like video games. And there is a time when that pace of learning is appropriate. Show and Tell is designed to start slowly in the early college years and pick up speed later on. It also has something of a paradox in the instantaneous access to information on the student pages that then must be slowly reflected on.
Show and Tell somewhat derived from Csikszentmihalyi’s theory about how an idea is determined to be creative. In his book “Creativity”, he describe a process that plays out over three distinct areas. They are the Field, the Domain, and the Person. The Field holds the symbols and information from which the idea is made. The Domain (or the given discipline) is where the experts of the discipline, (or Gatekeepers) reside. The Gatekeepers are the scholars, critics, and other distinguished practitioners of a particular Domain. It is the job of the Gatekeepers to judge whether or not new idea is really creative. They are also charged with recognizing individuals of merit and mentoring them. Finally, there is the Person and this is who makes the idea.

Two elements of Field - Domain - Person allowed me to see how it could fit into Show and Tell.

First, the idea of the Field as a repository could be expanded to include the research of the students. Up until then, I had thought of student research as proprietary, and I didn’t know how students might react when asked to post their research online. But many of them are familiar with Wikipedia and other open-source sites, and most students have not flinched over posting their research information. Due to the transparency of the Show and Tell pages, plagiarism is easily spotted.

The Domain led me to another decision about Show and Tell. In Csikszentmihalyi’s Field - Domain - Person, I would be the only Gatekeeper since the students wouldn’t qualify as experts. I decided the students could benefit if I allowed them to evaluate each other at the end of the three phases of Show and Tell. My decision sprung from the importance of trust and responsibility in the education of a good thinker. They evaluate using the same criteria I use, and the evaluations take the form of commentary. Here is another opportunity for learning how to talk about and evaluate work. We do grade-less evaluations in order to focus student attention on what they are learning, and not on grades. The evaluations are posted online The final evaluation decision is mine, but I take into account the opinions of the students if they are informed and insightful.

THE MECHANICS OF SHOW AND TELL

Everything that follows is not done in every single class. The level of the students and the specific goals of the class determine what parts of Show and Tell are used. As you might expect, what is emphasized in a first-year class might be emphasized less or differently in an advanced class. There is also building upon learning from previous classes. That said, I use Show and Tell in some form in all of my classes.

As I mentioned before, community is emphasized from the first day of class and the online page go up within a few day of the first of the semester. I like to do some kind of thinking style test to begin the class, but I have gotten mixed results. I have used a shortened version of one designed by Robert Steinberg (Critique, Summer 1999). However I may borrow an idea from Neil Postman and try either of two self-evaluations: one measuring self-confidence in topics related to the course, or another designed to determine a student’s willingness to take on course-related learning challenges based on his or her past successes or failures (Postman, 1996)

I may have the students do some in-class exercises leading to and in support of their on-line work. For example, we might do a group exercise in ideation. The exercise may be a mind-mapping in groups, or doing a idea extension with the entire class. This not only helps the students learn methods for extending an idea, but it also begins to get them working as a team.

Other online exercises might follow. One exercise might deal with making connections between things that don’t seem to connect by way of abstraction. Another might challenge students to provide a convergent and divergent point of view in their online critique. There is an exercise called “Dialog With Self” in which a student argues a topic with himself or herself. Students might read an essay where the author reflects on an idea and considers it from various perspectives (for example, Thoreau’s “Solitude”), and then take a simple topic of their choosing, say reading, and reflect on it. Taking a cue from Howard Gardner, an exercise on maturity and immaturity might be done as a way to develop new points of view on a idea or a problem. These exercise are intended to help to set concepts in place in a fun way. They also help the students to understand the advantages of teamwork and cooperation.

These exercises also are intended to help to remove some of the fear students often have about throwing
out an idea without agonizing over its rightness. It has been my experience that when a student has creative
block it is not that he or she doesn’t have ideas, it’s the fear the ideas won’t work. Another reason for
the exercise is their potential to teach students other ways of thinking about a problem. The result of the
exercises are discussed either in-class or online.

Project and their timetables depend on the level of the students, first-year to fourth-year. And depending on
how the students are responding, later projects may be scrapped in favor of ones that are more suited to
the particular needs of the class mix. Each project proceeds through phases and, as outlined previously, is
documented online. There are the Information phase, the Ideation phase, and the Realization phase.

The Information phase begins with lots of questions about the problem at hand. The purpose is to instill
in the student’s mind that pouncing on a problem right away potentially wastes time. What if the problem
isn’t completely understood or what if it isn’t really the problem? The students use a problem-finding model
loosely based on that of Veronica E. Ramirez (2002). Though Ramirez’s model was designed to solve
problems in institutional settings, it is useful for problem-finding in visual communication. The process
has three steps: looking at how the problem at hand is connected with other like things; asking (but not
yet answering) a lot of questions that might point at the actual problem or better define the one at hand;
and pinpointing the question among the many that best identifies or better defines the actual problem.
Problem-finding usually begins online so the process is as fully documented as possible, but an in-class
problem-finding session can be done as a podcast. Some information gathering may take place during the
Problem-finding depending on the nature of the problem.

With the problem identified, students begin doing research and gathering information. Sometimes the
project might dictate that teams of two students gather information about different aspects of the project
and reporting their findings to the class. The information is recorded to the team’s student pages where it
becomes available for all students to use.

As the information is gathered, it is examined and judged. Students learn that the beliefs and definitions of a
discipline are based on information that will can change over time as the information is looked at in different
way or new information comes to light. I call it “The-Day-the-Universe-Changed” effect based on James
Burke’ book of the same name and about the changing nature of truth and belief. The students may be
given a chapter from the book to read and discuss.

The nature of definitions is discussed. For example, who wrote them? For whom were they written? Are
they reflections of the times in which they were formed? And so on. This discussion might lead into another
about the of uses of language and words. The point is to get students to question before they decide. Good
questions lead us to consider diverse information which cause us to think and reflect. This is how new
knowledge gets created. Questions are not conclusions; they are open and hopeful. I don't like students to
move to answers too quickly; once they do, they close doors on options.

0The Ideation phase proceeds in two stages: idea-generating and idea-editing. In both, the students apply
the knowledge they have gained during the Information phase. During idea-generating, students learn about
and apply abstracting, or the breaking down and examining of information from different points of view. The
object is to find patterns or links with other information.

Abstracting is a difficult concept to wrap one’s head around, but it is necessary part of good thinking skills
and particularly important to a designer's ability to symbolize effectively. So the students might do exercises
concerning Polysemy and Semiotics, for example. One online exercise instructs the students to select a
single image and then come up with several dozens words that are suggest by the image. The students
might be asked to add a series of single images to an unchanging set of three or four images in order to
alter the viewer's perception of the visual narrative. Other exercises in idea generation, such as mind-
mapping and idea extension, also might be used.

The exercises are aim at teaching the student how to generate lots of ideas. At this point, it doesn't matter
whether or not they are visual as long as lots of ideas are generated. Students are cautioned against editing
and analyzing as they ideate. If ideas are slow in coming, new exercises in idea generation are brought out.
I don’t specify a certain number of ideas but the student know that the more ideas they have, the better
chance they have a success in the project.
Collaboration and cooperation are stressed since this will likely be a part of the student’s post-college experience. Students visit each other’s pages making suggestions and sometimes adding ideas of their own. Occasionally, a student feels that he or she gives up ownership by accepting an offered idea. I try to get the student to see that the idea is raw and unformed at this point, and it is he or she who will give it form.

When the idea-generating stage is concluded, the idea-editing process begins, and it is time to, in Jacob Rabinov’s words, “to get rid of the junk”. By junk he means any idea that doesn’t work because it doesn’t gel or is too complicated or doesn’t communicate to the audience. We also spend some time talking about the implications of the selected concepts. For instance, can the message of the design be misread in a potentially damaging way by another group or culture? Are there unintended or mixed messages being communicated? (The paper is recycled, but the cover is coated with an environmentally harmful coating).

Usually both the Information and Ideation phases happen more slowly and deliberately. I do this since I feel that we’ve become conditioned to make snap, uninformed and poorly-considered decisions. We tend to look at information that only supports our beliefs, when we look at all. We multi-task even though it is shown that we don’t think and work as well when our focus in sub-divided (Csikszentmihalyi, 1996). I believe that slowing down is the first step in thinking well. Show and Tell happens online so there is a record of thinking processes and information that can be reflected on.

Also, the first two phases deal most closely with how information is turned into ideas and knowledge which is something I want my students to understand and practice effectively. So I slow down the pace in an effort to aid their learning. The students read and discuss the introduction and an excerpt from John Stilgoe in his book, “Outside Lies Magic”. In the introduction he talks about the necessity for taking the time to observe and the rewards if gives back to us. In the excerpt, he likens making the unseen world visible to riding a bike past a picket fence at just the right speed so the barrier of the fence disappears, and we can see the other side. (Stilgoe, 1998).

The success of the first two phases determines the success of the final phase, the Realization phase. This is the making phase, and much of the time is devoted to the realization of the design. However, new ideas and issues are discussed. For examples, the cultural uses of symbols and color, the uses and ethics of emotional design, and discussions of user/viewer-centered design. It might be necessary for the class to revisit topics before going deeper into them or introducing new ones. I sometimes pair students and ask them to briefly critique each other’s design online, and determining whether or not the design is turning out as planned, and, if not, can they find where they went off course.

During the Realization phases, students are given class time to work on their projects. I monitor the individual sites before class in preparation of face-to-face discussions of the students’ work. At this stage, less is posted online since the students are usually consumed with making. However, I still expect them to post comments about the progress of their work. I also ask that they pinpoint a student or two who are in need of help, and post a few suggestions to them.

There is a standing assignment that each week the students reflect and write about what they learned that week. Maybe the light switched on about a concept or theory. Maybe they understood something more about their creative process. Maybe they made a breakthrough on some aspect of their project. The students can write as often as they want during the week, but everyone writes at least one reflective piece. This accomplishes two things. First, everyone learns more about each student's thinking process and style, and, second, somewhere in what the writings might be a solution for another student.

What I have just described might sound like a lot of work. But keep in mind that I am writing about the purposes and mechanics of Show and Tell, and how it encompasses a semester's worth of classes. This is a big-picture paper; I didn’t intend to profile how Show and Tell is used in individual classes. As for the work, I can say that experience is a great teacher, and I am learning how to refine Show and Tell so that the students and I continue to feel we are getting a return on our investment of time and effort.
CONCLUSION

I can’t see Show and Tell working as well in a traditional classroom even though I see it continuing as a blended learning experience. The information that is compiled, the documentation that is recorded, and the processes that are revealed are more accessible than in a traditional classroom because there is permanent record readily available through an Internet connection. I like that the students can work online to fit their schedules. I like that shy or deliberate thinkers often find their voice behind the wall of the Internet. I like how Show and Tell can turn students into teachers and mentors. And I like that online Show and Tell allows me to have extended contact time with the students.

We became design educators to help make a better future for our profession through the education of young designers. Though there is plenty of disagreement about how to do this, I dare say there is agreement about educating young designers, let alone all students, to have active intellectual curiosities and imaginations, and who think well.

Show and Tell was designed to foster a lifetime of this kind of individual growth.

Has it worked?

As one might say about children: you educate them for life as well as you can, but their life is up to them.

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