

Socially Responsible Design; Graduate Course in Research and Application, A Case Study

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ABSTRACT

In the fall of 2010, a class of eleven visual design graduate students at Kent State University were challenged to secure 25 new employers for Cleveland Sight Center clients who were blind or visually impaired (BVI). The problem, unframed and atypical for most visual design students, unfolded into a much broader set of issues in challenges over the 15-week course. Our mission goal expanded to finding innovative and sustainable solutions using design thinking, a design protocol for solving problems using exploratory design processes and experimentation. This protocol examines problems in a holistic way and from multiple perspectives, recognizing creative opportunities and devising multiple solutions, using multi-disciplinary teamwork.

The yearlong project is significant for a number of reasons as it raises important questions for visual designers: How can graduate courses be designed to affect social policies? How can our research be applied to other sight centers in the country? How can similar research begin constructing models for affecting change at national, state or local levels? How can our specific research be used to initiate new policies for blind and visually impaired persons? How can similar courses be designed to affect social changes in local communities?

Keywords: blind, visual, design, graduate, social, responsibility

SCHOOL OF VISUAL COMMUNICATION DESIGN BACKGROUND

The School of Visual Communication Design, situated in the College of Communication and Information (<http://www.kent.edu/cci/>) at Kent State University, has an excellent record of graduating talented designers, many of whom are employed in companies such as Nickelodeon, TNT, Wall-to-Wall Studios and Cannon Design. Some of these students have gone on to become entrepreneurs in software development companies while others have started their own Web application companies in New York and Chicago. Our alumni include award winning, children's book illustrator, Chris Sheban and designer Paul Sahre, from New York City. (<http://vcd.kent.edu/>) In addition, we have an excellent undergraduate program that has thrived for over 50 years. Our 12-member faculty is versed in illustration, 3D design, information design, motion graphics, information architecture, as well as print design. From the 17th century letterpress room, to our computer labs, our students are exposed to many hands-on studio courses. Our award winning, student run, Glyphix Studio was one of the first of its kind in the country, still serving as a place where students work with professional clients. (<http://vcd.kent.edu/special-programs/glyphix>)

INSTRUCTOR BACKGROUND AND INITIAL PROPOSAL TO THE CLEVELAND SIGHT CENTER

My name is Sanda Katila and I am an Associate Professor and Graduate Studies Coordinator for The School of Visual Communication Design at Kent State University. I am charged with advising, teaching graduate courses and shaping policies for our school, but more importantly, I think my role is to inspire students to become great educators, design leaders and entrepreneurs in our industry. In the fall 2010 I created and taught a new graduate studio course on socially responsible design. My prime objective for this course was to introduce students to sustainable design practices and empower students to create new, sustainable business models that can drive change in corporations and non-profit organizations.

To this end, I wanted my students to work on a community based, hands-on, service project that would give them the opportunity to tackle real world problems using exploratory design processes to solve a broad range of problems. The Fall 2010 class consisted of 11 graduate students, all of whom have undergraduate degrees in design from accredited colleges and universities. Most of them also have at least two years of professional field experience working as visual designers. They ranged in age from early 20's to 40's and possessed various design skills such as print design, Web design, motion graphics, experience design, 3-D design such as way finding and signage, as well as motion graphics, video, interactive design and corporate identity. In the summer 2010, I began looking for local organizations to partner with in this endeavor hoping to find an organization that would have those project parameters. I found such a partner in the Cleveland Sight Center (CSC).

FALL 2010: GRADUATE STUDIO; SOCIALY RESPONSIBLE DESIGN

Course Overview

The course was designed to introduce students to design thinking in collaborative group environments with focus on research, writing, innovation and application. Predicated on Ideo's (<http://www.ideo.com/>) brainstorming processes of using insight, exploring ideas, creating and testing prototypes, I wanted to employ various methodologies to solve unframed, unconventional problems centered in socially responsible design. When I presented my proposal for creative partnership to the CSC, although somewhat surprised that visual designers would tackle such problem, they agreed to work with us on this yearlong project documented in this case study.

Learning Objectives

The following course outcomes indicate competencies and measurable skills students developed in this course.

- Gain experience in primary and secondary research
- Understand how to translate research findings into design solutions
- Work in team environments to develop research strategies and application
- Gain first-hand experience solving an unframed problem resulting in direct impact in local communities

INTRODUCTION

As previously mentioned, our client was The Cleveland Sight Center, located in downtown Cleveland. The Sight Center is a 100-year-old non-profit institution serving blind and visually impaired individuals who range in age from shortly after birth to serving the elderly, with an extensive range of services for clients throughout Northeast Ohio. Among those many services is assisting their clients to secure employment in the region. (<http://www.clevelandsightcenter.org/learn-about-us.aspx>)

As students struggled to comprehend the problem given, they soon discovered the overwhelming barriers the CSC clients face in the workplace. The statistics were staggering; 55% percent of working-age (18-64 years) adults in the U.S. who are blind or have significantly impaired vision are unemployed, in contrast to 88% of all U.S. adults of the same age (Steinmetz 2006). For those who are legally blind, it is estimated only 30% are employed (American Foundation For the Blind, 2004). This figure has remained unchanged over time despite the enactment of the Americans With Disabilities Act (1990) that was enacted to level the playing field, including in the workplace, for individuals with disabilities.

Financial assistance for persons who are blind or visually impaired seeking career training services, or other rehabilitation services, differs based on the state in which they reside. In Ohio, The Ohio Rehabilitation Services Commission (RSC) is the state agency that partners with Ohioans with disabilities to achieve quality employment, independence and Social Security disability determination outcomes through its Bureau of Vocational Rehabilitation (BVR), Bureau of Services for the Visually Impaired (BSVI) and Bureau of Disability Determination (BDD).

RESEARCH

The students began their secondary research by examining the problem from many perspectives. They poured over literature reviews, Braille Monitor, Review Magazine, Journal of Visual Impairment and Blindness, annual reports/ Web sites, questionnaires and surveys of the blind, CSC marketing materials (Web site/kit), National Federation of the Blind, American Council of the Blind materials, supportive employment literature, Accessibility Guidelines (ADA), RTA (Paratransit) materials, adaptive technology reports and case studies.

Our initial findings began to reveal that the problem was complex and multipronged and required a multifaceted approach that would have to go beyond the traditional marketing campaigns, which were employed in previous efforts by the CSC. As we continued to probe further, still trying to understand the real depth of the challenges to employment of the blind and visually impaired,

we decided to proceed to primary research, which consisted of 49 interviews with the following populations:

- Blind and visually impaired persons
- Clients (past and present) provided a wide range of backgrounds, age, race, and disability.
- Employers
- CSC employee specialists, braille instructor, mobility instructor, EYEdea shop employee, director, quality manager, marketing manager
- Family
- Employees
- KSU University Disability Services
- Special education professionals
- Social workers
- Library for the Blind
- Other sight centers
- Blind and visually impaired students on the KSU campus

The Consumer Council, a client-based group of the CSC, formed to represent the clients at large. The group of eight fields client's concerns and questions to the director and board.

Additionally, we also conducted a competitive analysis of nationally successful sight centers that included:

- Louisiana School for the Blind: following the NFB model, Louisiana challenges blind individuals to live independently.
- Colorado Center for the Blind: Impressively, 85% of graduates have jobs.
- State of New Mexico Commission for the Blind
- Nebraska Center for the Visual Impaired: Awarded for 50 Years of Serving the Visually and Physically Disabled
- Iowa Department for the Blind: Kenneth Jernigan dramatically improved the center's model, and within ten years of doing so had received a citation from Lyndon Johnson for his outstanding work.
- NFB, ACB, Blind Incorporated
- Private practitioners
- Evidence-based practice centers
- BSVI affiliates

Finally we conducted ethnographic research that included mobility training, observation and interviews. As we continued to analyze the problem, we expanded our objective summarized in our "how to statement."

How might we cultivate an environment that fosters a sustainable perception of those that are visually impaired as qualified job candidates while encouraging empowerment and transparency?

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

What we found from our research was that there were misalignments of expectations by the clients of the CSC. Clients were frustrated and felt that they had no voice in their own empowerment. We also discovered that empowerment and confidence play a supportive role in finding successful employment. In addition, there was also the feeling amongst the clients that the mobility training they were receiving was not meeting their actual

needs. Equally, the BSVI system, according to the CSC clients, can be difficult to navigate and appeared to be larger barrier to employment than originally anticipated.

Transferable skills are essential to sustainable employment and independence

- There are several different perspectives and philosophies on rehabilitation tactics. We took our tone from the National Federation of the Blind (NFB).
- Clients will travel to have their needs met elsewhere
- BVIs experience a lack of control over transportation
- Social Security Disability Insurance (SSDI) benefits are a hurdle when seeking employment
- There are multiple assistive technologies and no single source to learn them all
- People who achieve independence have achieved a certain degree of empowerment.

PROJECT DEVELOPMENT AND COMPONENTS

I. Brand and Positioning

The project development began in the second semester in Spring 2011. “The culmination of our research has led to the development of a comprehensive branding platform of the Cleveland Sight Center’s employment services under the Supported Employment Model. By differentiating the program as the Career Development Services (CDS), the brand will increase visibility with employers and provide a sense of ownership and pride held by clients and employees of the CSC.” (Jason Goupil) The final name, changed by the CSC for its primary donor, was the Williams Career Services.

Through our brand platform, we wanted to increase public awareness, increase employer visibility and provide a sense of ownership and pride to the clients and employees of the CSC. The new brand would build employers trust and confidence and position clients as competitive job applicants in the job market; therefore, it would increase the pool of potential employers who would hire CSC clients.

2. Branding Tone and Voice

One of the most important parts of the brand was the development of our tone and voice. Our objective was to create active language, aligned with the CSC’s mission statement which is “To empower people with vision loss to realize their full potential, and to shape the community’s vision of that potential.” The new language would empower the clients and enable the CSC to more effectively reach out to the employers looking for independent, efficient, reliable, and qualified candidates. Used consistently throughout the branding platform, we hoped that both clients and employers would respond positively to our message.

3. Prospective/New Clients Toolkit

In order to provide clients with necessary interview, employment and training sources, we developed a client toolkit to guide clients through the training curriculum and provide answers to many frequently asked questions by the clients, redirecting them to the appropriate source. “The supportive tools provided will empower each individual to self-manuever through the program, seek assistance from the appropriate channels, simplify SSDI and BSVI info, and demystify the difficulty of attaining adaptive technologies.”(Jason Goupil)

Below is a working list of the components to the client toolkit:

- Program description

- Measured program results
- Contacts
- Library resources
- SSDI Info
- BSVI Info
- Success stories
- Affiliations, accreditations
- FAQ

4. Hot-line

In order to meet the immediate questions clients may have regarding employment opportunities and training, we designed a new hot-line for gathering and disseminating information to new and perspective clients. A phone system, already in place but somewhat under utilized, would provide information such as how to obtain inexpensive assistive technologies, get technical assistance at home or provide mentors to clients, reducing questions posed to employee specialists. The phone system would also guide clients to a single access point for their specific questions or route them to other appropriate areas for answers.

5. Audio Brochure

As part of our future outreach initiatives to bring in new clients, not familiar with the CSC, as well as direct traffic to the web site and the hotline, we wanted to create something that was immediate and required no effort on the part of the recipients.

Students looked to existing technologies in the marketplace that would help us with this vehicle. It was decided that an audio brochure, based on the popular audio greeting cards, may be used to deliver key points about the CSC’s services to people of any vision level and, at the same time, direct them to the hotline or the web site where their eligibility for services can be determined. It was recommended that the audio brochure be mailed or placed in various locations such as ophthalmologists’ offices where doctors had access to clients with visual impairments.

6. Employer Collateral, Leave Behind/Mailer

In order to help employment specialists generate conversation with employers, ask them to reflect on their existing workforce and show how CSC clients can make a difference in their workplace, we decided to create a simple yet unique employer brochure highlighting the CSC clients themselves. We wanted to present the clients as well-qualified, motivated individuals, ready to join the workforce and provide employers with positive reasons for hiring CSC’s clients.

7. CDS Microsite Web site

“The purpose of the CDS microsite is to act as a destination within the CSC’s domain as a hub for employers, clients and those seeking employment assistance.”(Jason Goupil) Our objective was to provide access to all pertinent resources, be a professional destination for perspective employees and give clients a sense of ownership of their employment program.

The microsite had to:

- Fit within the CSC as either a subsection or a subdomain
- Be a catch-all information repository for clients and employers, both current and potential
- Be a catalog of resources and success stories
- Build a client narrative for incoming members and employers
- Be both attractive to professionals looking for employees and accessible to individuals with a range of visual impairments

8. Employee Specialist Toolkit/Training Manual

Employment Specialist Training Manual

The employment specialists at the CSC told us on numerous occasions that they need a productivity tool that would streamline processes and establish protocols internally, which they never had before. With that in mind, we designed a training manual with all the information necessary to train future employment specialists that could also be used as a daily resource for current employment specialists. "Our research has shown that a comprehensive manual is a standard compliment to the Supportive Employment Models. It can enforce the brand internally and streamlines processes and protocols." (Jason Goupil)

Supportive Employment Toolkit

This toolkit was designed for several purposes. One was to coach clients on different aspects of the interview process, specifically dealing with disclosing their blindness or visual impairment and answering interview questions, which we were shown to be particularly challenging in an interview process. And two, we needed to create a uniform process that would make the employment specialists jobs easier on a daily basis. The kit would also contain coaching tools allowing clients to empower themselves and serve as a quick reference for building overall job and interview preparedness.

OUTCOMES AND SUMMARY

Conclusion: New Design Course Model Constructed for Change and Impact

In looking at the accomplishments over the last year, I have discovered many more questions than answers and maybe that's a great beginning for the next round of classes. Some of the questions pertain to my next steps posing new ideas on what's possible in the future. For example, how can our research methods be used on similar projects to affect policy changes? Can design research and processes ultimately affect social policies? How do we take those next steps? Can this body of work, with some modification, be applied to other sight centers in the country? How can our research begin constructing models for affecting change at national, state or local levels? Can our research be used to initiate new policies for the BVI community?

What I do know is that ethnographic research enabled us to collect solid, qualitative data respected and embraced by our client, CSC. My students gained empathy and insights into the blind and visually impaired community that would not have otherwise been possible in most classroom settings. As for the objectives I set out to achieve? I introduced students to a new way of thinking about design. Together, we showed that visual designers can and should bring substantive, meaningful qualitative research to projects. Graduate students must embrace open framed problems, applying design-thinking protocols to solving complex issues, in this case, specifically to not for profit clients.

Has our class made an impact? Yes.

Our work made an impact on one local not for profit organization servicing the blind and visually impaired community. The CSC received our work and prototypes with resounding appreciation. The CSC now sees potential for the work to impact other services offered by the organization. Our work will be used to substantiate future funding by its unique approach. And finally, the client is currently reviewing an implementation schedule of our completed work. They look forward to testing the prototypes for their

effectiveness, beyond the initial focus group feedback.

In answering the posed questions, I believe that our methodologies were sound, producing excellent data effectively allowing us to frame the problem leading to our solutions. When implemented, our measured results may be used to introduce the necessary changes through an organization such as the NFB with whom we've already established contact at the NFB Ohio Conference in Columbus in November, 2011. When they heard about the CSC work, they encouraged us to seek grant funding and attend next year's conference to present our findings at the state level. Additionally, at the same conference, contacts were made with the Director of BSVI who provided us with insights regarding national policies for the BVI community, which can also plant seeds for future projects. There is also evidence that the top six national sight centers, used as models for best practices, were interested in using our design solutions for their BVI clients, something we did not pursue during the two semesters of working for the CSC but understand to be solid leads to further analysis.

LESSONS LEARNED

Course Lessons

- (1) Partnering with organizations open to risk taking in both internal and external practices helps support student's creative, design processes. Future proposals submitted to organizations involved in similar projects should include this stipulation.
- (2) Future project proposals should articulate the importance of client involvement in the creative process by way of brainstorming and early prototype testing.
- (3) Finding creative funding options as part of the design criteria needs to be included in the course objectives in order to ease production costs for not for profit organizations.
- (4) Designing project assessments for measured results after implementation should be included as part of complete design solution.

Student Lessons

- (1) Our continual discovery of new and vital data affected the pace of the project. Instead of the focus narrowing, we kept going broader which actually helped us to define the problem. So, the prototypes were delayed by seven weeks. As a result, the client could not connect with our ideas until late in the development process.
- (2) The portion of this project dedicated to research amounted to the majority of work completed. The act of defining the problem was so diverse and multi-faceted that it required intensive research of multiple problems.
- (3) The students had an opportunity to work on a multi-faceted problem, uncommon in classroom setting.
- (4) Our perception of persons who are disabled or visually impaired was impacted by this work. Their drive, determination, and confidence fed into our need to prescribe the strongest solution we could devise.

(5) Our work has the opportunity to impact many organizations offering services to the disabled, both nationally and locally.

(6) The CSC received our work and prototypes with resounding appreciation. They now see potential for the work to impact other services offered by the organization.

(7) Our work will be used to substantiate future funding by its unique approach.

Client Lessons

(1) Our client now has a greater appreciation for design research and design thinking.

(2) The CSC now sees the importance of using active language when speaking of, and to, clients about training services. Active language is a key tool in empowering clients to achieve their goals.

(3) The client is currently reviewing an implementation schedule of this work. They look forward to testing the prototypes for their effectiveness, beyond the initial focus groups feedback.



WILLIAMS CAREER SERVICES
at The Cleveland Sight Center

Career Services logo

WILLIAMS CAREER SERVICES

ONE NORTHEAST OHIO AREA EMPLOYER RECENTLY STATED:

“We look for potential employees who are technologically savvy, self-motivated and highly self disciplined, and the Cleveland Sight Center graduates fulfill our requirements.”

FOR MORE INFORMATION: WCS.Cleveland@williams.org CONTACT US TODAY: Williams Career Services at the Cleveland Sight Center 1000 East 17th Street, PO Box 488, Cleveland, OH 44115-0488 CALL 1-800-848-7144

Employer collateral brochure, back

CREATING DIVERSITY

DIVERSIFYING THE WORKFORCE
As businesses strive for success, one way in which many companies have achieved this is through a diverse workforce. A WCS graduate can provide your workplace with unique backgrounds and viewpoints, bringing a different perspective to the work environment. These fresh perspectives have helped many companies with product development and specialized customer service needs.

CO-WORKER EDUCATION
We will never work hard to address any concerns and questions they have about their new visually impaired co-worker as a reward, type of educational seminar.

COMPUTER LITERACY
The Sight Center has developed the ability to develop the necessary computer skills necessary for meeting the demands of a modern workplace. Our graduates are qualified with strong computer and customer preparation.

CUSTOMER CARE
Our skilled call agents possess the requisite customer care skills necessary for meeting the demands of a modern workplace. Our graduates are qualified with strong computer and customer preparation.

COMMUNICATION
Contact center jobs usually involve communicating with customers. Effective communication skills is therefore an essential attribute that our agents possess. Professional agents who have our goal: customer care and service, as evidenced by every graduate of the WCS program.

ADAPTIVE TECHNOLOGIES
Adaptive technologies used by our clients as a bridge to success through additional office based programs. Our graduates have identified successful positions as servers, accountants, nurses, social workers, customer service, insurance sales, telephone operators, librarians, call technicians, stockholders, janitors, children workers, teachers, and much more.

EMPLOYEE SPECIALISTS
Our Employment Services work with the most qualified WCS candidates for appropriate training, ready for appropriate training in ways that match a specific job description, performing the job training and providing clients with "Job ready" employees.

CAREER TRAINING

SKILLS OF CLIENT
The WCS program is recognized as an accredited source of comprehensive services for employment preparation. These services have been rigorously measured and tested to confirm their effectiveness. Graduates that have graduated the program are work force ready with combination of computer literacy and customer service skills that produce quality customer service representatives. All candidates are put through an extensive screening, qualifications and job training process that includes:

- Initial screening to determine if the individual has the proper attitude and motivation needed to be a successful employee.
- Initial assessment to determine an individual's interests, skills, and aptitudes.
- Behavior Skills Training to teach interpersonal, communication and problem solving skills.
- Job Readiness Training to ensure the customer is "Job ready" to meet employer specific job responsibilities from day one.

THE CLEVELAND SIGHT CENTER
Job training program provides blind or visually impaired men and women in the Northeast Ohio area with job preparation opportunities that launch candidates into independence through successful career paths. The program's comprehensive program prepares each candidate for a career in customer service and sales as a call center agent. In this comprehensive eight week program, trainees obtain hands on work experience involving computer skills specific to call center employment. Each WCS graduate is a focused, strong candidate for professional career development in the financial, medical, hospitality and other industries that employ call center agents and customer service professionals.

FAQS

1. Question
How will the employee get to and from work?
Answer
There are a number of options but the responsibility is on the employer. First job readiness training is to establish the student and to discuss and plan for options, public transportation is option 1. Para-transit is another option. Para-transit is a door-to-door transportation, provided under contract to qualified disabled persons. A car pool is often an ideal arrangement, but may not be possible at initiation of employment. Transportation is an option, but one that can be resolved.

2. Question
How do I effectively supervise a blind or visually impaired employee?
Answer
Be, he should be able to do the work himself. And he should be part of the team and give as well as get help -- like any other team player.

3. Question
Do blind or visually impaired people take a lot of sick days?
Answer
Blindness or visual impairment does not mean illness. Our blind persons may be as healthy and healthy as an ox, while another may have a chronic illness. As a year ends conducted by the DuPont Corporation discovered that disabled workers as a whole had equal or better attendance than 90 percent of their non-disabled co-workers. Statistically speaking, a blind person is therefore less likely to take time off than other members of your workforce.

4. Question
Will I need to give a blind or visually impaired worker an assistant?
Answer
No, he should be able to do the work himself. And he should be part of the team and give as well as get help -- like any other team player.

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Employer collateral brochure, inside

Ask yourself, Do I have the right team?

EMPLOYER TOOLKIT

DIVERSE

COMMITTED TO SUCCESS

COMPETITIVELY TRAINED

HARD-WORKING & MOTIVATED

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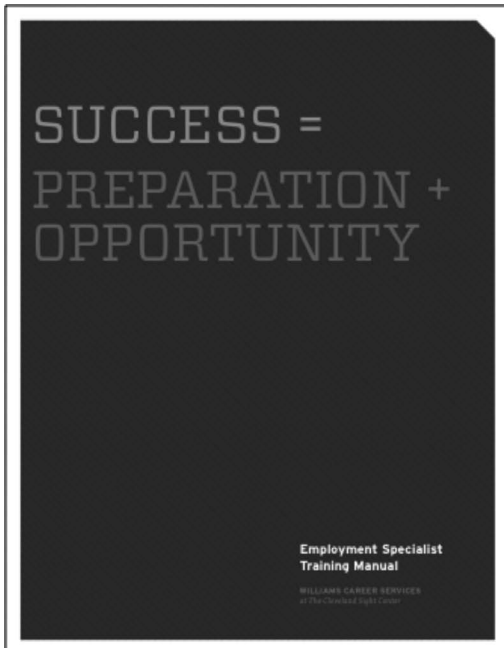
WCS WILLIAMS CAREER SERVICES

Employer collateral brochure, front



Career Services microsite website with preliminary logo

Employee specialist toolkit/training manual, inside



Employee specialist toolkit/training manual, front



Audio brochure, front