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MANAGING THE ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS OF PROJECT WORK WITHIN A DESIGN SCHOOL

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Unlike the significant projects undertaken by researchers or staff the undergraduate design task tends to be short in term and often “poorly” formulated, especially from a predictive perspective. The students are advised to seek first hand experiences relevant to the brief set and may wish to exhibit both the “research” work and the outcome. However, the time normally necessary to seek ethical approval may not be available. This workshop is intended to provide an opportunity for those attending to share experiences, best practice and, of course, the pitfalls to be avoided.

Overview

Within Northumbria’s School of Design I have responsibilities concerning the ethical approval and monitoring of undergraduate design projects. These are usually of short duration, three weeks is not atypical and, at least, initially the response to the brief unbounded. Indeed, at the start of the project it is common that neither the outcome nor the process to be followed is prescribed or can even be predicted with any detail. The student seeks to engage directly with the widest possible range of stakeholders and thus finds themselves constrained by the common conventional normal ethical approvals processes.

Furthermore, the professional designer, albeit in training, prefers to make images by photography or sketching to inform their work and, later, to refine their concepts and solutions. These outcomes will often be displayed in a public exhibition or show.

As Ergonomists working and researching with people we have a long and evolving ethical dimension to our work; an ability to define the effect that such responsibilities might have on the process, data storage and the presentation of

outcomes. Within a Design School this tradition may predispose us for selection as “experts” to give advice and to manage the ethical approval process but, even this “clear” understanding contains concerns; for example, notions of “utility” and “beneficence” may be hard to satisfy within student project work

In product design education matters will usually be complex as a group is given a brief and encouraged to think widely about the topic. (For examples of such design briefs see the RSA’s prestigious, multi sponsor competition that has been running for nearly 90 years. (RSA, 2012). Upon receiving the brief the student will be encouraged to think widely, enlarging and recording their knowledge and “topic nous”. This will then be refined to fit their perspective and that of their “client”. (Qv Fulton and IDEO, 2005) The diversity of work set will usually prohibit the common student “work-around” of only collecting data from other members of the cohort or department. Thus the question, immediately arises is to the extent that the approval of the appropriate ethical committee is required.

A problematic example

A student with a three week brief talked it over with their mother who suggested a visit to his grandmother living in sheltered accommodation. Grandmother realised that a fellow resident could be more helpful, made the introduction and then returned to watching the TV. Shortly afterwards the Warden appeared and became most concerned that “research” was being undertaken without the appropriate NHS approvals in place. The 20 year old student was drinking tea and asking about holding, with arthritic fingers, cups, saucers and mugs in the hope of creating a more practical design that would mitigate existing limitations.

Workshop intention

This workshop would offer an opportunity to those for us working with design or engineering students to consider how we may deal with the formal treatment of ethical issues that are, increasingly, applied to short undergraduate projects.. The good practice could result in the dissemination of guidance especially for those teaching beyond the human and medical sciences.

References

- Fulton, J.S and IDEO 2005, *Thoughtless Acts? Observations on Intuitive Design*, (Chronicle Books: San Francisco, California)
- RSA 2011, *The Royal Society for the encouragement of Arts, Manufactures and Commerce (RSA) 2012 Student Design Briefs*. (Online at: <http://www.thersa.org/projects/design/student-design-awards/rsa-student-design-awards-201112> (last accessed 10/10/11)).

Statement of Relevance:

The Ergonomist within a School of Design may be regarded as an “expert” in ethical matters as they will have had experience of working with people yet their expertise is often tangential to, and certainly more considered than, that needed by an undergraduate with a short design brief. This workshop is intended to offer the opportunity to consider and share good practice especially among those involved in design or engineering school teaching.