INSIDE THE LIVE WELL COLLABORATIVE
CREATING A ROADMAP FOR THE FUTURE OF OUR 50+
POPULATION

Steve Doehler
Assistant Professor of Industrial Design, University of Cincinnati
Steven.doehler@uc.edu

Peter Chamberlain
Assistant Professor of Industrial Design, University of Cincinnati
Peter.chamberlain@uc.edu

Linda Dunseath
Executive Director, Live Well Collaborative
ldunseath@livewellcollaborative.org

Roberta Lee
Associate Professor, College of Nursing, University of Cincinnati
leera@uc.edu

Inigo Arroniz
Assistant Professor of Marketing, University of Cincinnati
Inigo.aroniz@uc.edu

LWC BACKGROUND

In September 2004, Craig Vogel was recruited by the University of Cincinnati (UC) to direct the Center for Design, Research and Innovation (CDRI) at the College of Design, Architecture, Art and Planning (DAAP). As part of this newly developed center, his goal was to create a leading edge partnership and innovation model for how corporations and universities can work together. Co-champions for this model included former P&G CTO, Gil Cloyd and former UC President Nancy Zimpher, as well as a multi-functional team from UC and P&G. It was agreed that the emphasis would be on research, as well as product and service development for the 50+ population. According to Gil Cloyd, “For P&G to reach its growth objectives, we must achieve breakthrough results in meeting the needs of the aging consumer”. At the same time, P&G wanted to extend its Connect and Develop Strategy, developed by Larry Huston. Thus the Live Well Collaborative was founded in 2007 by P&G and UC as a new and unique model for industry and academia to work together and specialize in research and development of products and services for the 50+ market place. Its overall mission: to leverage collaborative efforts to enable 50+ consumers to live a rich and enjoyable life and to contribute to the improvement of our communities.

During the past 5 years the LWC has collaborated with 9 corporate partners, completing 32 projects and exposing greater than 400 upperclassmen students and over 30 faculty to multi-disciplinary teaching methods and the design thinking process. This model is now being used by UC as part of the UC Forward initiative that introduces interdisciplinary thinking to students in their freshman and sophomore years. UC Forward will provide a continuous platform for interdisciplinary education at UC.

WHY THE LWC IS IMPORTANT

From a student’s perspective, the Live Well Collaborative (LWC) is one of the few forums at the University of Cincinnati where students from Design, Business, Engineering, Nursing, and other programs can share
their unique knowledge and solve real-world problems established by industry partners. This is important because it breaks them out of siloed problem solving and exposes them not only to the benefits of team problem solving but also a greater awareness of the importance of each discipline in the process of innovation. This awareness is critical as each student enters the workforce. As they grow they will soon realize that the professional world thrives on collaborative environments and the era of compartmentalized knowledge is on its way out (Figure 1).

Figure 1. A complementary mixture of student and faculty disciplines immersed in the studio experience

From the College of Business, design and engineering students gain a better understanding of marketing strategies, techniques for understanding user needs, and the role of economics in launching new product lines. From Engineering, design and business students gain a better understanding of the realities behind how things can be manufactured and the properties of unique systems and materials. From Design, engineering and business students gain a better understanding of determining user needs, the importance of aesthetics, and how to iterate and refine. These unique traits when shared and adopted by the complementary disciplines are a recipe for innovative problem solving.

Faculty also reaps substantial gains from the LWC. In order to organize a LWC studio faculty from all participating disciplines must clearly understand what they can bring to the table as it relates to their area of specialty. This enables members to develop research relationships that can lead to new pathways in research and have become spinoffs in new collaborative agendas.

While each project proposed to a LWC studio is extremely challenging, our industry partners are always astonished at the holistic solutions our students develop. Our partners also realized they are part of an education system that is unique and effective. As they grow with the LWC so does their understanding of the system and each project gets better defined and outcomes become more focused and achievable.

As students, faculty, and industry partners grow from this experience so does the university. Each successful studio leads to new students and faculty gaining interest in this method of education. In the past few years more students have asked to join the collaborative and interest is gaining in university faculty. The LWC has become a model of how a university can break down silos of learning and combine them into a unified innovative platform for problem solving that can truly make a difference.
HOW THE LWC OPERATES

The LWC’s operational model is based on the structure set forth by the Master Collaborative Agreement (MCA) that was established when UC and P&G founded the LWC. The MCA provides membership guidelines and most importantly defines how intellectual property (IP) is handled both from the perspective of ownership, as well as a fee structure for commercialization milestones. IP was identified as the single most difficult item to negotiate and a primary reason why universities and industry find it difficult to collaborate. Other components of the MCA include project costs, confidentiality, and how the board of directors governs the Live Well.

LWC daily operations greatly depend on studio project loads. There is one full time associate, the Executive Director. For each project the director hires a research associate, graduate student and co-op to form a core team to support faculty during the course of a project. This frees faculty to concentrate on leading projects and leaves them unburdened with logistics. The support that these students provide is one of the reasons why the LWC is so successful. The amazing level of competency and skill sets they bring to the table is unbelievable. Students also do a variety of project work for LWC, including workshop development, research, project process log development, and research for faculty. The Executive Director reports to the board of directors and manages all aspects of the member relationship, project contractual agreements, business development and budgetary requirements.

The LWC follows a membership model. Interested companies join the Live Well by first agreeing to the terms of the MCA. Another successful structural component is all companies agree to the same MCA, there are no modifications. The membership requires a two-year commitment. During this time frame, companies have the opportunity to do studio projects that are priced according to deliverables. Membership also provides two collaborative forums a year and workshops based on member needs.

In planning LWC studios much preparation work is needed. Typically a quarter or semester before a studio is to be launched representatives from all disciplines and corporate sponsors meet to discuss the project scope. This meeting outlines basic topic areas, expected outcomes, and communication leads inside the corporations. Many times the initial scope is refined after our partners understand the full collaborative capabilities. Once the initial meeting is completed key faculty once again meet to discuss an academic strategy for developing the desired outcomes and resources needed to complete the deliverables. Topics discussed include access to interview subjects, access to primary site locations for observational research, and setting up communications with identifying corporate point persons.

After these initial meetings are completed a series of planning sessions are scheduled. In these sessions a syllabus outlining the entire quarter or semester is completed in detail. Estimates of funding are compiled and preliminary site visits are conducted. These site visits are typically conducted with participating faculty and graduate students. The goals of these visits are to get a better understanding of what the students will be experiencing and also to gather preliminary research data that will assist student understanding at the studio’s beginning. Once these activities are completed the faculty and graduate team will meet with the sponsor and review all material to ensure action items are in place to meet the agreed upon expectations and deliverables.

HOW THE STUDIOS OPERATE

From the initial class, participating students recognize an LWC studio is different from most university learning experiences. Excluding designers, most have not worked in a studio environment where failure is as important as success. From a design student’s vantage, this learning forum forces them to teach others how a studio operates and opens their minds to techniques used by other disciplines. For most designers and non-designers this is the first time they have worked with an intimate interdisciplinary team.
An LWC studio is divided into four phases: research, ideation, validation, and refinement (Figure 2).

The research phase relies heavily on a team approach. In this phase students meet our industry partners, hear lectures from subject experts, begin primary research strategies, execute research plans, and compile results. The results become the anchor for all future developments of products, services, marketing strategies, and manufacturing plans.

After research is completed, results are used to develop a conceptualization strategy in the ideation phase. Using this strategy is the first time students cross-pollinate via intense brainstorming sessions. The goals of these sessions are to develop concepts that address and solve problems and opportunities discovered in the research phase.

Once concepts are developed student teams return to their users and test for concept validation. Validations ensure the concepts and teams are on the correct trajectory for a successful final solution.

Next teams begin the refinement phase. Here the interdisciplinary team begins to split and focus on their areas of expertise. This final direction weaves all team members’ final outcomes into one cohesive product or service direction.

During these phases faculty correspond weekly with the sponsor and arrange face-to-face presentations at key points in the project. Ideally these presentations occur at the completion of each major phase, however in cases where this is not possible video conferencing is used and in person reviews are cut to a mid-term and final presentation.

WHAT MAKES THIS MODEL A SUCCESS

Operationally this model is a success because of its structure. The LWC is a non-profit 401c-6. It is a stand-alone company that operates independently from the university as well as its corporate members. It has developed several mechanisms that have eliminated university barriers and is the face to corporate sponsors. The LWC coordinates contractual agreements, university resources, and IRB requirements. Most importantly the LWC allows faculty to focus on project outcomes, instead of behind the scenes administrative and logistical work.

Academically the success of this collaboration lies in the interdisciplinary nature of each studio. Many times throughout the course of a studio, students show frustration. This comes in many forms from project scope to learning what is valuable to other disciplines. In the end these various points of frustration are exactly what makes this a success. Students who go through this process learn the traits of their complementary disciplines (Figure 3). For Nursing students, this extends from clinical rotations within the health care team to collaborating closely with disciplines related to but also outside the confines of clearly defined acute care settings. This understanding stays with each student as they enter the workforce and begin to climb the ladders of success.
From a university perspective, all those associated with the LWC have benefited. Faculty participants have found new research partners, and have forged new initiatives that have succeeded outside the collaborative. Departments have refined long-term goals to include interdisciplinary studies into their curriculums and the University has implemented many of the values cultured at the LWC in their plans for creating an academic competitive edge.

From a member's perspective, the success is what comes out of young minds that are not jaded by corporate influences and the responsibilities of family life. “The richness is phenomenal….the students are totally open in their approach and their designs have been very productive for us. It’s exceeding our expectations. Its an environment of co-creation….It’s a total enhancement of the way we are doing work,” as expressed by Dr. Matthew Doyle, Director and Senior Researcher in Healthcare at P&G, for CoDesign, March 2011.

WHAT OBSTACLES THE LWC STUDIOS HAVE FACED

There are definitely challenges encountered when conducting interdisciplinary design studios. Those challenges can be met by a well-organized faculty team, ample support, and perhaps most importantly of all the ability to flex and adapt to myriad variables within the studio.

Since the interdisciplinary studios of the LWC have been comprised of students from various majors in colleges from across the university, the students have come to us with a wide range of exposure to and experience working in team projects. The respective culture of their home college and program, a climate to which they have become accustomed, is often times quite different from those of the students sitting to their left and right in the LWC studio. At no other single point in the course of the LWC studios is this cultural consideration more apparent than in the initial “understanding” phase of a project. Since this phase happens early in the term, the students haven’t had the opportunity to adjust to their new climate, one that is often quite ambiguous. Many students do not initially understand the reason for the lack of upfront structure, but eventually come to understand that this is necessary to increase the potential for creativity and unique perspective needed to ultimately conceive innovative output. Although one mantra of the LWC is that we appreciate and celebrate differences in the perspective and capability of studio members, there are times when the clash of student culture becomes too great and instructor interventions are required. If approached appropriately, such as a reorganization of teammates at the earliest onset of trouble, potential negative situations can be defused and the studio project can keep ticking along. In the process, a new culture can unfold as students discover how the variety of disciplines adds richness, depth, and increasingly creative outcomes.
As student cultures and differences emerge, so may those of faculty and their administrative direction within various colleges and programs. A new administrator may change direction or may not understand this different and innovative approach. In this case, transparency, sharing, and mutual support is needed with early intervention just as is done with the student teams.

THE FUTURE FOR THE LWC

During the past five years, the LWC has had its share of ups and downs and has managed to survive. The downturn in the economy has caused the LWC to re-invent its economic model. A major win for LWC was P&G pursuing a research site in Singapore. This provided LWC with enough leverage to collaborate with Singapore Polytechnic and form a Live Well Collaborative in Singapore. This has led to global members: P&G, Kraft and Boeing. The flexible nature of the Live Well, combined with the continued support from its corporate membership, administration and faculty from the University of Cincinnati has made it a success.

What does the future hold? Concepts that were developed 3-4 years ago with companies have now reached a point where determinations will be made regarding commercialization. Stay tuned….the future is looking very bright!