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Author: Joe McCullagh
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Introducing ALF

Joe McCullagh

Head of Design/Associate Dean, Learning, Teaching, Quality and Assessment
Manchester Metropolitan University

Introduction

In this short article I introduce you to ‘ALF’.

As Associate Dean for Learning, Teaching, Quality and Assessment, this pedagogic project will be used as a central strategic vehicle for Learning and Teaching in the Manchester School of Art.

My intention in this short article is to introduce and outline the process to you so far for ALF. ALF is now in the final stages of development and about to go live soon, but for now here is a brief introduction. Any feedback for ALF would be really welcomed.

Who is ALF?

Let us start with a Problem:

Essentially, there is a great deal of exciting learning and teaching taking place in the school, however, this needs to be shared and experienced to wider communities within the school. There is also a further need to be able to share, research, develop, exchange work and ideas across the school on learning and teaching and to ultimately extend this to the university and beyond.

Response:

Let me introduce ALF. ALF is you, me. Conceptually, ALF is the student, the academic, the technician, the administrator, whoever is interested in learning and teaching.

ALF is Manchester School of Art’s Learning Foundation; it is about social learning and teaching. ALF manifests itself as an online designed blog. It will be an interactive learning space for those in the school and for those outside the school who wish to know what we are up to in terms of learning and teaching.
ALF is also a research publishing space to allow learning and teaching artefacts to be produced. ALF highlights these learning and teaching projects by students and staff in the school.

**Context for ALF**

ALF has its origins in the historical tradition of learning and teaching in the school. On investigating further research material from our Special Collections, I was inspired by the established and rich tradition of pedagogic education tradition of our own school. I took inspiration from Walter Crane, the school’s first head of design (1893 to 1898) who illustrated educational books and also created books based on his lectures whilst teaching at Manchester. Seminal books were published, incorporating his illustrated drawings; two notable books were *The Bases of Design* (1898) and *Line and Form* (1900). I also found his ‘Toy books’ as useful reference points, designed to stimulate the imagination, designed to be small and short in length.

Theoretically, the work of ALF principally draws heavily upon the pedagogic theories of social learning from both Wenger (1998) and Brew (2006). We were also recognising social learning in the context of changes in how students learn and the emergence of new graduate attributes. It is beyond the purpose of this short article to articulate further, however, these theories set within the context of research in learning and teaching in the art school have been further referenced and have been presented as co-authored papers at a number of international conferences, please see ‘further references’ below.
Sources of inspiration

In broader design terms, my motivation comes from the educational heritage of learning and teaching in art, design and architecture. My key influences are traced to the work of designers Charles and Ray Eames in the 1950s and to other periods such as Alan Fletcher in his work for 'Studio Vista' in the 1960s. The ALF project is also conceptually influenced by Gyorgy Kepes in his 1960s ‘Education of vision’ series and also the work of the amazing but short-lived American educational institute the liberal arts college, Black Mountain College (1933–1957), which was inspired by the principles of the educational reformer John Dewey, whose work focused upon reflection, democracy and embedded learning within a social community of learning.
Developing ALF

It was important to note, that I needed to carry out market research and an aspect of this crucially was whether the name Art Learning Foundation actually existed. Thankfully, it did not and Neil Ashdown (our Faculty Web Officer) and I were able to register the name of ALF, Art Learning Foundation, online.

In order to develop ALF further, I created a Design Brief; please see the brief outlined below. The brief enabled me to understand fully the nature of the project and for me to be able to brief colleagues. In order to gain further early feedback, the concept of ALF importantly was presented and discussed at School Communication Days where I was able to receive vital input into its development from academics within the school. As part of the process, I contextualised the project within what I felt is important in the major shifts of pedagogy as Associate Dean for Learning and Teaching and delivered a talk on ‘Social Learning and Teaching’.

I felt it was also important that ALF was fully developed in-house utilising the skills and expertise of my colleagues. This celebrates the concept of the ‘pedagogic designer’, which I have been developing further within the school. For the logo, I commissioned Hilary Judd a senior lecturer in Graphic Design who had previously produced some beautiful hand-drawn letterforms to create a number of hand-drawn ideas based for ALF. The hand-drawn letterforms were then refined further as part of final logo realisation. I liked the idea that ALF was to have a signature, hence, the use of the hand-drawn mark.
Hilary was given the brief and a number of random visual reference points to work with that were mainly taken from music references such as Miles Davis.

Hilary on reading the brief developed the hand-drawn ‘signature’ of ALF further and produced a great ‘signature/mark’ for ALF.

Hilary’s ‘alf’ visuals

The ‘mark’ was refined further and an appropriate typographic treatment incorporating Art Learning Foundation was produced resulting in the final ALF logo. The logo utilises Akzidenz Grotesk, one of the school’s brand typefaces.

I worked very closely with Neil in order to deliver an appropriate online platform for ALF. The technical aspects of this project working with content delivery are worthy of further discussion and cannot be underestimated. Neil’s technical creative expertise was vital in ALF’s development. We discussed heavily the nature of access to the platform, its audience, and the process of developing a social space. We settled upon the platform of a blog, however, we wanted it to look more bespoke and designed. Neil took the decision to adapt ‘wordpress’ in order to make the project more visual and bespoke.

Design and content realisation

Coming from a graphic design background, I developed the concept and design of ALF and translated this working further with Neil to create the online presence. I wanted the site to be linear and easily navigable. I created a simple structure that would allow the key sections to be accessible.

Importantly, for me the idea of ALF had to exist as part of the brand of the school. However, it had to have its own distinct identity. Working closely with Neil we developed a platform for ALF that is easily downloadable and importantly accessible. For the graphic imagery of ALF I took everyday photographs of the school.

The photographs were edited further and heavily cropped to be incorporated as key visual elements within ALF.
Screen shots of ALF

Screenshots below from the ALF beta version give you an idea of the content and design of ALF. Archives, comment boxes are currently being technically developed.

**Content**

The categories developed for the space reference jazz and improvisation further, I guess I was 'listenin' to too much jazz when it was being developed! Importantly, the content and feel of the space is to be relaxed, and as Hilary pointed out when designing the mark for ALF that it should be friendly and also credible. We purposely did not want to produce a space that is one dimensional and content given, we want to engage social interaction and that the users would generate the content. The various sections allow an open structure to encourage this interaction. ALF is not meant to duplicate any learning and teaching activity but simply to signpost, to connect up, network
and to continue to stimulate the community of learners within the school and also beyond. I will act as the main overseer of ALF and also our Senior Learning and Teaching Fellow, Michael Gorman and it will be taking it further as an on-going pedagogic research project. ALF has already revealed other fascinating areas for research, particularly on why in the 1960s there appears to be a greater interest in pedagogy publications within art and design.

Next steps

This short article introduces you to ALF. ALF’s intention is to innovate within learning and teaching and to encourage social communities of practice. Importantly, it hopes to do this within a social and engaging way. I will be advancing some of the research ideas and concepts outlined in this article further in the future.

ALF is going through some technical updates at the moment. We will need to carry out further user testing and also content development. The school’s pedagogic research group will be asked to contribute to this process and content generation. We will have a ‘soft’ launch of ALF and we hope to go live in the very near future. Any feedback on the development of ALF will be very much appreciated.

References


Appendix 1

Design brief

Background

ALF
Alf will become Manchester School of Art's learning foundation

ALF = ART LEARNING FOUNDATION
social learning and teaching

Conceptually ALF is the student, the academic, the technician, the administrator. ALF is about social learning and teaching.

ALF will be an online space that will be an interactive learning space for those in the school and for those outside the school who wish to know what we are doing in terms of learning and teaching. ALF will also be a publishing space to allow learning and teaching artefacts to be produced ie. Using our in-house risograph. ALF will show the learning and teaching projects by students and staff in the school. It is an open space for the whole school.

Problem: Essentially there is some really exciting learning and teaching in the school but this needs to be shared and experienced. ALF is set up to allow this interaction.

The strapline is ‘social learning and teaching’.

Design feel—fuzzy felt
The initial feel of ALF is that it came out of looking at Ken Garland’s work for GALT toys, a fuzzy felt idea and again referencing some of those beautiful learning and teaching handbooks by Alan Fletcher’s work here for Studio Vista. I wanted something exciting, friendly and interesting but credible.

Conceptually taking the idea of ALF as a person hence the hand drawn idea of the logo. The handdrawn logo is counterbalanced with some strong photography again referencing Ken Garland’s use of photography.

Identity
An identity for ALF. The identity should work on screen and off. Consider drawings ‘marks’ around the idea of ALF also for the navigation of the site. Colour palette wise we should use the school’s house style branded colours and also the school's typographic specification of Akzidenz Grotesk. ALF needs to sit and work within the school brand as a sub-brand within. Also work in B/W.

Content ideas
Jazz! The influence of jazz on ALF is important as it typifies the idea of play and importantly improvisation.

Possible content ideas:
ALF takin’ off
ALF what’s cookin’?
ALF what you lookin’?
ALF what you watchin’?
ALF what you listenin’?
ALF what’s up?
Say hello to ALF?
Who is ALF?

ALF questions?
Alternative NSS artschool questionnaire find out how many students like the colour blue and prefer subway or sand bar to....

ALF academic stuff
Check out reading lists for staff, albers, dewey, vygotsky, interesting education stuff for staff and students, links to CELT, HEA, organizations

Top 10 pedagogoues of our time

Video wall
studio pedagogic films, link in to existing film course films

Ask ALF?
ALF’s JAM creative hour
Take part in creative day of the week, at between 7-8pm
Art jam upload your images, videos, work

ALF what’s up?
Conversations with ALF Staff and students talk about art/design/architecture stuff

See what your mates are up to?

Project wall, upload an image and words of project

Top 10 random images of the week

Twitter 150 words tell us what you think on learning and teaching

What have you learnt this week?

ALF wants you.
In 150 characters or images

Who is ALF?
What’s up
what your colleagues are up to.