

AEME 2019

Strand: Creating Value in Event Education

Title: Death & Experience Design: a case study of transdisciplinary teaching & learning

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### What is it about?

This presentation explores the initial impacts of a pilot transdisciplinary project between Business & Experience Design, English and Graphic Design at Falmouth University.

It evidences both teaching, through sharing of content and methods, and learning through a review of assessed student work and student feedback.

### The project:

In February - May 2019, MOTH, a graphic design research collective at Falmouth ran a 2<sup>nd</sup> year undergraduate project exploring how food and funeral feasting can be used to positively impact and disseminate creative exchange around mourning, bereavement and end of life choices.

The project, *An Extra Place at the Table: Food and Funeral Feasting*, had 3 elements:

01 *Epitaph*, supported by Dr. Anna Keirnan from the School of Writing and Journalism at Falmouth University

02 *An Extra Place at the Table: publication*, supported by Elsa Richardson, Chancellor's Fellow in the History of Health and Wellbeing at University of Strathclyde

03 *An Extra Place at the Table: Death Over Dinner Event*, supported by Clare Hearn from Business and Experience Design at Falmouth University

An Extra Place at the table encouraged students to explore how, through food and funeral feasting rituals, loss in many forms can be purposeful and positive, empowering *'a durable biography that enables the living to integrate the memory of the dead into their ongoing lives'* (Walter 7-25: 1996).

### Industry context:

Death research is experiencing somewhat of a resurgence. Recent studies have noted the increasing trend in Australia for a *'deadly individualisation'* pervading the funeral in post-Christian societies, with collective rites replaced by personally tailored experiences focused solely on the individual (Singleton 2014).

The 2019 Global Wellness Trends Report named 'Dying Well' as its 8th trend, evidenced by research into the rise in popularity of *'death doulas'*, the *'green burial wave'* and *'death acceptance tourism'*, all acts conducted in response to what author Beth McGroarty notes as our death denying society.

This is fuelled in part in the US by the Silicon Valley biotech industry aiming to cure death, and a pervasive 'wellness' agenda, a *'21st century secular belief system ...fundamentally directed at avoiding death anxiety...[by] convincing oneself that the right regimen of diet and exercise will keep you perpetually young or ...perpetually alive'* (Soloman, cited in McGroarty 96: 2019).

Such trends in alternative funerals question the commodification and perceived value of the traditional funeral service, with demand declining whilst costs are rising, 112% in 13 years. The cost of dying is rising seven times faster than the cost of living, (the average UK funeral costing £4078, with one in six bereaved families experiencing Funeral Poverty in an industry estimated to be worth £1billion annually). [Statista](#)

The UK Competition and Markets Authority are currently conducting the second stage of their enquiry into the UK funeral industry, a hitherto unregulated sector, accused of opaque pricing at best and financial exploitation of the vulnerable at worst.

(It should be noted that such concerns are not without precedent. In 1963, Mitford's *The American Way of Death*, a seminal text for the then nascent death awareness movement, accused the US funeral industry of profiteering by the selling of unnecessary services to the vulnerable bereaved.)

However, there persists a pervasive reluctance to openly engage with such existentially charged dialogue, despite the efforts of increasing numbers of initiatives, including Swiss sociologist Bernard Cretz's Café Mortels, Jon Underwood's subsequent Death Cafés, Hebb and Macklin's Death over Dinner phenomenon and Caitlin Doughty's *The Order of the Good Death*. As a consequence, current practice in funeral services is still for the most part subject to historic attitudes and beliefs.

And certainly, there is a dearth of literature on the topic within events management and events studies research as Laws and Deveral note (2019), though they have of course been the object of scrutiny in a number of other disciplines for many years, most notably perhaps, in social anthropology, where the analysis of the events around death has long provided rich commentary on meaning, structure and value within societies.

### The workshop

In April, I delivered a day long workshop introducing staff and students to the nascent field of experience design.

The workshop manifest as a series of explorations, conceptual and practical, into theories and methods drawn from multiple disciplines. It was designed to both illuminate the nature of a new era of critical discourse about event experiences (their design, their meaning and their impact) and to consider how this can be utilized in the design of contexts for potentially deeply existential dialogue and thought.

We started from the position that *'the poem is not the critic's own or the author's. it is detached from the author at birth and goes about the world beyond his power to intend about it or to control it. The poem belongs to the public'* (Wimsatt & Beardsley 1946).

Design then is the creation of the potential for a narrative. It is the creation of the methods and experiencescape for the telling of a story in which attendee is protagonist.

The workshop explored experience design both practically, using discussion of theory and group activities to consider immersivity, inclusivity and co-creation methodologies but also conceptually, discussing the role of ritual, liminality and tradition in the design of funerary experiences, alongside nostalgia, authenticity, habitus, and of course, commensality.

### The Events studies perspective

From a new event studies perspective, consideration of how one might design experiences in which food and funeral feasting either enable dialogue on mourning, bereavement and end of life choices or which are themselves contexts for funeral feasting, must surely include establishment of an appropriate conceptual framework.

However, 21st century event management professional practice has stood accused of having sacrificed awareness, understanding and inclusion of ritualistic elements in favour of artificially manufacturing events (Brown & James 2004).

In academia, the discipline is rapidly evolving, and increasingly we teach using a construct of events as '*catalysts, symbols, conduits, and lenses*' (Richards, Marques & Mein 2014:4), which will feed into the future of the industry, and so in 21<sup>st</sup> century post-Christian secular societies, where discourse around death has been '*privatized, secularized and medicalized*' (Simpson 7:2018), perhaps it will be the role of experience designers alongside scholars to explore what new meaningful and performed rituals are needed in order to mark death.

If we accept that funerary experiences provide (admittedly sometimes rejected) sites for collective acceptance of loss, where the dead are '*reassembled, resurrected and regenerated in ways that are meaningful to those who have been left behind*' (Simpson 5:2018), how might we now need to design for these? As Wilson states, '*the problem facing all who celebrate rituals in a fast-changing society is how to combine relevance to changing circumstances with the sanctity of tradition*' (cited in Rothenbuhler 46:1998).

Currently, I suggest that the funeral remains the only shared, rarely discussed and least planned event within our experience economy (Pine and Gilmore 1999). It is the site of things which must be done (Mandelbaum 1959). But do we know what these things are? And by whom they should be done?

The notion of commensality, whilst core to the *An Extra Place at the Table* project, is not an automatic component in an exploration of experience design; however, in the context of the funeral experience, its relationship with ritual is essential. Food is often one of the core aspects of the ceremonial, of ritual events. Commensality, the sharing of meals, symbolizes and denotes social bonds and divisions, drawing boundaries between those who still eat together and those who do not.

The funeral, an agreed space for mourning, can be deliberately designed to reflect current belief systems, to act as an essential bounded transitional period, in which we can carefully move the dead into a socially collectively constructed mythologized narrative, enable survivors to experience separation communally, begin to darn the space left by death and start re-integration into society in its new form.

Through framing experience design with such concepts, enabling awareness, understanding and inclusion of ritualistic and other elements, we are far from providing Rojek's '*technocratic view of events, focus[ed] on the nuts and bolts in the machine and when and where to oil the parts*' (2013: xii).

### **Discussion of the primary research:**

It was initially hypothesized that this project might be transformational on 2 levels:

- shared knowledge creates a broader and deeper understanding of the transdisciplinary nature of staff and student endeavour;
- the creation of a safe and 'held' space enabling existential enquiry into dying and individual agency.

In order to explore this hypothesis, 2 data collection methods were used:

### **1. Mixed methods survey consisting of 8 questions sent on 9 May to all 25 students' email accounts**

*(response rate was 7 / 28% - reasons for low rate might include: use of student email addresses, which are infrequently checked after teaching and assessment finish; distribution date, which was necessarily after final submission date of 3 May 2019 and after final date of teaching)*

Students were asked a number of questions exploring their perception of transdisciplinary teaching, the relevance of the content of the Experience Design workshop, the impact of the Experience Design workshop on the quality of their assessed work, and the impact of the project on their attitude towards death and dying.

All students surveyed felt that the use of academics from other disciplines had improved the quality of their work with 70% saying that it had helped with multiple aspects and had significant impact on their output.

Over 85% of students said that the project had changed the way that they think about mourning, bereavement and end of life choices.

All students commented that the project had changed the way that they viewed the relationship between academic disciplines.

Students were asked which theories explored in the experience design workshop were most helpful – options were experience economy, habitus, semiotics, authenticity, commensality, sensory design immersivity, liminality – all were all were rated either useful or highly useful, with unsurprisingly for this project, commensality rated most highly (least popular were semiotics and habitus).

All students stated that they had used these theories in their assessed work, with sensory design and liminality most commonly cited.

When asked for any other feedback, all comments focused on wanting more access:

- *Should be more in-depth throughout a number of days*
- *Maybe work hand in hand with the individuals producing work or creating an experience design*
- *More opportunity to talk about our own projects/ideas with the visiting lecturers*

### **2. Analysis of content of collaborative student submission (submitted for assessment on Friday 3 May, 5 weeks after the Experience Design workshop)**

- Students were asked to produce a collaborative presentation, including the following elements:
- Articulation of visual narrative of a Death over Dinner event and rationale for narrative
- Evidence of dish for consumption
- Design for accompanying menu, plate and/or place setting for the table.
- Decisions on music/sound-scape, selected or created readings/text/prose

The student submissions were analysed for evidence of learning taken from the Experience Design workshop. Effectively applied content was present in all but one,

**SLIDE: Play with Food**

Play with Food, which explored the loss of creativity in the transition from childhood to adulthood, located their event

*'In a round white room with a high ceiling and natural style lighting, which make the room feel open and airy, despite there being no windows. The absence of windows causes guests to lose track of time, just as children do when playing. The room's shape encourages inclusion and collaboration, and the white walls are a never-ending canvas upon which guests are invited to create their own enchanted worlds.*

*The absence of time, curved 'blank canvas', and unusual presentation of food create a liminal space, which may feel uncomfortable at first. However, liminal spaces are unsettling by nature, as they are places in which transformation occurs...'*

#### SLIDE: Eat with your Eyes

Eat with Your Eyes, a project which explored the loss of sight, created an immersive space which enabled the participant to have a series of visual experiences akin to a partially sighted individual, whilst heightening other senses.

#### SLIDE: Death of Mess

As one might expect from the survey results, the consideration of the meanings of food, articulated in the workshop through introduction of habitus and semiotics, was evident in only one project, the Death of Mess, which explored whether the trend for showing 'beautiful' food on Instagram might impact on the purpose and look of funeral foods – the meaning of food was therefore explored here, with Instagram posed as the tool for new colonialization of traditional culture.

Their notion of a funeral event at which the traditional food would be consumed was uniquely bleak -

*The event would be designed for a single person; so it would avoid pictures taken with someone' in the background. Each table will have its own studio lights in which the mourner can adjust.*

#### So, to conclude...

Both the workshop and the evaluation of its impact were pilot exercises, developing out of a shared area of research across disciplines, discovered by a chance meeting between MOTH and Ian Lamond at a conference in York and enabled by his subsequent email introductions. (MOTH and I were unknown to each other prior to this, despite both working for the same institution ... sound familiar?!)

Did the project create a broader and deeper understanding of the transdisciplinary nature of staff and student endeavor? Well, I think that it has started something – I think that the students and we the academic practitioners have learned much about what we share and how we might co-create value moving forward. Yes, there will be more sharing of our time with each other's students – there may also be a blueprint for designing an approach to loss for who we are now, which will be a truly collaborative endeavor.

Did we create a safe and 'held' space enabling existential enquiry into dying and individual agency? Again, I think that with this project, MOTH started something, something which uses experiential creativity to enable a shared discourse on loss, without the crippling immediacy of grief, something which I believe that we truly need.

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