Not too long ago, our Senior Consultant Creative Lead Shun Ishikawa travelled to Japan to facilitate a unique workshop. Upon his return, we quizzed him on the event, the people and what he learnt from the experience:

Tell us about the workshop itself, what was the theme?

The workshop is organised by i.school, which is part of an innovation course at the University of Tokyo that teaches students how to become innovative and forward thinkers in multiple disciplines. It’s a very academic course.

The theme of the workshop was about innovating house chores, such as washing up, laundry, cleaning and vacuuming. The challenge was to explore how we can change these experiences into something completely different, which can positively impact families and people living alone.

What was your role and who else was involved?

My role was to come up with the programme for this four day activity. And to think about how to run the workshop and how to make the most of the short time we had. I had to facilitate this, working closely with Takuya Akashi, a service designer from Hitachi, who ran the project with me. His job is to come up with new infrastructures and consider things such as how energy will work for people in the future. Takuya is very good at looking at things from a very different perspective to me – I’m more focused on technology product design and people, and how these two interact.

The collaboration went really well and we worked really well together. It was very difficult for me, living in the UK, to communicate effectively to the people at i.school and really understand what they wanted for the workshop using Skype, so it was really good to have someone to help me from Japan.

How many people attended and who were they?

27 people participated. About 70% of them were MA students but they were from very different disciplines - from law, architecture, engineering to business, but they were all keen on learning about design and creative thinking. Other participants came from different companies who sponsored the workshop; Sony, Toyota, NTT, Tokyo Marine Company and SCSK.

Sounds interesting, how long did the workshop last?

Four days, from 9am to 6pm. However, we usually carried on working at the venue until 8 or 9pm. For the students, it probably went all night because they couldn’t sleep as they were thinking about the project and how to improve house chores and come up with innovative ideas.

What was the outcome?

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The theme of the workshop was about innovating house chores, such as washing up, laundry, cleaning and vacuuming. The challenge was to explore how we can change these experiences into something completely different, which can positively impact families and people living alone.
Even though everyone started with the same challenge - to come up with home appliance products to change the experience of house chores - the outcome of each group was very different. We were hoping that some students would break boundaries and come up with new, different designs. Some teams came up with a new vacuum cleaner and another team came up with a service-based idea about how families and the local community could work together with their product to better facilitate a more sustainable food chain.

What did you learn from running the workshop? Any feedback from the participants?

I learnt that facilitating a large group with very few people is difficult! I learnt a lot about preparation and ensuring you have enough work activities which you can flexibly change as you go along because often you have to adjust your schedule depending on how people are doing; for example those who are struggling a bit or those who are doing well. It’s important to have good team members and I learnt a lot from the students. Although many of the students were very academic, they were still able to think about design innovatively and creatively and working with them really helped create innovative and more digestible ideas for a wide audience.

I had really great feedback and everybody who attended said they can now see things very differently. They used to think that design was all about the surface and how to make things look better. Now the students see that the design process is a lot more in-depth, and you can use it to change experiences for someone, even with the smallest findings - that a trained eye can see small details that will make all the difference.

That’s great! What did you most enjoy about the whole experience?

Everything went really great, this was the first time I’d taught students and they were a pleasure to work with. They were slightly different to the professional business person because their goal is quite pure in a way. The students really went for it and tried to come up with something very innovative, without the barriers that you have in a business context. They were very passionate.

What would you do differently?

I think I’d have more people involved, this time we only had two people facilitating and helping all the participants but I would rather have one coordinator for each group/table so that everyone gets more time with a tutor. We had five groups and only two people facilitating which makes it difficult to fairly allocate time to each group. It tends to be that you spend more time with the teams that are having issues and less on the teams which seem to be doing well, which makes it hard to judge the final outcome. I’d definitely put in place more facilitators to help run the workshop.

Also, in the final stage we had a Dragon’s Den style presentation with a senior staff member from Hitachi giving his verdict and it was fantastic to gain fresh perspective but I think it would be good to bring more people in to evaluate the projects and have a mixture of opinions from a diverse group of experts so that the students gain different perspectives on their work.

Any plans to do something similar next year? What about in the UK?

The Director of iSchool suggested that we should try do the same next year in Tokyo as the workshop went so successfully, so I think my wish will be to do one every year in Japan. I’d love to run one in the UK. We run lots of workshops with our clients, but it would be great to do something with students as well. It would be great to get people from different countries and invite them to PDD. It would be interesting for the students as well as the clients.

Thank you very much, Shun
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