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Curating pedagogical change: A model for leadership and co-creation in student-led exhibition practice

ABSTRACT

This paper examines how pedagogical and operational strategies were put into practice while integrating a large-scale student exhibition, held as part of the European Design Awards festival, into the academic curriculum. The initiative was guided by experiential and project-based learning (PBL). It sought, above all, to connect classroom teaching with professional practice. In practice, the methodology tended to emphasize collaborative planning, structured team roles, and sustained staff engagement, grounded in principles of motivation and autonomy. These principles were evident in how students managed their own sub-projects. The main strategies involved creating dedicated teams for mentoring, curation, and logistics; introducing structured communication processes; and fostering an environment that promoted a sense of ownership among both students and staff. The results suggested a meaningful and lasting impact on both students and faculty. The project equipped students with industry-relevant skills and opened new professional opportunities. For faculty, this meant rethinking their role from knowledge deliverers to facilitators of hands-on, real-world learning, which encouraged more collaborative and student-led teaching methods. The institution also gained recognition within the European design community. In retrospect, the process itself proved to be a powerful driver of innovation, growth, and cultural change, despite challenges such as workload and resources. The study concludes that immersive, student-led projects are most effective when embedded into the curriculum, though their long-term sustainability depends on continued institutional support.

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Introduction

The primary aim of organizing a student exhibition as an accompanying event of the European Design Awards festival was to integrate professional practice into the academic curriculum. This allowed the teaching team to bridge theory with real-world application (Kolb, 1984). The teaching team guided a cross-disciplinary group of students and staff, ensuring the event's success while gathering insights to establish a sustainable model for future student-led showcases. Built on mentorship and strategic planning, the effort not only equipped students with career-ready skills but also advanced institutional goals (Opoku, Appiah & deGraft-Yankson, 2020). It also contributed to a broader framework of public projects, with an impact that extended far beyond a single event.

The team faced complex logistical and creative decisions. By fostering a collaborative environment, members aligned around a shared vision and created a temporary but effective community of practice (Wenger, 1998). Swift, solution-focused meetings were held whenever unexpected constraints arose, leading to agile revisions of layout and workflow.

This approach, which emphasized problem solving, empowerment, and conflict management, proved critical in making operations more efficient and strengthening the overall impact of the exhibition (Bass & Riggio, 2006; Amabile & Kramer, 2011).

Recognizing that influencing and supporting staff was fundamental to achieving both pedagogical and professional objectives. Within the PBL framework, administrative and faculty members required inspiration, active engagement, and sufficient resources (Blumenfeld et al., 1991; Taneja, 2025). By deliberately creating an empowering environment, we aimed not only to support immediate roles but also to encourage long-term shifts, in line with principles of constructive alignment (Biggs & Tang, 2011).

Methods

Vision and Concept Development

We used a qualitative approach that included post-event reflective analysis, structured debrief sessions with staff and students, and a review of project documentation to explore the development process (Figure 1). The first step was to shape a guiding framework that reflected the European Design Awards' emphasis on creativity and innovation. Through collaboration, we worked with staff to embed the vision into teaching practice. This enabled more effective student mentorship and ensured a stronger alignment between exhibition goals and curriculum outcomes (Kaplanoglu & Dinç, 2019).

This process helped students develop industry-relevant skills while giving staff the chance to engage directly with experiential learning strategies (Wenger, 1998; Kong, 2021; Lave & Wenger, 1991). To foster inclusivity and co-creation, structured sessions were organized with students and staff to gather ideas about themes, presentation styles, and interactive elements.

This participatory approach, which is rooted in social constructivism (Vygotsky, 1978), encouraged staff to contribute to conceptual development directly rather than taking on a purely supervisory role. This promoted a sense of ownership and strengthened collaborative investment across the teaching and learning community.

Close collaboration with administrative staff ensured that vision development remained aligned with broader institutional goals. We gained strong commitment from faculty and administrators by articulating a clear and shared purpose. By maintaining a transparent and motivating environment, we reinforced a culture where all contributors felt valued and inspired to engage meaningfully (Kolb, 1984; Ryan & Deci, 2000).

Building and Managing a Strong Team

Balancing creativity, experience, and technical expertise was essential for building an effective team (Belbin, 2012). A key part of the process involved identifying, recruiting, and coordinating faculty members, mentors, and administrative staff. Ensuring broad participation and equity allowed all students at the Institute of Creativity and Innovation to present their work.

To adequately support students, it was important to define structured roles for staff that leveraged their individual strengths (Bass & Riggio, 2006).

To ensure effective collaboration and execution, responsibilities were divided among specialized teams (Northouse, 2021; Hattie & Timperley, 2007; Wenger, 1998; Biggs & Tang, 2011), each with clear objectives (Table 1).

Table 1

Team Structure, responsibilities, and impact

Team	Core responsibilities	Leadership approach	Key outcomes
Mentoring Team	Student guidance Constructive feedback Creative concept refinement	Empowerment-focused Encouraged initiative Autonomous problem-solving	Staff shifted from content deliverers to facilitators Adoption of PBL, flipped classrooms, structured debates Enhanced formative assessment skills
Curation Team	Exhibit selection Narrative construction Thematic coherence	Trust-based delegation Creative autonomy Regular check-ins	Cohesive exhibition narrative Enhanced curatorial skills among staff Strong thematic alignment with awards standards
Organizational Team	Logistics management Technical operations Administrative coordination	Structured oversight Clear deadlines Resource allocation	Seamless event execution Improved project management capabilities Technical proficiency development

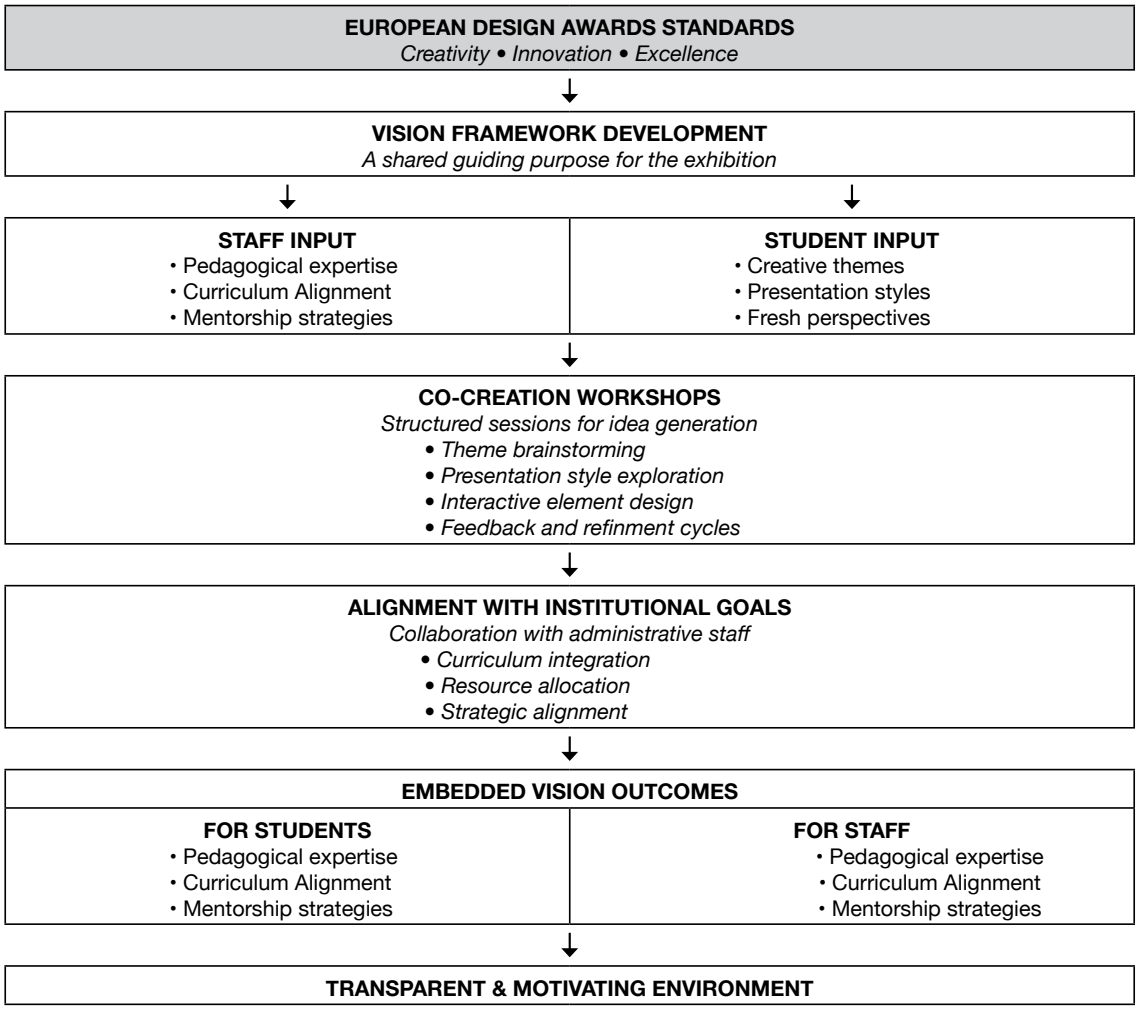
Meetings were held weekly to monitor progress and address any emerging challenges.

While delegating tasks, the focus was on motivating and empowering staff, encouraging initiative, autonomous problem-solving, and leadership development as well (Amabile & Kramer, 2011; Zhang & Bartol, 2010).

Reflective data obtained after the event revealed a notable shift in how staff perceived their professional roles.

Many transitioned from seeing themselves as content deliverers to facilitators of practical, real-world learning. Several staff members introduced structured debates, problem-based learning (PBL) scenarios, and flipped classroom models in their teaching based on their mentoring experience (Barrows, 1996). Staff also reported that providing iterative feedback during the collaboration enhanced their formative assessment skills, which they later integrated into their studio instruction time (Black & Wiliam, 1998).

We cultivated an innovative and accountable work environment while balancing guidance with trust in the team's ability to make decisions. As a result, staff morale improved, and many reported feeling more confident about tackling complex projects in the future (Ryan & Deci, 2000; Edmondson, 1999).



» **Figure 1:** *Vision development and co-creation process*

Influencing and Motivating Staff

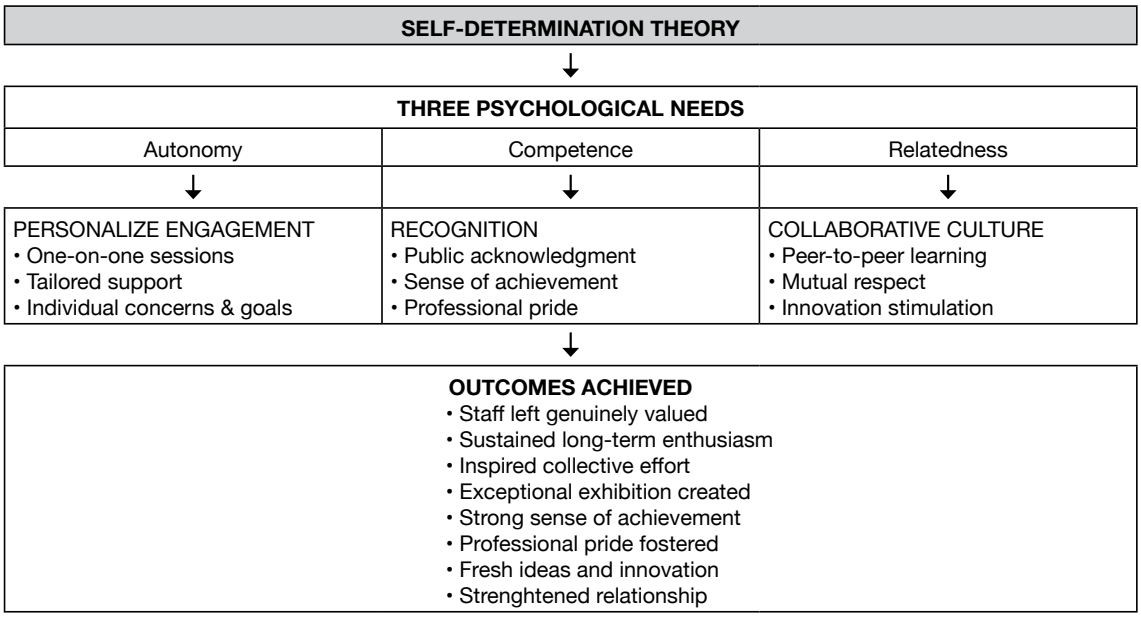
One of our key responsibilities during the project was keeping staff motivated and engaged.

Given the extensive scale of the exhibition and the prolonged preparation period required, maintaining long-term enthusiasm was critical (Kong, 2021). To address this, targeted strategies were implemented to foster and preserve motivation, guided by the principles of self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Figure 2 shows approaches that were implemented.

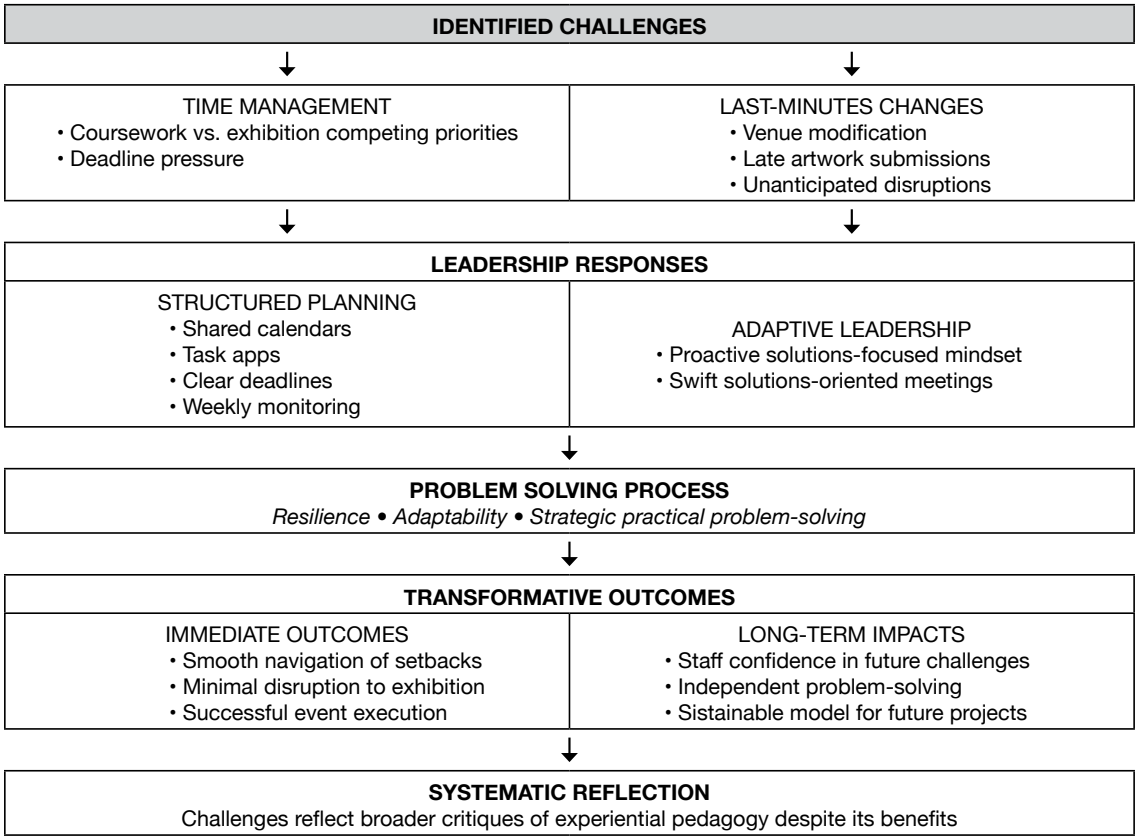
By consistently recognizing, supporting, and empowering staff, we kept them inspired and fostered the creation of an exceptional collective exhibition.

Overcoming Challenges and Problem-Solving

Several significant challenges (Zijlstra, Cropley & Rydstedt, 2014; Uhl-Bien & Arena, 2018) emerged during the project. Figure 3 shows how time management pressures and last-minute changes were addressed through structured planning and adaptive leadership.



» **Figure 2:** *Motivation strategy wheel aligned with Self-Determination Theory*

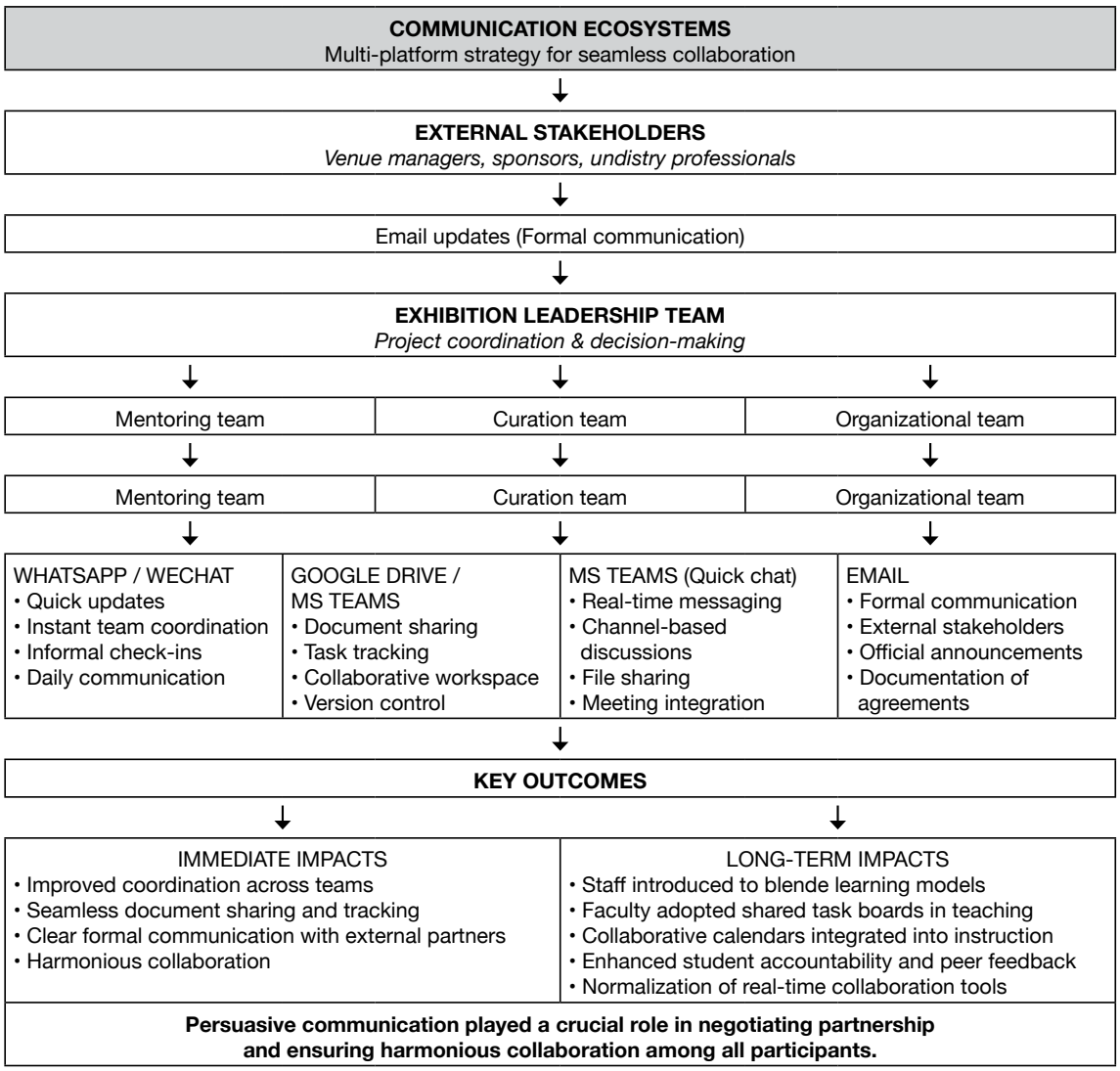


» **Figure 3:** *Challenge-Response-Outcome flow model*

These challenges reflected broader critiques of experiential pedagogy, in which educators often encounter systemic barriers despite its clear educational benefits. Through resilience, adaptability, and practical problem-solving, we supported staff in building the confidence to handle future challenges on their own.

Effective Communication and Management

Clear and consistent communication was essential for coordinating both across teams and with external stakeholders. To ensure seamless collaboration, several communication channels were established which is shown in Figure 4.



» **Figure 4:** *Communication ecosystem map*

Using these platforms, we not only improved coordination but also introduced staff to updated models of blended learning and project management (Garrison & Kanuka, 2004). Faculty members incorporated shared task boards and collaboration calendars into their teaching, helping foster student accountability and peer feedback. By doing so, we helped normalize the use of real-time collaboration tools in teaching practices. Persuasive communication was equally important, especially in negotiations to maintain harmonious collaboration among all participants.

Results and discussion

The exhibition day marked the shift from planning to execution (Figure 5). Our role transitioned from strategic leadership to hands-on operational management. This phase involved overseeing the final setup, ensuring technical systems functioned smoothly, and coordinating team efforts to keep operations running seamlessly. Maintaining a calm and authoritative presence was essential, as it instilled confidence in the team and enabled members to carry out their responsibilities effectively. The event successfully attracted industry professionals, journalists, and design enthusiasts, broadening its reach and impact.

After the event, reflection through structured debrief sessions with staff and students provided critical insights into successful practices and areas for improvement. Besides the immediate success of the exhibition, the initiative demonstrated notable long-term impacts. Staff reported substantial professional development in areas such as mentoring, event planning, and problem-solving. The project provided students with new professional opportunities. Furthermore, the institution achieved high recognition within the European design community and beyond.

Additional evaluations revealed a meaningful shift in pedagogical approaches among staff.



» **Figure 5:** *Exhibition space and poster presentation*

These changes included the adoption of co-creation methods in curriculum planning, an increased emphasis on formative, student-led critique sessions, and the implementation of diverse assessment methods such as portfolio reviews and live presentations.

These elements may be formally integrated into updated module descriptors and may contribute to the institution's ongoing quality enhancement process within its internal assurance framework.

This initiative achieved significant pedagogical transformation. Despite this, it is important to recognize that such constructivist approaches often encounter barriers related to workload, resources, and institutional preparedness. Our experience highlighted these constraints, especially in balancing academic commitments with exhibition demands, underscoring the necessity of sustained institutional support to ensure the long-term sustainability of such projects.

Conclusions

The successful leadership and curation of the European Design Awards exhibition were built on a clear strategic vision and a focus on motivating the entire team.

We brought students, faculty, and administrators together to handle every logistical detail, tackle challenges, and create an atmosphere where innovation thrived. Central to translating a shared vision into a successful event was the ability to inspire and direct collective efforts.

Staff were encouraged to assume ownership, which helped cultivate an environment conducive to creativity, collaboration, and excellence. As we aimed to go beyond mere delegation, the focus was shifted towards mentoring faculty and administrative teams to strengthen their leadership abilities.

This approach also fostered student participation and promoted a culture of shared accountability. This encouragement not only solidified the achievements of the exhibition but also reinforced connections between faculty, students, and other partners.

Looking back on this experience reveals the significant role of leadership and mentorship in the success of collaborative endeavours. Because we built trust and gave both students and staff real responsibility, people stayed motivated and committed to the project's goals.
The initiative confirmed the potential of leadership to generate meaningful educational experiences and opportunities for professional development.

The exhibition also served as practical training in using digital tools, equipping faculty to implement more interactive and student-driven instructional activities. Subsequent internal reviews noted a marked increase in instructors' confidence in digital pedagogy and student engagement in related courses.

The exhibition was more than just a display of art; it was a powerful experience. By empowering and mentoring everyone involved, it helped us all grow professionally. We left not just with a project, but with new confidence, leadership skills, and real-world experience that will shape our future work and studies.

What mattered most about the exhibition wasn't the opening night, but the process that led up to it. When we frame it as a core part of the curriculum, it drives innovation in teaching, gives students crucial professional development, and genuinely changes the institution for the better.

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