

**Paper or Plastic? A Community-Engaged Design Clinic
as Common Intellectual Experience (CIE)**

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Context of the Design Clinic Process

This design clinic builds on our small campus’ (FTE 900) experience with using case studies as the basis of common intellectual experiences (CIEs) (Cruz et al, 2023), an under-studied high impact practice. George Kuh, the originator of the high impact practice model, described CIEs as “advanced integrative studies [that often] combine broad themes—e.g., technology and society, global interdependence—with a variety of curricular and co-curricular options for students.” (Kuh, 2008. 1). The results of an AY 2023-23 pilot program were promising, leading to widespread interest in continuing to evolve how timely, relevant, and cross-disciplinary cases can be integrated across the curriculum and, perhaps especially, into the local community, part of a vibrant and expanding urban area with a large percentage of first- and second- generation immigrant groups.

For this design clinic (Tennessee, 2020), we hosted an in-person session with representatives from two local small businesses and volunteer faculty, staff, and students from four degree programs: business management, biology, economics, and sustainability studies (n=17), to consider the issue of sustainable packaging (Boz et al, 2020), through multiple lenses and across multiple roles. All participants were provided with food purchased from the participating businesses, utilizing their existing packaging procedures.

We are working towards a world where...

Our focus was environmental sustainability and sustainable decision-making, which often involves long-range thinking and the integration of perspectives from multiple stakeholders. This focus is a strength of the campus faculty and a value known to be shared with many in the surrounding community as well as the majority of enrolled students.

Could you help me...

The local city council has twice vetoed bills that would ban the use of plastic bags for retail establishments, citing the potential inequities such a ban might impose on small businesses as well as their customers from economically disadvantaged populations. Based on these community debates, representatives from two small, family-owned businesses, both food providers located near our campus, asked for input from the campus community regarding the sustainability of their packaging.

Both community representatives shared their experience of tension between sustainability values and cost effectiveness. As one of them stated, "I am working toward a world where I will be able to see small businesses like mine using sustainable packaging for delivery of take-out meals from our businesses at reasonable costs. Plastic bags and containers, though cost-effective from business point of view, in which we typically serve the take-out meals, are not the best option given the climate change issues we face around us." The local business owners were asking for help deciding how to balance the demands of sustainability and cost in terms of packaging.

Share more about...

For the sake of organization, the design clinic experience was split into two equal groups, each focused on one of the businesses. Each group contained a mix of students, faculty, and staff members.

In group A, members posed questions regarding current packaging procedures, volume, ratio of take-out/delivery to in-person customers, and cost. In group B, members posed questions regarding decision making processes (i.e., how the business chose its packaging), cultural preferences, and clientele expectations. Both groups worked towards a shared understanding of the dynamics of decision-making within small, family-owned businesses.

This makes me think of...

Most of the students contributed their experiences with unusual, excessive, or exemplary packaging in other contexts. These included the adoption of re-usable, food-safe cardboard containers, shifting the cost of plastic packaging to the customer using re-usable delivery bags, and different options for the provision of cutlery (especially chopsticks). Faculty members, on the other hand, tended to focus on their experiences with the long-term effects of plastic packaging on the environment, especially the pernicious effects on local wildlife.

You might try...

The two groups identified the following initial options as possibilities for the two businesses:

- Eliminating redundant practices, such as double bagging or extraneous cutlery
- Researching the cost-effectiveness of switching out plastic bags for cardboard containers
- Conducting market research to determine customer values and preferences
- Looking to other states known to be environmentally friendly, such as California, for model practices

- Providing positive incentives for customers who agree to bring re-usable containers or bags
- Partnering with providers such as Door Dash or UberEATS (used by both businesses) to adopt sustainable practices with delivery orders
- Leveraging sustainable packaging as a competitive advantage, using it in advertising and brand identity
- Exploring possible sources of excess or re-usable cardboard in the region, which is home to many large-scale warehouses
- Considering virtual options, such as using QR codes for customers to access menus

You have me thinking...

Both representatives indicated that their families had not spent much time thinking about sustainable packaging until this clinic experience. As one stated, “Most of the time, local businesses like mine do not think of the negative externalities imposed on society due to the use of cheap materials like plastic.”

The community members tended to steer away from direct conversations about costs, making it evident, both implicitly and explicitly, that the decision-making process for both businesses was done collectively by members of the family and not by individuals such as themselves. Both stated that the process had provided them with potentially actionable strategies that could increase the sustainability of their packaging, and they would need to bring these suggestions back to their respective families for further consideration. Several faculty noted that this style of decision making differs markedly from most of the theoretical models that the students are taught.

Indeed, in their reflections on the experience (provided several weeks after the clinic), students indicated that the process had opened their eyes to the complexity of how such decisions are made. As one noted, “I would like to keep in mind that thinking of sustainable solutions is not easy.” Another stated, “I learned that there are always multiple solutions to most

problems, and spending time thinking of options is valuable.” Another acknowledged how the conversation expanded their knowledge of potential alternatives, e.g., “it was eye opening to compare and learn from sustainable initiatives in other states like NJ and CA.”

What happens next?

This was our first time trying a collaborative design clinic process. It was certainly not a perfect implementation, but we learned much to inform our next iteration. In addition to reporting on this experience together, the group does plan to continue in the next academic year, extending to include students and faculty from other degree programs (Psychology and Public Health were both suggested) and other food-based businesses in the region. There was also a discussion about inviting representatives from the campus-community entrepreneurial maker space (Launch Box) to future sessions.

When asked what aspect of the clinic participants found most surprising, the facilitators noted that they had expected there to be a need to foster relationships between community and campus representatives, but they had not expected to navigate tensions within and across the campus groups, especially among the faculty. For our next iteration, we plan to provide additional pre-training in inclusive practices for participating faculty and students. We would also like to secure funding to directly compensate the community members for their time---we had purchased food from their respective restaurants, but that seemed insufficient reward for participating in multiple collaborative sessions and providing further resources and information to support student research into alternatives.

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