



Full Interview with selected questions.

How did SXSW EDU Learn By Design Competition come to you all?

Stuart: We had an opportunity to sit through the juried presentation just like Micheal and I delivered and thought it was very fascinating.

Bridget: We originally presented at SXSW EDU two years ago and the focus was on [the] WILC and we kind of presented it as a case study, but also offered insights from both the superintendent at the time and a student...and just how that type of programming was becoming more popular as we start to better mesh PK-12 environments with post-high school opportunities, whether that be in a workplace setting or with the school itself [with another school for example in higher ed]. That's how we got introduced to SXSW EDU-. When the second opportunity came around we submitted it for the Learn By Design Competition and Micheal and Stuart were able to co-present this year...and it worked out.

When you were announced as finalists, how did you all start preparing for the festival and conference?

All: Well... [laughs]

Stuart: Our firms worked as a team to prepare an outline, and the purpose of the outline was really to get our thoughts down to what [were] the primary ideas that we wanted to communicate. We understood very well that this was gonna be a very short duration to the presentation itself. The year prior we had really worked on crafting a really broad message and having a lot of involvement of voices, because we were doing a panel, but here we really had to communicate what was it that was going to capture people's imagination in five minutes. In order to do that, you have to [put] a lot of planning into it and in fact it's harder to create a presentation for five minutes than it is to create a presentation for 60 minutes, because you have to figure out a way to get that message down. As a team, we worked really hard on defining the challenges, really talking about how the process made a difference, explaining the solution itself and how it supported and solved those challenges and was a reflection of the process. What became really evident in the practice for SXSW EDU was the big emphasis on being able to show what the results were: the results aren't the building, the results are the students and the teachers and literally measurable results that come out of the program for students both personally and professionally and that the program itself was growing.

Michael: The crucial part of the preparation, aside from practicing, and practicing, and practicing again, was the outline. We really broke it down into four sections: it was the challenge... the process, and then the solution and the results...and we really stuck to that and tried to keep it concise and clear [about what was] the specific work that we did that was successful for that project.

Any cool impact stories the WILC has had, post-development?

Michael: In our presentation we told the story about a student...named Kane...he did not feel successful...[but] he found things that intrinsically motivated him to do work and to be in school.....and if you read that, it's sort of a tear-jerker kind of thing to read, for a student that had so many challenges educationally coming up to that point, maybe [even] to the point of wanting to leave. We heard other anecdotal stories about students that really were looking for a way to become engaged in learning and those are the things- there's not a lot of statistics behind...you can't put numbers to that, but you can put a lot of stake in that.

Laura: One semester a few years ago, a business partner was working with a studio for an entire semester and the instructor [told] the business partner that the valedictorian and the student that was second bottom [in] the class were both in the studio and could this business partner guess

SXSW EDU ↙

which one was which. The business partner guessed the student that was second from the bottom as the valedictorian, because that student had been engaged and the most active and the largest leader in the class...and that story always hits home with me when we talk about this program and what it can provide. People assume it's for the students at the top of the class and it's [actually] for each student to make its own.

Why did you choose our competition? What is it about EDU that made you want to share your work?

Stuart: I go to a lot of K12 and higher ed-focused conferences... and local conferences that are tied to public school districts. I see a lot of educators, thought leadership, my peers talking about their work and the research that's being done. Our firm, obviously wanted to submit for this award and be apart of this program. What we found is that at SXSW EDU there are a lot of educators that are interested in looking for what's next and looking for places of innovation and ideas that are going to make a difference for students moving into the future. Some of the risk takers show up and present, but also some of the tried and true people, who have been around for a while and have a lot of true data and proven evidence of things that work [do too]. I think there's a real strong energy to the conference, and of everybody being in that setting. That is inspiring to be around...and the mere quantity of material available.

Michael: ...going with Stuart, earlier this year was my first time at SXSW EDU...and I have to echo I found it really inspiring. Most of my time was spent preparing and taking care of the award stuff, but we did make it to several [sessions] and found it to be invigorating. I think what sets SXSW EDU apart from other conferences...is that there's such a broad topic coverage throughout that entire conference...but what SXSW EDU conference allows [is] for multiple people to go down and choose their path about what they're wanting to learn about next. There's so many choices and so many opportunities to get a real broad topic base.

Stuart: A lot of the conferences that are education-based are often people speaking about solutions and they might talk about what influenced their solution, but it's really focused on solutions. This conference is focused on the things you would want to know that you can then take back to your studio and develop your own ideas about. Just to give you an example, when I attended the first time, a couple of years ago, I attended a talk and met some people from an organization that I had never heard about that I was very inspired by, called Universal Design for Learning. We had already been designing our buildings so that a lot of differentiation and instruction could happen, but I had never found a framework, educationally, or an organization that was committed to that purpose and literally devoting time to doing research around that, so when we say that we're creating collaborative learning environments or places for personalization, there's teeth behind the ideas that were put in place in building, because they relate back to a framework that this organization is doing themselves. I contacted him after that and I've had a very good relationship and dialogue with him since and we collaborate [here is the 2020 session featuring Stuart and Universal Design for Learning]. That would not have been possible at any other conference, I'm pretty convinced of it.

How effective was having the mentors help with your pitch on the mentor day?

Micheal: Stuart and I were texting and I texted, "Are you going back down to SXSW [EDU] this next March?" and he said "Yeah, are you?" and I said, "Yep!". We're all headed back down because we like it so much. Yeah, [with] the mentors, I did not know what to expect going in and going through the test runs. The feedback that we got from the coaches, actually, the feedback that they gave to everyone, [was] phenomenal and I felt like all the participants felt that way and felt like the feedback was very useful, very constructive and very thoughtful. You guys did an excellent job in selecting them. It helped even more than the preparation of an outline, it really helped hone our message. The specific critique that we received was primarily about highlighting Kane a bit more and being more overt about his story...

Stuart: We've always had a lot of strong mentorship here in our office about being very focused in our ideas, since we have to interview in front of clients and deliver design presentations, we're

SXSW EDU ↙

sort of coached to do these things. This was sort of the Marine Corps of presentations because of what had to happen and it only comes through the quality of coaching, like we had, to be able to present such quality and meaningful information in five minutes. I agree there was one architect we both wanted to hire. Her input was so focused and so helpful that it was just an incredible experience. Our experience at the conference was pretty much dominated by this design award. We also were on the floor at the exhibit hall the morning of the presentation (the SXSW EDU Expo) and we found that experience to be incredibly important in preparing because all kinds of people came up to us and asked us questions about the project. We used that time to practice our messaging, so by the time we got to the actual five minutes where we had to deliver it, both Michael and I felt really comfortable with the material in a way that we could say what we needed to say in a meaningful way. I'm really glad you guys put it that way, in that order, and I would endorse that kind of preparation intensity in the future.

What do you hope to see in the future your industry?

Michael: It's about reaching every one of these kids in a way that's meaningful for them. This project in particular and those that are following its footsteps outline that one pedagogy of delivering education just doesn't work for everyone and it's really about, creating scenarios for choice and opportunity for people that learn in a different way-. I think this program has really shown that it works for the high flyers that are bored and don't have to study and that are not challenged in a normal high school setting *and* it works for the kids that are struggling, that just don't learn that way, the traditional way, and don't understand why and how ideas gets applied in the physical world. I'd like to see a really clear focus on offering choice in the way in which a student can learn.

Laura: Finding a way to scale this idea of diversity of space-type and programming to all types of school districts. The WILC, we're very proud of it and we worked on it and it's a beautiful \$13 million facility, but not every district can build one of those and helping them understand that you can still provide that education type in a very simple space- that's something we're very passionate about trying to deploy across our state. Helping districts understand that it doesn't have to be this beautiful and expensive.

Stuart: Get away from an information based learning approach to teaching and learning and more skill mastery...facilitating a learning environment that would allow teachers to do that and be comfortable within it. It's going to have to be a team effort: educators, students, designers, psychologists, and neuroscientists. My hope would be that we could figure out a way for there to be all of these perspectives involved in the design process. We should have neuroscientists, psychologists, architects, educators, constructors and engineers on every design team so that the solutions that come out [are] truly reflective of what is going to work for students [for] when they come out in this uncertain world in the future, [for] when jobs are changing and skills will need to succeed in the future. My hope is inspiring a future where they can focus on what is truly human, and what machines can't do and that school is really about creating a stronger context for that.

Corn or flour tortillas and how did you like Texas?

Stuart: I would say that I like *both* tortillas. We managed to go to three or four restaurants...and whether its music or food [with my Texas native wife] there isn't a day that Austin doesn't come up.

Michael: I have it on my list! We're going back. It's kind of like music for me, I waffle between genres- I'm going to go traditional, with corn. I'm excited to go back.