International Journal of Social Sciences and Management Review

Volume: 09, Issue: 02 March - April 2026

ISSN 2582-0176

SOCIAL MEDIA COLLABORATED IN A NEW PARADIGM FOR DESIGN KNOWLEDGE AND SKILL DEVELOPMENT

CHEN DOUNAN, TAKSINA CHAI-ITTIPORNWONG & PANOM WANNASIRI
Faculty of Communication Arts, Bangkokthonburi University, Thailand

https://doi.org/10.37602/IJSSMR.2025.9202

ABSTRACT

This research aimed to analyze a linkage of social media affordance collaborated in a new paradigm for design knowledge and skill development. Methods of in-depth interview with students in the field of design learning, and task-based-participant observation were deployed for bridging the gap between the students' cognition and action; a "say-do" gap in relevance. The research found that design students emphasize social media as a tool for design knowledge and skill development, prioritizing creativity over professional practice, and integrating multiple platforms according to objectives, with interactive feedback and collaborative networking as primary benefits, followed by the features of resources accessibility and visual sharing. Students' positive embrace of Rednote and Bilibili apps for creativity while enhancing professional practice on Huaban platform. A new paradigm of design learning requires the integration of visual sharing on social media to enhance technical proficiency, the use of platform networks for real-time and teamwork collaboration, the optimization of interactive feedback from peers for evaluation and reflection, and the accessibility of knowledge resource to support a holistic interpretation of outcomes. Finally, it is evident that excessive reliance on social media can result in homogenized designs and diminished creativity, suggesting that students are mastering tools rather than cultivating design thinking.

Keywords: Design learning, Digital affordance, Social media

1.0 INTRODUCTION

The advance in digital technology is currently navigating profound transformation, marking significant progress in every context, globally. Design learning has been no exception to this disruption. The pervasive and accelerating integration of digital media into every facet of society has fundamentally reconfigured the landscape of creativity and professional practice in design knowledge and skill development. The established pedagogical model, historically centered on the localized and embodied interactions of the physical design studio, is being augmented and challenged by dynamic networking towards digital media (Fleischmann, 2022). According to Wang & Chen (2023), the number of design students in Chinese universities offering design programs has grown continuously at an annual average of 18% since 2020. Meanwhile, fine arts or pure art programs account for 7% annual growth, indicating decline compared to design disciplines. This aligns with the mid-2025 report from China CSSD (Center for Student Services and Development) under the Ministry of Education, which revealed that cross-disciplinary programs are becoming a new trend in undergraduate education, for example, Tongji University combined "visual communication", "product design," and "environmental design" into a new program called "art and design", including the integration

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of industrial design with digital media. These reflect Chinese young people's interest in the integration of design and technology whereas digital communication becomes increasingly prevalent in both personal and professional contexts of education.

1.1 Digital Affordance

In 2023, China's National Data Center revealed that between 2021–2023, Chinese users posted more than 500 million short videos on social media platforms (Cai, 2023) where have become a space for daily activities, a workplace, a source of knowledge and entertainment, and a place for social gatherings on screen for people of all ages. The 2020s are considered the decade of harmonizing AI technology with the characteristics of social media (Baker & Aron, 2022), making social media a medium that effectively responds to communication needs. By nature, human communication behavior differing across economic, social, cultural, and environmental contexts shares the same purpose; to communicate for expressing and exchanging needs, to follow or be aware of social movements, to engage in social interaction, and ultimately to access knowledge and entertainment (Ding, 2025).

According to Zhang & Yu (2021), Z-generation or youth aged 13–35 is the group that places great importance on enhancing digital affordance, which was initiated by James Gibson in 1979 and later adapted by Donald Norman to be 'DAT' theory (digital affordance theory), with realizing the facilitation of social media for educational system. Social media encompasses digital platforms and technologies that facilitate the creation, sharing, and interaction with content among netizens. By offering a diverse range of functionalities, social media enhances online experience for users through mechanisms of information exchange and establishing social networks, and the ability to share content quickly influences how information does viral spreads. In short, social media affordance means the potential for action that social media enables users to perform (Withagen, 2022). When social media affordance is integrated with knowledge seeking and skills development, it creates new forms of learning (Young & Cleveland, 2022). As a consequence, social media affordance has become a crucial component in the development of knowledge and skills among young learners, both in terms of knowledge exchange, seeking answers, accessing desired information, and building communities of people who share the same interests (Milenkova & Lendzhova, 2021).

1.2 New Paradigm for Design Learning

Referring to Rocha, et al. (2018), education management in the digital context is being challenged by the spread of social media, affecting practices and conceptual frameworks of traditional teaching. The application of digital technology to formal online learning systems such as Learning Management Systems (LMS) or Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) does not align with the lifestyle of Z-generation, who desire lively learning with interactive engagement between teachers and learners, and among learners themselves (Ley et al., 2023). In this sense, social media affordance is a dynamic interplay between the media features and user goals becomes a variable influencing learning behavior in digital era (Fleischmann, 2022).

In today's Chinese education, digital technology skills, including AI and virtual reality, have become basic qualifications for learners in all disciplines (Yu, 2025). Particularly, social media plays a significant role in knowledge-seeking processes, changing ways of thinking, needs, and

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learning methods. This has led to widespread use of social media in teaching across various fields, including design. However, it is often used as an optional or supportive tool for teaching and learning at the discretion of teachers and learners, rather than a structural transformation of the education system. As such, the adjustments in classroom teaching methods are required, creating challenges for educators, learners, and design disciplines that rely on developing "creativity" and "professionalism", which is the communication of professional work reflected through design outputs (Hu et., 2024). Thus, creativity and professionalism are the core elements and fundamental logic of design learning (Rocha et al., 2018).

Within a global landscape that is increasingly interconnected, overlapping, and complex, design learning must shift toward 'new paradigm' to cultivate new-generation designers with competences in technical proficiency, teamwork collaboration, reflective practice, and holistic interpretation requiring the ability to connect design concepts with other dimensions. These qualities are interrelated and all stem from the influence of DAT theory on design learning (Scheiter, 2021).

First, technical proficiency refers to the ability to use new technologies or tools, as well as to initiate techniques for creative design work that demonstrates professionalism (Canavesi & Ravarini, 2024). Secondly, teamwork collaboration is essential because design is a process-oriented activity involving multiple dimensions. It requires cooperation from various parties as a teamwork to study internal and external factors affecting design, ensuring that design outputs meet intended objectives (Swart et al., 2022), while the third competence; reflective practice, refers to the continuous development of design knowledge and skills, forming a learning culture among designers. It is generally divided into two aspects: during design and after the work is completed. Designers in the digital era should learn to adapt and solve problems in real situations immediately, adjusting design presentations when users do not understand, thereby creating a learning culture during design. (Lipnevich & Smith, 2022). The last one is holistic interpretation. Contemporary society is complex and diverse across social, economic, environmental, and cultural dimensions, which, though different, are widely interconnected, therefore, creativity and professionalism, as structural elements of design, must be interpreted to encompass social realities (Dubberly & Pangaro, 2023).

While important for understanding the modernization of formal instruction and the collaboration of digital affordance as the conditional factor to design learning in contemporary society, identifying the relationship between the new paradigm and the DAT theory offers the complex realities facing the next generation of designers. In short, the emphasis on learners' ability to utilize digital media has become an indicator of success in transitioning toward a new paradigm where social media affordance has been collaborated for knowledge seeking and skill development in design learning among the new generation (Lan et al., 2024).

2.0 RESEARCH METHODS

To find out how social media affordance is collaborated in new paradigm for design knowledge and skill development focusing on creativity and professional practice, this study adopts the method of qualitative research with in-depth interview, then supplements with a task-based participant observation to present a significant methodological validity, consistencies and discrepancies between the opinion and experiences, and the actual usage of design tools and

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ISSN 2582-0176

social media apps. These research methods are rigorously structured to move beyond surface-level description, deploying a dialectical combination of interview and observation to bridge the gap between cognition and action.

2.1 Key Informants

The year 2+ design students at Huangshan University in China was targeted for this research as their demography represents the digital native generation currently traversing the critical threshold of new paradigm for design learning, and engaging in complex design tasks remain under the pressure of academic and market validation, making them the most sensitive barometers for the shifts. It is structurally aligned with the distinct layers of the research problem, acknowledging that "what students say" (cognition/attitude) when interviewed, and "what students do" (action/behavior) expressed in two months project of the participant-observation method often constitute two divergent yet equally critical realities. The number of key informants was eleven samples, determined by the principle of data saturation where the interviews continued until no new themes emerged. Meanwhile, the attendants for the activities of participant observation across four requirements: (1) identifying pain points of the task, (2) developing and optimizing creative solutions, (3) implementing solutions including modeling and UI design, and (4) visualizing the work for final display, consisted of 14 volunteers from the students in a design major. This study also substantiates the dual positioning of design students, acknowledging that some fulfill both roles: key informants and active workshop participants.

2.2 Materials

Since the research involves university students, special attention is paid to protecting informant anonymity and avoiding cultural or personally sensitive questions on ethical risks, all questions are reviewed and approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB). Also, the Chinese digital landscape characterized by the high integration of content, community, and commerce on platforms like Huaban, Bilibili, and Rednote apps represents an extreme case of digital immersion. These three platforms are not selected arbitrarily but are identified as the constituent elements of a complete "functional loop" for Chinese design students (Yu, 2025): Huaban acting as the static resource archive (memory), Bilibili as the interactive technical workshop (skill), and Rednote as the commercial market simulator (validation). Studying this specific triad allows the research to map the complete trajectory of the new paradigm, covering the entire lifecycle of design learning from inspiration gathering to professional socialization.

3.0 RESULTS

3.1 Social Media Affordance of Chinese Design Students

The research reveals that the social media affordance has evolved from a supplementary tool into the central infrastructure governing the acquisition, application, and validation of design knowledge and skill development among the students. This transformation is not monolithic as the results found from the interview representing the student's cognition are aligned with those characterized by their real actions in the participation observation method, mostly contributing to interactive feedback and collaborative networking, rather visual sharing or resource

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accessibility. As well, this structural shift is articulated for creativity development, rather than professional practice.

For interactive feedback, this mechanism has transitioned from a closed-loop, authoritative academic critique to an open-loop and market-driven validation system as well as functionally superseded by the immediacy and quantitative nature of interactive feedback on social media platforms. Most design students perceive the ability to receive instant comments as a critical efficiency tool that maintains their creative flow and offers immediate reassurance during complex problem-solving. In case of collaborative networking through social media, collaboration is bounded by those involving design problems from the on-site class learning, bringing a hyper-integration of learning and networking. The students view the social media network not just as a place to chat, but as a "virtual apprenticeship" system where they can access the tacit knowledge of business professionals that is often absent in formal learning.

Moreover, except for similar appearance of surface-level functions from three Chinese-based apps: Huaban, Bilibili and Rednote, most students believe that every platform fosters a uniquely integrated and entrepreneurial mode facilitating their wish to achieve creativity and professional design development. In the workshop participation, all students demonstrate a sophisticated understanding by strategically choosing Bilibili for creative deconstruction and professional skill acquisition, using Rednote as the engine for inspiration and accessing designer community, and optimizing Huaban for creative collection and professional static resource.

3.2 New Paradigm for Design Learning

As captioned in Table 1 showing the students' opinion, though the typical model is fundamentally defined by its structured, insular, and episodic nature offers a safe haven for skill incubation but possibly detaching them from market realities. It operates as a linear, hierarchical, and closed system, prioritizing the systematic accumulation of foundational skills and academic rigor within a controlled and focused learning environment, although the students' activities on design development currently are highly platform-dependent.

Table 1- Typical and new paradigm for design learning

Development	Design Learning	
	Traditional Practice	New Paradigm
Creativity	Active retrieval & scarcity	Algorithmic feeding & echo chamber
	Creativity as skeleton	Creativity as skin
	Systematic thinking	Fragmented & traffic-driven
	Static accumulation	Instant skill replenishment
Professionalism	Cohort-based isolation	Hyper-integration
	Linear skill accumulation	Multipurpose on multiplatform
	Closed-loop validation	Vivid validation & disintermediation
	Retrospective portfolio	Integrated production

The new paradigm has shifted the focus of creativity in design from active retrieval to passive feeding, and redefined professional development from a status of qualification to a continuous

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process of public performance. It brings an open system, constantly and fluidly interacting with and being shaped by external market forces, social trends, and diverse, often anonymous, communities. Most students also believe that the new paradigm is unnecessary for replacing the traditional model but runs parallel to it, creating a dual-track reality for the contemporary design learner.

3.3 Social Media Affordance Collaborated in New Paradigm for Design Learning

Based on the actionable expression of the students during the participant-observation process, it is obvious that the collaboration of social media affordance in the new paradigm involves linking the sharing of design work with technical proficiency (technical proficiency on visual sharing), connecting collaborative networks to enable swift and effective cooperation (teamwork collaboration on collaborative networking), receiving feedback through interaction to support evaluation and reflection (reflective practice on interactive feedback), and utilizing social media as a means of accessing knowledge resources that can be extended and applied toward holistic interpretation of design work (holistic interpretation on resource accessibility). These abilities have become defining attributes of the new generation of designers. Students often prefer to pursue knowledge and skill development by relying on social media overwhelmingly perceive social media affordance as a dynamic tool for enhancing creativity, collaboration, and access to knowledge, immersing them in the market from day one, fostering agility and resilience whereas sacrificing depth and subjecting learners to the volatile pressures of the attention economy.

1) Technical Proficiency on Visual Sharing: Sharing Works to Enhance Design Technique Competence.

Design students define their technical skill acquisition on social media by moving beyond linear memorization to a dynamic process of "on-demand" problem solving, combining the "search intelligence" to find solutions with the "collage-style" execution facilitated by Rednote and Huaban apps. Observations further reveal that students tend to select high-quality images characterized by effective lighting and commercial potential, while deliberately avoiding amateur or low-quality visuals. In the absence of instructor critique, the images presented on the app function as proxies of expertise, prompting students to align their designs accordingly. The app's ability to display high-resolution, polished images encourages students to employ sketches from the platform as preliminary drafts, thereby expediting structural analysis and digital refinement. Their performance indicates that social media mechanisms are widely adopted for initial drafting, foster understanding and facilitate the application of contemporary design techniques attracting the transition from a novice learner to an agile practitioner.

2) Teamwork Collaboration on Collaborative Networking: Building Collaborative Networks for Team-Based Coordination. Collaboration typically begins with the creation of groups and the initiation of dynamic discussion boards on social media platforms. Group members then independently explore online resources to gather inspiration, design techniques, and trending styles, guided by links shared across diverse platforms. These curated links are subsequently exchanged within the group, enabling rapid information flow. The group collaboratively filters and synthesizes this information in a dynamic manner, frequently engaging in cross-platform sharing to generate multidimensional and flexible ideas before

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crystallizing them into tangible design outputs. Such indirect experiences through social media fill the gap of theoretical knowledge acquired in classrooms where brainstorming is constrained by immediate verbalization. The students predominantly employ BiliBili app to coordinate teamwork while utilizing Rednote to engage broader networks and establish connections. They also point out that such digitally mediated collaboration fosters multidimensional creativity and mirrors the nonlinear dynamics of real-world design processes.

3) Reflective Practice on Interactive Feedback: Having Feedback from Interactive Exchanges for Reviewing and Refining Works. BiliBili and Rednote apps are most frequently chosen by participant students to seek solutions, often in preference to consulting instructors or mentors when encountering challenges in participatory activities. BiliBili is favored for technical inquiries, as it provides real-time responses that eliminate delays inherent in classroom-based explanations. This immediacy removes obstacles without interrupting workflow, thereby enhancing efficiency and ensuring timely completion of tasks. The metrics of “likes,” “views,” and “comments” icons are as indicators of the value of design ideas enabling immediate revisions. This process sustains continuity and fluidity in workflow. In contrast, academic explanations delivered once in class often leave students with lingering uncertainty, as they lack the ability to revisit or replay the content for deeper comprehension.

4) Holistic Interpretation on Resource Accessibility: Accessing Knowledge Resources for Facilitating Holistic Interpretation. The Huaban app offers a drawing board that allows users to retrieve images from its database via keyword searches, thereby facilitating rapid sketching based on templates. Meanwhile, BiliBili, functioning as an animation platform, provides extended videos that document design processes comprehensively from inception to completion. These applications support the sharing and monitoring of information throughout the design process, not merely the final product. They establish a framework for observation and tracking of developmental changes at each stage, with options for selective review and repetition. Furthermore, it is evident that the students consistently attempt to design or adapt works through holistic interpretation supported by AI. This includes managing file structures, revising works during the design process to align with environmental considerations on local identity, user behavior, and prevailing stylistic trends.

3.4 Towards a New Paradigm for Design Learning: Social Media, DAT Theory, and Global Digital Literacy

Based on the filter bubbles generated by social media algorithms, a breakthrough in information evaluation is considered to bridge the gap between passive feeding and active curation. It embeds learning into a continuous process of comparison and synthesis, making students more resilient to aesthetic homogenization and enhancing their ability to discern quality amidst information overload. In this new paradigm, technical skill acquisition moves beyond the confines of linear memorization to become a dynamic process of "on-demand" problem solving, preserving the rigor of professional standards while attracting students with immediate and actionable results. Eventually, it brings a boundary for creative validation and blending the subjective judgment of aesthetics with objective traffic data adds greater commercial relevance and interactivity. This dynamic and public validation experience stimulates a deeper appreciation of the market value of design, aligning academic output with modern professional expectations. Through the incorporation of personal branding strategies

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and community engagement, the emergence of "digital cockpit for design study" has become a vital medium for expressing professional identity and industry readiness for design students. Finally, an absolute model identifying the implications and collaboration of social media, the DAT theory, and the new paradigm for design learning in digital context can be drawn as in Figure 1 consistent to the aforementioned.

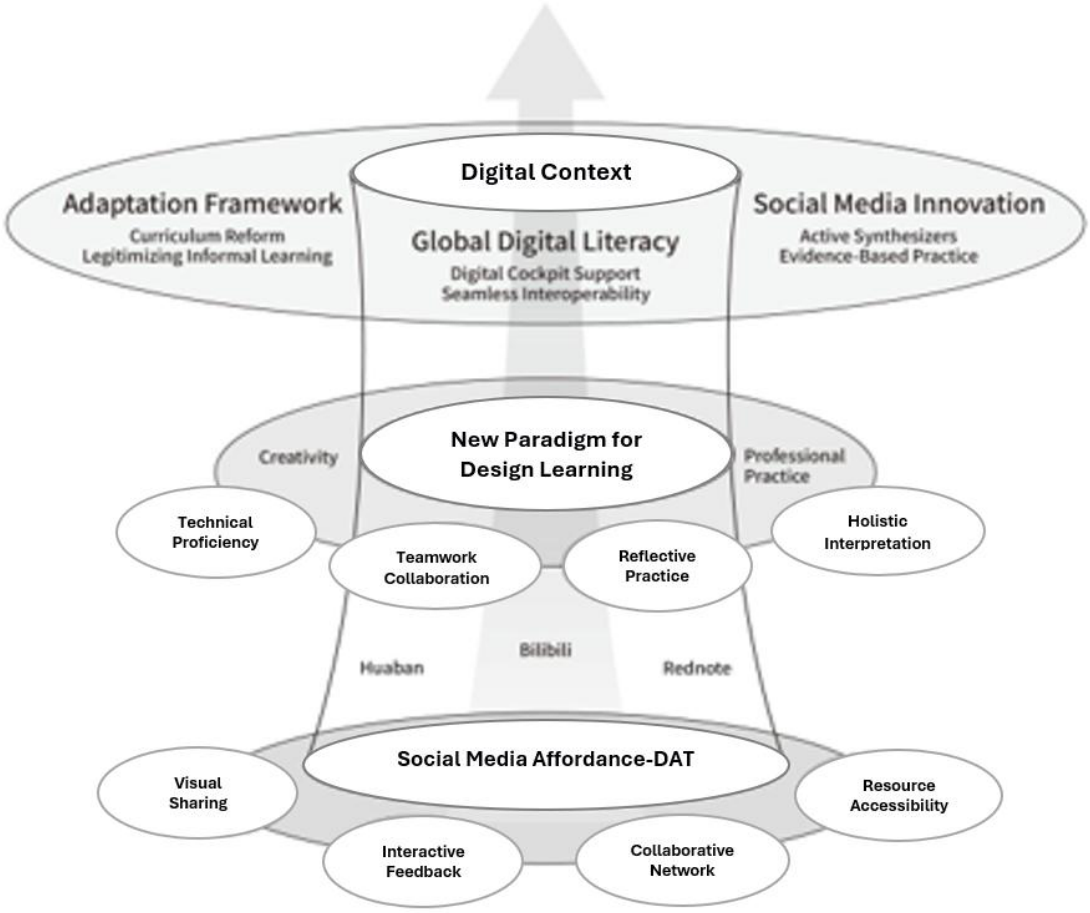

Figure 1 - Toward a New Paradigm of Design Learning: Social Media, DAT Theory, and Global Digital Literacy

4.0 DISCUSSION

According to Withagen (2022), affordances are not merely properties of an object but are relational action possibilities offered by the environment for survival. In the digital context, the environment of the design learning has expanded to include the algorithmic infrastructure. While some students perceive social media fragmenting knowledge compared to holistic classroom learning, the observations show that all students employ social media at every stage of design activities, affirming that social media has become integral to new paradigm for design students, reshaping learning structures, fostering collaboration, and enabling technical option for creative tasks (Rocha et al., 2018; Scheiter, 2021). However, in the "traffic-driven" environment allowed for social media user, the absence of engagement (low likes) is often

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interpreted as a total failure of technical competence, leading to the "algorithmic anxiety" (Ding, 2025).

The new paradigm emphasizes on technical competence, collaboration, work reflection, and holistic interpretation, consequently, the student-driven and commercially operated systems of social media popularity offer a practical and platform-based evaluation to make sense of the complex realities facing the next generation of designers. This is concurrent to the explanations revealed by Hu et al. (2024) and Zhang & Yu (2021) that activities like sharing "pitfall avoidance" tips or engaging in “comment” discussions when rendered as public performance can reflect contemporary professional norms and diverse career values. This approach also enhances the student's role as both a learner and an active participant in the industry context, showcasing their unique potential in the competitive digital marketplace (Cai 2023). In addition, excessive reliance on social media can cause students to focus on mastering technical ‘tools’ rather than cultivating genuine ‘design thinking.’ In such cases, the student is not simply engaged in drawing; rather, they are orchestrating a complex supply chain of digital assets (Cross, 2024).

Ultimately, the study illustrates that design knowledge and skill development in the digital era is not merely about integrating new tools but about reinterpreting foundational concepts. Creativity is no longer confined to structured projects but emerges through dynamic exchanges across networks. Professionalism is no longer solely about accumulated expertise but about visibility, adaptability, and continuous engagement with digital communities. This aligns with critiques of typical, closed-system learning model, which prioritize academic standards over responsiveness to social and economic contexts (Rocha, 2018; Young & Cleveland, 2022). These findings also point to a paradigm shift where social media affordances redefine both the process and outcomes of design learning, challenging educators to reconcile traditional structures with the realities of a digitally mediated world. Referring to Swart et al. (2022), a profound tension between traditional classroom-based approach and a new paradigm shaped by social media affordances reflects broader debates in educational theory about the role of digital affordances in reshaping learning environments. While social media affordance enhances creativity and flexibility in professional practice, it also raises concerns about fragmentation, reduced originality, and ethical implications. This affirms the need for media literacy alongside expanded social media use in education (Yu, 2025).

5.0 RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Adapting learning models both within and outside formal systems, including interdisciplinary curriculum development.
2. Guidance for social media platform developers to design tools that meet the needs of creative and design communities.
3. Legitimize informal learning pathways by creating credit recognition mechanisms for self-directed digital learning and integrating market validation into academic assessment.
4. Establish “digital cockpit” characterized by the synergy of four distinct mechanisms; algorithmic scaffolding, visual-text hybridity, synchronous interaction, and market simulation. Each mechanism addresses a specific limitation of the traditional model while amplifying the student's capacity for creativity and professional practice.

5. Bridge academic grading with public exhibition feedback

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AUTHORS

First Author – Chen Dounan, Doctoral candidate, Bangkokthonburi university.

Second Author – Taksina Chai-Ittipornwong, Ph.D, Bangkokthonburi university.

Third Author – Panom Wannasiri, Asst. Prof., PhD, Bangkokthonburi university.

Correspondence Author – Taksina Chai-Ittipornwong, email: natcna@gmail.com, Phone: 66 0 81 846 3819

