

# Grid

MAR/APR  
2014

GREAT LIVING PLAY

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## COLAB: SHARING THE EXPERIENCE

By Dawn K. Waters

Photo by Teresa Engle Ilnicki



**Two VCU professors** have flipped the traditional student internship experience and invited the real world of work into the classroom. It's part of a new course offered in VCU School of the Arts, called Collaboratory (CoLab). This transdisciplinary internship program provides students the opportunity to develop and share skills that build upon their major courses by working on internally initiated projects, or joining external start-up teams who have a need for a diverse range of creative skills and thinking abilities.

"Our goal is to create unique talent that remains buoyant in a new career landscape of rapidly emerging opportunities, and to retain this talent in Richmond to help establish this region as a vital hub for innovation," says professor Matthew Woolman, VCUarts executive director of entrepreneurship and founder of Creative Disruption. "The companies we work with see what our students offer, and become partners with us providing educational experiences that help them cultivate potential recruits. An interdisciplinary student team can perform in ways a traditional class might not."

Woolman says that CoLab has already worked on a diverse range of projects from mobile app development to fashion design this semester.

Like Gestalt Theory, the CoLab experience is greater than the sum of the parts. "One department would never be able to take on the projects we're seeing in CoLab," explains Woolman. "They are too complex – no single project that we take on fits neatly into any single discipline, department, or even a 15-week semester." Woolman says that this approach allows CoLab to collaborate with units outside the School of the Arts, and to play a vital role in the larger innovation and entrepreneurship ecosystem emerging across both campuses of VCU, known as VCU Squared (Venture Creation University).

Andrew Ilnicki, VCUarts director of academic technology

and project mentor for CoLab, says that his students had been pushing for more of a 'real world experience' during their time at VCU. "In a way, we just re-imagined what an internship experience can be and put it on steroids," says Ilnicki. "Instead of individuals getting a 1-to-1 internship, we assign small intern teams to a diverse range of projects and organizations over the course of the semester."

CoLab intentionally puts students into a need-finding role first, before problem-framing. "We essentially throw them into a pool of ambiguity with a few scattered remnants of an idea, then let them design their own boat, and navigate their journey back to land," says Woolman.

In the Spring 2013 semester, a team of students participating in CoLab, along with VCU's Center for Human Simulation and Patient Safety, and Computer Science, conceptualized a solution that utilizes Google Glass

*"We essentially throw them into a pool of ambiguity with a few scattered remnants of an idea, then let them design their own boat, and navigate their journey back to land."*

technology to reduce response times to patients in critical care settings. The students developed user interface prototypes and created three video scenarios to demonstrate the use of Google Glass for medical applications. They submitted their solution to Google's "If I had a glass" competition and were selected into the Glass Explorer program. CoLab was able to acquire three pairs of Google Glasses due to the timeliness of their concept.

"We're trying to leverage our connections and work with outside partners where it makes sense. It's a win for all involved... the students, industry, VCU, and Richmond as a whole," says Ilnicki.

The only limitation is a workspace large enough to handle the project load—but that will soon be resolved. The new VCUarts Depot Building on Broad Street will be the headquarters for much of the interdisciplinary work stemming from VCUarts.

For more information, [arts.vcu.edu/entrepreneurship](http://arts.vcu.edu/entrepreneurship).



Photo by Alex Kreher

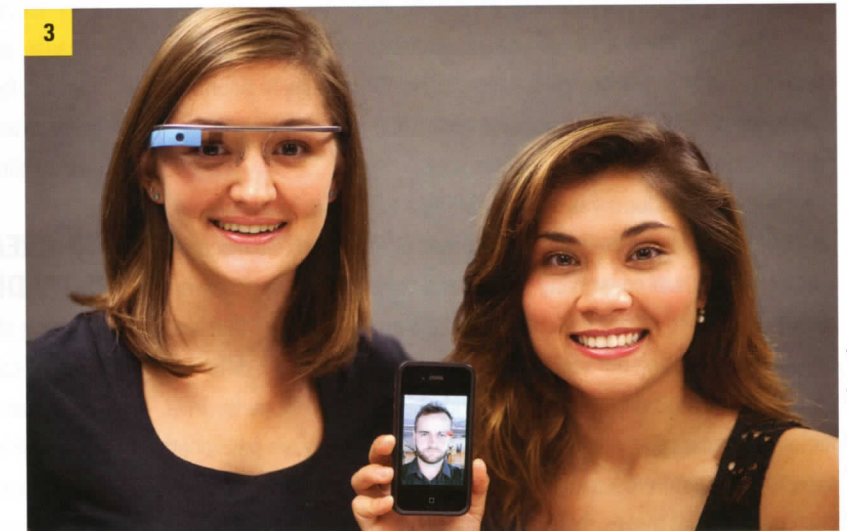


Photo by Tim Chumley

**1** Andrew Ilnicki, VCUarts director of academic technology and project mentor for CoLab, and Matthew Woolman, VCUarts executive director of entrepreneurship and founder of Creative Disruption, have flipped the traditional student internship experience and invited the real world of work into the classroom.

**2** When Google launched its web-enabled spectacles to beta testers, Alex Kreher and students at CoLab were among the first to test drive the next wave in wearable computing.

**3** A team of students participating in CoLab, along with VCU's Center for Human Simulation and Patient Safety, and Computer Science, conceptualized a solution that utilizes Google Glass technology to reduce response times to patients in critical care settings.