Collaboration Packs a Punch at Poly

Google Acquires Punchd, a Cal Poly Senior Project

By Cathy Enns

When you ask about the story behind the creation of Punchd—the now famous Cal Poly senior project Google acquired with fanfare in July—students, faculty and staff who were involved are eager to credit one another for the project’s success. It becomes obvious the key ingredients in creating the smartphone app were collaboration and cross-disciplinary work.

The tale begins with a partnership between Google and Cal Poly. In summer 2009, the tech giant donated two dozen Android phones to David Janzen, associate professor of Computer Science in the College of Engineering, for use in a new mobile application development class slated for winter quarter 2010. As a believer in Learn by Doing, Janzen directed his class to deliver a functional app by the end of the quarter.

Janzen advised his students, including Reed Morse, to think of ways to “turn atoms into bits.” This idea stayed with Morse as he swung by a local convenience store on his bike on the way to class. “I was tired of the ‘buy some, get one free’ card,” he said. “I found the card—when I could find the card—to be annoying and thought how much easier it would be if the information were stored on my phone.”

Morse realized that a virtual card for smart phones was just the kind of app Janzen had in mind. Morse and teammate Grantland Chew began work on the project. In class, Janzen introduced the two to the notion of starting their own business, and he brought in Jon York, Cal Poly’s first professor of entrepreneurship in the Mary Lois College of Business, as a guest lecturer.

At the same time, Janzen petitioned his department to add “Introduction to Entrepreneurship,” one of York’s courses, as an elective for computer science students. Learning from York while they took the Android class turned out to be key for the Punchd team. York taught them to “look for a problem to solve, and look for a big market,” Morse recalled.

Morse and Chew continued to develop Punchd as their senior project. Kareem Nassar, a software engineering major, joined the team as a programmer. Morse recruited Xander Pollock, an art and design student from the College of Liberal Arts, after seeing Pollock’s work in a senior show for graphic design majors. “Professor Mary LaPorte inspired me to think like an entrepreneur,” Pollock said. “Over my four years, she convinced me that a graphic designer could be an important contributor to a project like this.”

Janzen explained that his department keeps senior projects as flexible as possible, so they reflect the multidisciplinary
nature of the real world. “Computer Science is core to so many projects across campus and in the community,” he said. “We want students to get interested in collaborative projects—whether they develop an entrepreneurial application, solve a problem for an outside firm or help a nonprofit organization.”

As Punchd came together, the team suffered some setbacks. Morse visited restaurants in San Luis Obispo but couldn't generate much interest. Frontline people he spoke with were excited but had no influence; decision makers were too busy to meet him. Another early disappointment came when the team's application for a funding opportunity was rejected.

Encouragement—and a dose of reality—came from York at the time, Morse recalled: “He said, ‘So one investor didn't like you. Get used to it.’

Then, Yukie Nishino, a manager for the Cal Poly Corporation, agreed to give Punchd a try in dining locations on campus—a partnership Morse called the turning point.

As Google completed the acquisition this summer, Morse, Pollock and Nassar went to work for the Bay Area company, along with Cal Poly alumni and Punchd employees Matt Joaou and Nat Welch. Niket Desai, a UC Berkeley grad and co-founder, also became part of the Google team in Mountain View. Grantland Chew has since joined another company.

As true collaborators will, all parties point to the others when relating the success of Punchd. Looking back at the extraordinary path he's traveled in recent months, Morse summed up this way: “It's cross-pollination that really makes things happen at Cal Poly.”