01

Visual Communication Design Teaching Strategies: Guiding Undergraduate Studio Courses

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A Handbook for
John Bowers'
Visual Communication Design
Teaching Assistants
VCD 1001 / VCD 2900 / VCD 3045
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02

Credits

I would like to thank the following people for their assistance with this handbook.

· Long-time friend and collaborator Karin C. Warren for her help in developing the manuscript and in guiding its completion.

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03

Preface
Background

I have taught and served as an academic consultant at private and public universities across the United States, in Canada, and in Sweden, for over 30 years.

These schools have different structures, grading formats, enrollments, and missions. Yet the one constant throughout is the students themselves. Regardless of their abilities, life experiences, and expectations, they have a tremendous capacity to learn when guided well.

This handbook is a blend of practical advice and pedagogical discussion. It is written for you—the teaching assistant (TA)—as we teach together, and when you teach alone as a TA-A in these courses: VCD 1001, Introduction to Visual Communication; VCD 2900, Sophomore Seminar: Design Strategies; and VCD 3045, Web Design: Interface and Structure.

When I began teaching with TAs, I created a simple one-page, bulleted list of things to discuss with them prior to the first day. That list is now expanded into this handbook. In it, I discuss how to plan and teach an undergraduate visual communication design course that is active and effective.

The underlying instructional approach is that of teacher as guide, not as director or figurehead who teaches solely through the power of personality, but instead uses their innate strengths together with planning, study, and effort.

Example

This book targets undergraduate courses that

· occur in a classroom (vs. online)
· are project based
· involve planning and prototyping
· require the use of a computer
· focus on original yet reproducible forms
· use iterative processes
· develop specific and broadly applied skill sets
· employ project prompts with open-ended outcomes
· are co-taught by myself and the TA, then alone by the TA-A

and may

· use self-generated content
· employ multiple rhetorical approaches
· apply a range of methodologies
· consider targeted and open-ended responses
· explore singular and multiple interpretations

04

Preface
Faculty and TA Teamwork

Viewing the faculty and TA working relationship from each side is helpful in determining how the two can best work together.

The benefits of faculty and TAs working together are many, and include a broader or reinforced critique of students' work, more individualized attention to students, and the introduction of additional skill sets and interests into the course.

Students may look up to you, the TA, as someone to emulate. TAs are deeply engaged in making a body of work and have life experiences that may be inspiring to undergraduates.

You may find it difficult to find a rhythm with your faculty member (e.g., when to interject in critiquing) and to gain command of the class. When teaching with faculty, it is best to lead course activities only after you have found your comfort areas and are thoroughly prepared. Without thorough preparation on your part, students may lose faith in your instruction, which can be very difficult to regain.

Example

Which attributes describe what you are looking for in a working relationship with faculty?

· Is attentive, thorough, and consistent
· Conveys trust, believability, and inspiration
· Undertakes self-reflection and is open to change

How do you participate in course activities (match the below with the table on the right)?

O Observing
A Aiding
L Leading

Activities	O	A	L
Planning Course	o	o	o
Evaluating Students	o	o	o
Guiding Projects	o	o	o
Giving Demonstrations	o	o	o
Holding Discussions	o	o	o
Moderating Critiques	o	o	o
Leading Critiques	o	o	o
Providing Personalized Guidance	o	o	o
Conducting Exercises	o	o	o
Giving Lectures	o	o	o
Teaching Software / Code	o	o	o
Doing Relevant Research	o	o	o
Preparing Course Materials	o	o	o
Advising Students	o	o	o
Assessing Course	o	o	o

Questions

Which faculty attributes above are the most critical to your participation?

Why do you want to teach this course?

What is your definition of academic freedom and how does that mesh with the teaching of your required course goals and objectives?

If you added time as an element to the activities list, which would take the most class session time, and which requires the most preparation?

05   During Course

Preface
Putting the Parts Together

There are two ways to teach course content: break it into parts and teach each part separately, sequentially, and cumulatively (common in beginning-level courses or those with unique content); or teach all parts concurrently (common in intermediate and advanced courses and in design programs that assign issue-driven and open-ended physical outcomes).

Unique content is often divided into parts that are taught separately. For example, in an introductory design course, a form project using geometric shapes is often assigned first and evaluated in purely formal terms. Other course content such as methodologies or theories may be added incrementally throughout the course and included in a final project.

The opposite approach is to teach form and all other course parts concurrently (such as coding) by continually shifting emphasis among the various parts throughout the course.

Your choice between the two approaches should take into consideration the department's approach to teaching course content, your own teaching beliefs, and the extent to which you believe students can successfully complete project parts presented separately or simultaneously.

Example

The argument for teaching form or other course parts separately (and joining them in a project at the end of the course) is

· the approach educated many influential Baby Boomer and Generation X design educators.

· it keeps students from becoming overwhelmed or finishing projects too quickly.

· it narrows down the principles a project addresses, which can lead to a more thorough understanding of project goals and objectives, and better visual outcomes.

· subsequent courses will methodically add to the parts and place them together in new ways.

The argument against teaching form or other course parts separately and for teaching them concurrently is

· it may be difficult for students to buy into a formal or highly conceptual project without accompanying and immediate application.

· the function of each project part comes from being part of a whole.

· it may treat visual form and messages as void of biases, ideals, and values.

· it may prioritize a given visual language and rhetorical approach over all others.

Questions

What would you add to the arguments above?

Which variables most influence your teaching approach, e.g., course content, course level, corequisites, or others?

Which point best supports your teaching approach and which is the strongest argument against it?

Which approach is in line with your own creative practice, and how might that connection be leveraged?

Before, During, and After Course

Keep in Mind

Students will leave with a memory of the experience as much as the designs they create.

Contents

08

Opening

This section lays out the fundamental and critical considerations in teaching an undergraduate design studio course.

09

Developing a Strategy

A strategy provides a framework in which to create your teaching materials, assess your performance, and guide the student experience.

More than a plan, a strategy encompasses perspective, opinion, research, and creative practice, and is largely employed by experience and instinct.

Teaching requires a strategy of preparation and delivery to create a critically based learning experience.

Without a strategy, you may improvise material that does not support the course's goals and objectives, as well as create confusion among your students. You may also miss teachable moments and lose the ability to effectively grow your course.

Your strategy should be linked in some way to the department and school strategy, i.e., its over-arching goals and objectives, mission, and values. Your strategy may change as the school's strategy evolves. It may also change from one school term to the next should you teach the same course and reflect upon its successes and failures.

Example

Which of the following are your primary ways of developing a strategy?

· Teaching and professional experience
· Personal experience
· Research and conference participation
· Informal talks with colleagues
· Teaching evaluations

What are your primary considerations when developing a strategy?

· Cultural shifts and societal trends
· Diversity of design practices
· Constituent requirements
· Fragmentation of audiences

Questions

What distinguishes your strategy and what would you add to the lists above?

Does your strategy break down into manageable units that can be developed individually over time?

Is your strategy fixed, or can it change as the school term moves along?

How does your strategy fit into the larger school and department strategy?

10

Choosing Your Design Definitions

Your definition(s) of design convey the values and ideals to which you will teach.

They may be broad or narrow, timeless or part of an emerging school of thought. Most importantly, they should be relevant to contemporary design and design education, as well as to your program curriculum and school strategic plan, and should match your course description.

It can be helpful to show your students design examples based on different definitions, and then locate and explain your definitions in the examples. For instance, if you are teaching VCD 3045 (Web Design), you might base the course on a user-centered definition of interaction design. Showing examples of web design/interactive digital environments based on this definition—as well as examples that lie on or beyond the fringes of the definition—can help explain what you will teach and why.

It is important to teach according to your definitions. Straying from your values and ideals of design may conflict with your course description and syllabus course goals and objectives, which in turn could cause confusion and weaken your stature in the classroom.

Example

Teaching Focus

Where is your teaching focus, and is it fixed or changing?

Telling and Sharing	Persuading and Suggesting
Revealing and Illuminating	Informing and Describing
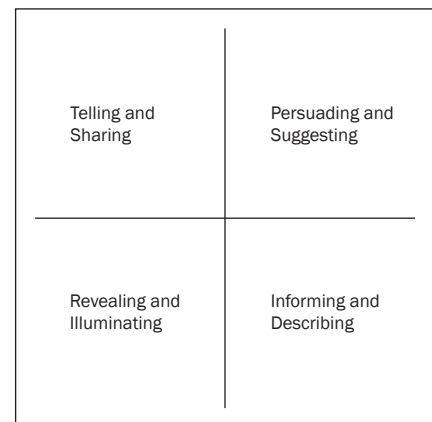
Questions

Do you teach to a single definition of design, or to multiple or even conflicting definitions?

Do your design definitions change as your design practice evolves, and if so, how does that change your teaching?

How do emerging design practices fit into your definitions?

What are your students' definitions of design, e.g., "a moment of …", "a dialogue between …", "a belief in …"?

Selecting Learning Goals

Goals are statements of desires, needs, and vision. Within goals are objectives—specific activities required to achieve the goals. Whereas goals are general intentions, objectives are precise, concrete, and able to be benchmarked and validated.

I have adopted these core student learning goals as established by the American Institute of Graphic Arts (AIGA), National Association of Schools of Art and Design (NASAD), and International Council of Design (ico-D).

VCD 1001, VCD 2900, and VCD 3045 Course Goals

· Identify and express one's relationship to culture and society and the interconnectedness of disciplines

· Solve communication problems through conceptual development iterative processes and critical evaluation

· Consider the values and opinions of others while expressing one's own voice

· Recognize physical, cognitive, cultural, and social human factors that can shape design decisions

· Apply suitable methodologies, processes, strategies, and technologies to analyze and solve problems for audiences, contexts, and desired responses

Example

Sample Course Goal, Objective, and Evidence

Each course goal is accompanied by one or more objectives and a chosen form of evidence.

Goal, Objective, and Evidence

Example Goal

Consider the values and opinions of others while effectively expressing one's own voice

Example Objective

Synthesize research that informs individual conceptual and visual development

Example Evidence

Effective participation in critiques

Questions

How does the necessity of your curriculum prerequisites reveal itself in your course?

How do your goals and objectives prepare students for life as designers immediately upon graduation and afterward?

Which professional-practice skill sets does your teaching address: persuasion, negotiation, collaboration, ideation, presentation?

What are the key points in your course description?

12

Meeting
Learning Styles

Understanding your students' preferred and most effective form of receiving, analyzing, and synthesizing information is critical to their success.

Two learning theories that aid the ability of students to acquire and use knowledge are Community Learning and Problem-Based Learning.

Community Learning theory states that student learning is affected by the culture and community of the course. Learning occurs as a function of the activity, context, and culture. Students can teach other students what they have learned and, in turn, develop useful communication skills and foster collaboration.

Problem-Based Learning theory describes learning through the experience of solving problems that have unknown physical and digital outcomes. In this approach, students self-direct and teachers serve as facilitators who guide the learning process and create a supportive environment of inquiry.

Example

Bloom's Taxonomy

Bloom's Taxonomy, developed by renowned educational psychologist Benjamin S. Bloom, classifies educational learning objectives through six sequential cognitive skills necessary for critical thinking.

Acquiring knowledge (shown as Knowing in the diagram to the right) is the starting point for creating informed and meaningful design.

Creating
Evaluating
Analyzing
Applying
Comprehending
Knowing
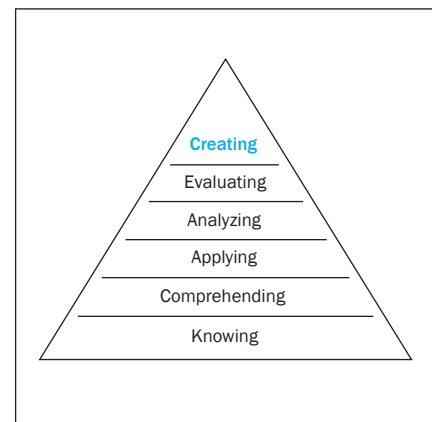
Questions

Where in Bloom's Taxonomy is student assessment most difficult?

To what extent is your teaching uniquely tailored for each student?

If you were to add quantity or the time you give to each of the six parts in the above diagram, how would it change visually?

Have you identified SAIC resources for meeting student accommodations?

During Course

Guiding
Experiential Learning

Experiential learning occurs every day as we accomplish tasks and seek desired results.

Effective guidance of experiential learning requires planning for critical parts of the process (e.g., where students should diverge and converge) and for when you need to be more involved.

You may find it helpful to suspend micro judgments until enough broad divergence has occurred for thorough visual comparisons. You may also have to slow down some students in order for them to fully appreciate the complexity or possibilities of projects, as well as to create good work.

By having students do most of their work in class, you can participate directly in their visual and conceptual decision-making. Schedule outside activities that move the project forward but also minimize the potential for steps backwards. These activities might include readings, research, exercises, and software tutorials.

Example

Kolb Diagram of Experiential Learning

This diagram outlines the four basic ways knowledge is gained: experiencing, reflecting, conceptualizing, and experimenting (the culmination).

Experimenting should be the primary focus of any studio course. It is through experimenting that visual discoveries are made, additional learning is gained, and meaning is shaped.

1 Experiencing an Event or Action	**2** Reflecting on the Experience
4 Experimenting Based on the Experience	**3** Conceptualizing From the Experience
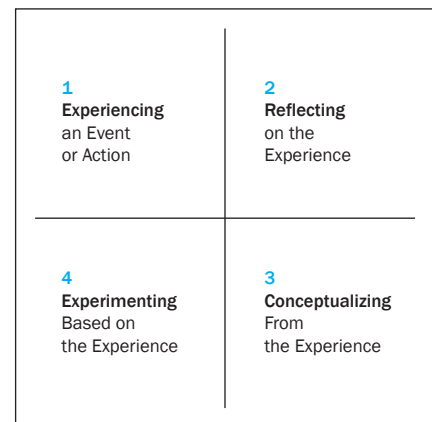
Questions

Do your students experience Kolb's four stages of learning linearly or non-linearly?

Which of the four stages represents your students' strengths? And their weaknesses?

If you were to add quantity or the time you give to each part of the Kolb diagram, how would it change visually?

Which of the four stages do you use most often to teach your students?

For more info, read *Experience and Education*

14

Teaching
Iterative Processes

Guiding iterative processes requires getting students to diverge and converge at key points, and then analyzing the entire body of work before making a final convergence.

Processes can be sequential and repeatable, or random and difficult to reproduce. It is through expansive and rigorous processes driven by effort, persistence, and thought that conceptual and formal breakthroughs occur.

In iterative processes, one iteration can be used as the starting point for the next step. The process may not proceed linearly, but instead branch out, diverging and converging at any time. The interplay between the two generates and refines options. Some directions may continue while others end.

As multiple iterations are made, visual and conceptual relationships can be seen and labeled with descriptive words (e.g., revealing, expanding, juxtaposing) to better understand differences and commonalities. Creation can be generative, that is, it can create new options as the process unfolds.

It can be helpful to ask students to compare their diverging directions, review each direction's development, and make a case for the direction(s) that have hope. You may allow a student to pursue a direction that shows little promise as a way of providing a deeper challenge.

Example

Diverging and Converging

Diverging and converging, along with analyzing and synthesizing, are key components that drive the iterative process.
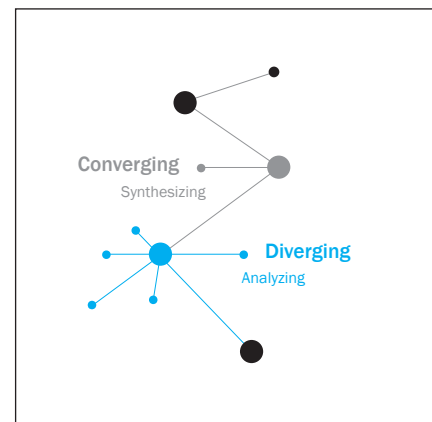
Questions

When do the key moments of diverging and converging occur in your students' projects, and how do the students get there, e.g., linearly or serendipitously?

How do you get students to diverge broadly but also appreciate subtlety and address details?

Which is more important: progress benchmarks or the quality of the final outcome regardless of how it was reached?

What is the ratio (e.g., 80 percent to 20 percent) between the time students spend diverging and converging?

For more info, read *Basic Principles of Design*

15

During Course

Leading Problem
Seeking and Solving

Problem seeking and problem solving are phases within the iterative process.

Problem seeking is self-initiated design that addresses a perceived problem (such as accessing community resources online) or an issue (such as income disparity) through any number of physical outcomes including apps, posters, and websites.

Problem solving is design that responds to a project initiated by someone other than the designer through a predetermined physical outcome, such as an event poster.

Every person's problem seeking and problem solving process is unique, but in general most processes fall into the basic components of learning, identifying, generating, and implementing. While the first three components are typically divergent and the last component convergent, explorations can move from divergent to convergent at any point.

Example

Problem Seeking and Solving

The problem seeking and solving process begins with learning and ends with implementing.

Visual forms can be created through a variety of methods and processes. These can be instinctual and involve play and chance, or methodical and involve steps that build upon one another.

Implementing
Beta Testing
Installation

Generating
Prototypes
Iterations

Converging
Synthesizing

Diverging
Analyzing

Identifying
Matrices
Lists

Readings
Visual Audits

Learning
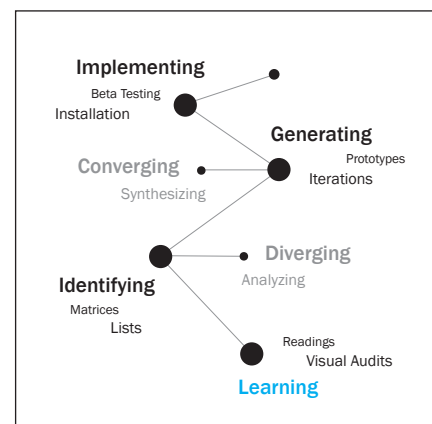
Questions

In which one of the four components of the problem seeking and solving process do you spend the most time, and which is the most difficult to teach?

What approaches do you use to help your students stay on schedule yet devote sufficient time to each phase?

Are there seeking and solving phases in which outside participants or critics are or can be involved?

What additional variables could you add to the diagram above that would further illuminate the process?

For more info, read my book *Introduction to Two-Dimensional Design, 2nd Edition*

16

During Course

Integrating
Theory

Design cannot be fully explained without discussing the theory that helps shape it. Referencing theory can aid students' ability to send messages that prompt desired responses as well as their ability to critically interpret and critique the messages.

The role of relevant graphic design theory—gestalt, deconstruction, and semiotic—should be determined by your course goals and objectives.

As you discuss the communication aspect of theories, introduce or reinforce the notion that we all have biases, experiences, and different educational backgrounds that influence how we process and act upon messages.

Depending on the interpretative lens (e.g., ethical, historical, socioeconomic), forms and messages can yield multiple and even conflicting meanings. In addition, meaning itself is often unstable; it changes over time and can be influenced by the physical location and cultural setting in which a message is viewed. As theory is applied, be careful that it does not become a way of covering ill-informed visual decisions.

Example

Communication Spaces

Is your teaching focused in the message center where interpretation occurs and meaning is determined, or in the encoding or decoding phases?

Sender Encode   Message   Receiver Decode
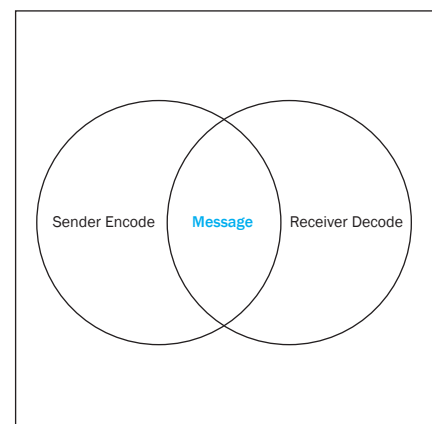
Questions

How will you help your students understand theories that may seem impenetrable? (Examples include posting questions in advance of reading discussions, having students list key points, or creating an outline.)

Which theory most influences your own work and that of your cohorts?

Is there a valid argument against teaching theory in a studio course and to discuss it only if a student brings it up?

Which theories taught elsewhere in the school are most relevant to your course, and how could you bring them into your course?

17   During Course

Teaching to Your Strengths

Teach according to what you believe in and do best. Know your strengths and take advantage of them, while minimizing your weaknesses.

Continually reflect on your teaching to improve your course-specific body of knowledge and classroom performance skills. Be realistic about the aspects you can improve upon during the school term, and which are best addressed afterwards.

Challenging aspects of studio teaching for TAs are often performance related, including holding group critiques or delivering lectures. Aside from simply teaching more and trying new approaches, these simple strategies can help:

· Arrange the classroom furniture in a manner that serves your delivery style
· Use the delivery approach that works best for you
· Guide participatory critiques vs. critiques in which you do all of the talking

As a TA, you may feel pressured to appear to know it all and be expected to have the skills to deliver content and guide projects at the level of a seasoned educator. To help alleviate the pressure, find your teaching comfort zone within the course content and stay there. If your body language suggests insecurity or you admit (to students) a problem in your instruction, this can be validation for some students and raise questions for others who otherwise thought the class was going well.

Example

Performance

Re-rank these stage performance skills to best describe your teaching style focus or growth area.

01	Stage Presence
02	Command of Content
03	Faithful Consideration of Reviews
04	Range and Use of Props
05	Passion of Delivery
06	Use of Narrative Arch (Beginning, Middle, End)
07	Adherence to the Script
08	Believability / Connection to Audience
09	Timing / Being On Cue
10	Adaptation and Use of Stage

Questions

What metaphors and analogies do you use to introduce and develop teaching concepts?

What life or educational experience has most influenced your teaching?

What teaching attributes do you portray, e.g., strong, empathetic?

When might you want to take a teaching a risk, such as teaching content as you are learning it?

18

Defining

This section looks at ways to build
upon students' interest areas and abilities
while teaching to your course goals
and objectives.

During Course

Meeting Students Where They Are

Students come to your course with different levels of commitment, maturity, interests, and skill sets. Capitalizing on their strengths while minimizing their weaknesses requires a plan and effort.

You have two basic teaching-approach choices: teaching for proficiency, or teaching for growth.

If you are teaching for proficiency, then you want the majority of students to reach a common skill level and perhaps develop a portfolio that will earn them a summer internship. If you are teaching for growth, you want the weaker students to become stronger, and the stronger students to become even more so.

Either way, you may have your students do a pre-course personal evaluation that describes their working processes and methodologies (such as methodical or intuitive), and rate their skill level in design aspects (such as conceptualization or iterative development). This provides a benchmark and basis of comparison that can be used at the end of the term, as well as an outline for moving forward.

Example

Proficiency and Growth

Where is your teaching aim and why?
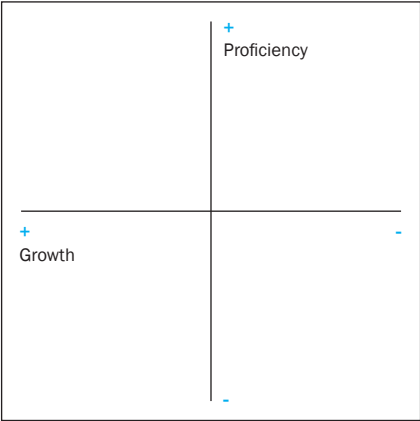
Questions

How diverse are your students' abilities, backgrounds, and interests, and how and when do you learn about this?

How do you keep students from feeling overwhelmed?

Under what circumstances might students have an "aha moment" or "happy accident"?

Which course skills are the most difficult for your students to master? These might include maintaining focus, transitioning skills learned in earlier courses, grasping theory, and clearly articulating ideas.

20

Seeing
the Big Picture

The big-picture view of your course involves looking at the breadth of contemporary design practice and pedagogy, and positioning your course within it.

Do not try to teach for all design eventualities. Instead, give your students a critically based learning experience. In the big picture, nurturing the growth of critically engaged citizens and critical thinkers may be our highest calling.

Positioning you course should take into account what is most relevant to your course and department curriculum, with consideration to content and teaching approaches that best match your experiences and abilities.

When focusing your course, consider two teaching approaches: One is to teach specialized skills for particular design careers such as identity designer, or for specific purposes such as the ability to plan and manage a design project. The other is to teach broad skills applicable to a range of design careers, or for general purposes such as risk-taking, overcoming inhibitions, or negotiating.

The latter broad approach helps prepare students for life-long learning and job opportunities across many areas of activity.

Example

Course Content

Where is your course content and context situated? Is this position fixed, and if not, what causes it to move?

Personal Experiences and Self-Generated Content	Broad Audience and Not Site-Specific
Focused Audience and Site-Specific	User Experiences and Other-Generated Content

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Questions

How do you teach students to move vertically (e.g., entry-level designer to senior designer) as well as laterally (e.g., designer to designer-author) when they graduate?

What ideal of design will you be teaching (e.g., simplicity), and what values of design do you teach (e.g., ethical behavior)?

Is your course a prerequisite for other courses and/or is there a prerequisite for your course, and how does that affect your teaching?

How do you tell a student that his or her skills and interests may be best suited in departments other than VCD?

21

During Course

Taking
the Long View

For students, your course is a part of a journey of discovery. The long view of that journey is looking at their growth during and after your course.

Successful completion of your course should not be an all-encompassing rite of passage students must endure. Students should be expected to work hard but should also feel rewarded and encouraged in your class.

You have the responsibility to accept your incoming students' skills and to develop these to the extent possible. But you also need to be willing to accept that some students' design skills will develop in subsequent courses or even after graduation.

As undergraduates, your students are likely undergoing a number of life changes. There are many things competing for your students' time and interests, including concurrent courses. In addition, students develop at different rates of speed, and their interests change quickly in the undergraduate years.

Students can make dramatic leaps forward—or backward—in their design skills during a course or from one term to another. If you are unsuccessful in moving students forward to the place you hope, take the long view and back off.

Example

Narrative View Point

You may think of your course as a narrative with a chronological framework that helps you mentor and advise your students

Beginning	Near	Past	There
Middle	Now	Present	Here
End	Next	Future	Where

Course Skill Set Range

How broad is the range of student incoming skill sets, and how far forward can you take each student?

+

Advanced

Autonomous

Intermediate

Tethered

Beginning

-
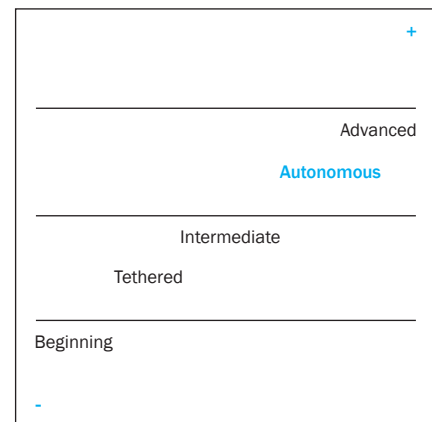
Questions

What course content might some students understand or appreciate only after graduation?

How does your role change as the school term progresses, and what helps information retention?

In the diagram above, where do students make the greatest knowledge leap?

What words best describe the transitions from courses before and after yours?

For more info, read *Effective Teaching*

22

During Course

Laying Out the Landscape

Laying out a landscape of design activity relevant to your course and positioning your course within it can bring focus to your course and help your students better understand what they will be doing and why.

While your course fits into a landscape of design activity, it has specific goals and objectives as outlined in the course description. Demonstrate to your students where the focus will be and explain why.

You can lay out the landscape in any number of ways, such as by strategy, subject matter, or issue. Keeping students in one area of the landscape can help prevent them from feeling overwhelmed.

Identifying your course in relation to professional practice, other design courses, and courses outside the department can help your students understand the interconnectedness of design activity. Cultural anthropology, for example, can guide audience research useful in VCD 3045, and gestalt psychology can guide the creation and critique of form in VCD 1001.

Example

Landscape

Describe your focus for each of the categories listed. For example, if origin, do your prompts initiate visualizing personal experiences or those of others?

Origin
Audience
Context
Process
Issues
Methodology
Motivation
Response
Ideal
Rhetorical Approach
Strategy
Content
Visual Language
Value

Questions

What lies at the border of your landscape and when, if ever, do your students cross it?

Does your landscape include collaboration with departments outside VCD, and with which departments does your curriculum most closely align?

Which words in the box above best describe the breadth and depth of your course landscape?

Assuming your landscape is changing, how are you adapting?

During Course

Building on Student Interests

Encourage your students to reveal their talents and use their existing skills while developing new skills.

Students have creative practices that can include a significant and meaningful body of work completed in other courses or done on their own. This presents you with an opportunity to incorporate some of their previous work experiences and interests into your course.

You have the responsibility to teach course-specific material, but also to take advantage of your students' existing skills and concurrent course work that meets the goals of your course.

If you are able to integrate students' existing experiences, interests, and knowledge into the coursework, they will feel more of a connection to the course.

Example

Opportunities

Opportunities exist in your students' interests and experiences.

Traditional hand craft skills
Cultural background and traditions
Maker movement experiences
Community service
Travel experiences and hometown
Reading lists and recipes
Heroes and dreams
Idiosyncratic visual languages
Previous degree
Tattoos, stickers, and doodles
Part-time job
Native tongue or second language
Junk drawer and collections
Concurrent course work

Questions

How and when do you learn about your students' interests, and how do you build upon the interests?

Are you open to other design ideals (such as complexity instead of simplicity, or ambiguity over clarity)?

How is your students' morale, and what can you do to improve it?

Are there projects that require students to work within limited points of view, and with content that is not theirs and may even be counter to their values?

Visual Communication Design Teaching Strategies   Guiding Undergraduate Studio Courses   Defining > Making the Experience Active

24   During Course

Making the Experience Active

An active classroom is a blend of creating, reflecting, articulating, and sharing, which together create an environment conducive to learning.

Research overwhelmingly demonstrates that an active learning environment is more effective than a passive learning environment.

An active environment can take the form of different activities over the school term: small talk at the beginning of class, sketching, researching, making prototypes, reading discussions, one-on-one guidance, exercise presentations, and participatory group critiques. Avoid repeating the same activities in every class session.

Creating an active environment can also be achieved by using different furniture configurations, allowing students to move around rather than stand or sit for long periods of times, and instigating teamwork as well as independent work. Some students also need to see visual examples of a prompt outcome in addition to reading about it or hearing you explain it.

Example

Guidance Approaches

Which approaches best describe yours and are most effective?

· Showing
· Asking
· Discussing
· Diagramming
· Sharing
· Leading
· Repeating
· Augmenting

Questions

Are the classroom facilities controlling your teaching, or vice versa?

Would you be able to better accommodate the range of your student learning types if you could change your course meeting length or frequency?

When during the school term is your teaching most active?

What types of guidance best match your student learning types (e.g., say it, see it, do it, or write it)?

25

Developing Criticality and Points of View

Challenge your students to create work that can both stand the test of critical review and that displays criticality.

Critical thinking is active and engaged. It examines credibility, biases, and relevance by asking questions and questioning assumptions.

Point of view is the position from which something or someone is observed. It is an extension of one's perspective, position, and opinion, and takes into account lenses of interpretation.

The creation of work that has criticality and displays a point of view can be achieved many different ways. It is often through a combination of approaches taken, ideals transmitted, or issues addressed, which is then developed with rigor and uniquely visualized.

Guiding the creation of critical work requires persistence throughout the design process. Continually encourage your students to ask "Why?" and to articulate their views.

Example

Targets

Which are your target areas, how do you lead your students to them, and what justifies your focus?

Description	Identification
Relationship	Function
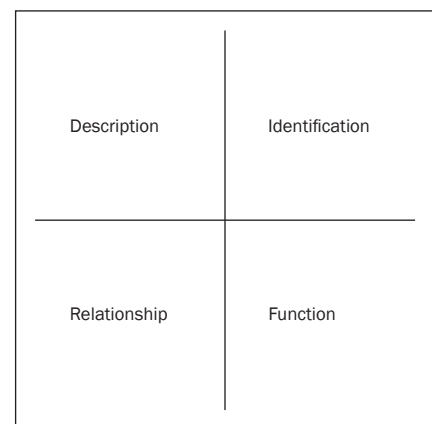
Questions

What examples do you use to demonstrate the difference between sentimentality and criticality?

Is your definition of criticality context-specific?

In the above matrix, what is most difficult to teach? What best develops your students' points of view and criticality in their work and in others?

How will you support a student who creates a work with a point of view that might be controversial or even go against your own values or belief system?

During Course

Creating a Culture

A culture describes the social behavior and values of a community. It also can define roles within the culture. Creating a course culture is about setting the atmosphere in which students work together and create good work.

Creating a culture can be an effective way to make your class function effectively. It can provide motivation and accountability among students, which in turn can promote a strong work ethic and better outcomes. It can also foster mutual respect and create a shared sense of identity.

You guide the development of your class culture through your actions and values. Particularly when moderating critiques or meeting with students one-on-one, keep in mind that you are imparting classroom expectations and not merely carrying out tasks.

For practicality's sake, encouraging your students to foster a healthy culture is important because practicing designers work primarily on teams. Developing a rapport among classmates can help students prepare for their transition into professional practice in which productive dynamics among team members are critical for success.

Example

Culture and Community

Which words describe your course and the department culture, or would be desirable additions?

Inclusive
Collaborative
Engaged
Helpful
Open
Experimental
Rigorous
Empowering
Shared
Respectful
Organic
Evolving
Participatory
Honest

Questions

How does your course and department curriculum embrace SAIC's diversity and inclusion initiatives?

If your students do not have a dedicated studio space, how can you best use your studio space to develop a culture among the students?

In what way can the department help develop and support the culture of your course?

How do you ensure that students retain and develop their interest in design and in your course? Examples include offering flexible deadlines, assigning homework with students' overall workload in mind, etc.

During Course

Blurring Boundaries

Design boundaries are ripe for exploration because of the many possibilities that emerge when different media and methodologies come together.

Your course design definitions and landscapes come with boundaries that you determine, such as content (self-generated or assigned) or participant role (active or passive). In contrast to teaching within fixed boundaries, blurring boundaries opens up opportunities that can help students think broadly when solving problems.

A blurred boundary example might be the writing of a narrative in a writing course, and then making it into a digitally interactive user experience in VCD 3045.

Solutions to contemporary design problems often extend over the boundaries of multiple disciplines. Competencies helpful in crossing the boundaries include:

· Expressing arguments constructively
· Being open minded, engaged, and curious
· Appreciating disciplinary connections
· Embracing the possibilities of the unknown

Example

Boundary Overlap

Project prompts that allow for open-ended physical or digital outcomes and that draw from your students' existing skill sets or bodies of work in other departments can lead to unexpected and unique possibilities.

Utility | Possibilities | Expression
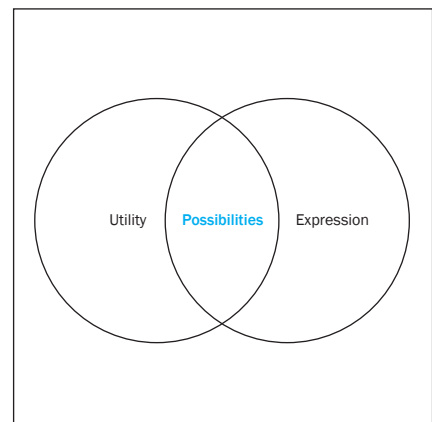
Questions

In your experience, how high are the walls among departments at the school, and is it possible to scale them?

Does your role change when your students blur boundaries?

Are you able to guide prompts that have either physical and digital/coded outcomes, and if not, do you have a plan to expand your skill set?

What projects constraints (or the lack thereof) will challenge your students?

28

Framing

This section examines creating effective course materials and honing your instructional approach.

The emphasis is on clarity of delivery, treating students as individuals, and student choice within course activities and assignments.

Before Course

Creating
Effective Course Materials

Your course materials are a document of record, a pathway to follow, and an implied agreement between you and your students.

Your course materials convey the content you value and the goals and objectives you seek. Anything you put into the syllabus sets an expectation that it will be a guiding principle.

Write your materials in the tone that matches how you speak. If you make your materials overly academic or overly casual, you may turn your students away because of the material's denseness or "fluff," or its seeming lack of rigor and value.

If you are teaching a course for the first time, you might start with a small body of content or activities, and expand upon it as you gain teaching experience.

As the course is underway and if it becomes apparent that changes are needed, you face a difficult choice. You can finish the course as stated in your syllabus, which may make you look on top of things and decisive, or make changes to the course, which may get the course back on track but undermine your authority and make you seem indecisive and lost.

Example

How does the writing and design of these course materials demonstrate your values and sensibilities?

· Syllabus
· Schedule
· Exercise assignment sheets
· Project prompt sheets
· Questions on readings
· Student self pre-assessment form
· Student self post-assessment form
· Software instructions
· Grading forms
· Critique forms (for written responses)
· Critique etiquette and goals

Questions

What would you add to the list above?

If you changed your course's title, what would it be?

Are your course materials dynamic or static?

What visual and verbal tone do your course materials convey?

For more info, review the course syllabus

Making a Flexible Schedule

A regular rhythm to your studio time helps students understand expectations and prepare to meet them. This can create a sense of certainty—a key element in keeping the class engaged and productive.

One approach to developing a schedule involves establishing a regular, predictable rhythm to projects and their related activities. For example, a course might have three projects of five weeks each, with research occurring the first week, visual iterations the next two weeks, followed by refinement for a week, and final production and self-assessment in the last week.

An effective and flexible schedule lists only key progress critiques and the final deadlines. Other course activities—progress deadlines, software instruction, reading discussions, student presentations, etc.—are largely excluded and announced as the course progresses. This helps take into account the ebb and flow of the class.

By having some degree of flexibility in your schedule, you may find it easier to keep the class moving more or less at the same pace.

Example

Effective schedules address these four aspects

Duration

· Avoid overlapping projects to maintain focus
· Establish a regular rhythm for familiarity
· Identify possible points of in-term changes and response to class flow

Expectations

· Instill ownership and empowerment
· Make it challenging but be realistic
· Spend more time working in class than outside of class to meet a given deadline

Access

· Divide projects into manageable parts
· Accommodate varied learning styles
· Have firm project deadlines but give students some choice in progress deadlines

Benchmarks

· Announce all final deadlines on the first day, then let the ebb and flow of the class determine progress deadlines

Questions

Does your teaching lead or react to your students' pace, and are there times for both?

Do all of your students need the same progress deadlines?

In what ways does your schedule accommodate varied learning styles?

Do you have a plan for students who complete a project before everyone else (e.g., assign additional reading or an additional project task)?

During Course
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Maximizing
Studio Time

It can be difficult to lead creative activities because the activities planned for class session may not be in sync with the ebb and flow of student inspiration. Unforeseen difficulties can slow down the process, and conceptual breakthroughs can speed it up.

For students to get the most out of your class time, decide in advance which activities will be performed primarily inside or outside of class: researching, planning, reading, writing, sketching, designing iterations, learning software/coding, prototyping, and critiquing.

It is beneficial to be present when students make visual decisions because you can give immediate, real-time feedback. Their decisions should be better as a result. Another advantage is that you can present answers to individual student questions to the entire class. When you see several students struggling with the same issue, stop the class and gather the students around a classmate's work area, then make a point about the shared concern.

By contrast, some activities (such as the example below) are better done outside of the classroom, which helps develop students' research and independent decision-making skills.

Example

Exercise Example

Exercises contribute to an active classroom and are an effective way of engaging students in presenting course content.

In this example—a digital interaction design exercise—students are given a list of approaches, principles, and strategies. They are then asked to choose one item in the list, locate a good and bad example, and present their findings to the class.

Interaction Design Exercise

Interface as Transparent
Website as Billboard and Tattoo
Choice as Illusion
Content as Hero
User as Participant
Designer as Moderator
Brutalist Architecture as Website
Design as Honesty
Customization as Empowerment
Public as Private
Digital as Brick and Mortar
Sitemap as Toll Road

Questions

Do you assign homework equally throughout the school term, and how does the workload compare to other design courses?

What best describes your course pace (slow or fast)?

What project phases can your students perform successfully outside of class?

What student exercises could you create that would supplement the content of your course?

32   During Course

Giving
Students Choices

When students are given more learning approach options, they take greater learning responsibility.

Providing students with choices in project processes and outcomes allows them to incorporate their own interests and unique skill sets, which in turn gives them a sense of ownership and commitment to a project.

When students are given choices—as opposed to tight constraints—their solutions may be more original and unique. Making choices teaches your students to be independent and self-sufficient designers.

Conversely, if the choices are too broad, some students can become overwhelmed. When that happens, you may have to limit their decision-making in some way, such as by reducing the amount of content.

Example

Choice

Where can your students go from a single starting point?
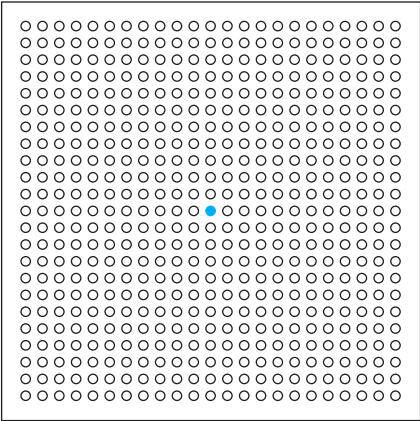
Questions

What kinds of choices are you giving your students?

Do student choices narrow or expand as a project is started, developed, and finalized?

How different in visual language, rhetorical approach, or methodology is student work from your own?

Are the choices you present to your students real or illusory?

Before Course

Crafting Project Prompts

Project prompts are brief statements that describe projects and invite students to insert their own experiences and points of view.

Different from a project brief, which states a deliverable such as a book, a project prompt outlines the exploration of subject matters such as a personal journey. Project prompts typically allow for many possible physical and/or digital outcomes, and often use student-generated content.

Prompts may seek content from students' life experiences and activities, such as a place (their hometown or a Chicago intersection), a journey (past or present), or a collection (found or given).

Decisions regarding project constraints and desired responses are left up to each student, in consultation with you. This will give focus to a prompt and channel students toward the project learning goals and objectives.

Example

Sample Prompt Choices

Prompts that provide something tangible, such as a duality, and openness, such as responses with a point of view, allow for access points and room for interpretation.

Sample Prompt Options

A single prompt with many options can target a specific set of objectives and issues, and empower students with choices.

Choices

Choose a place, identify a duality, and respond to each part of the duality with point(s) of view.

Options

Choose a Location	**Choose an Action**
Digital screen	Sit
Floor	Lean

Choose a Behavior	**Choose a Response**
Anxious	Thank you
Calm	What?

Questions

How open-ended are your project prompts?

How much freedom do you give your students, and how is it presented?

What are the underlying and transferable skill sets gained by students when designing to your project prompts?

What rhetorical approaches do you teach?

For more info, review the course project prompts

During Course

Individualizing Outcomes

One of the best compliments you can receive about your teaching is that your student outcomes are not identical.

Individualizing outcomes can be done in two primary ways: creating project prompts that allow choices such as in the visual language or rhetorical approach, and by tapping into your students' life experiences and unique skill sets.

Guiding individual outcomes in which each student may have a different set of project constraints and aims—while simultaneously keeping the class working at approximately the same pace—takes a lot of skill and effort.

Example

Project Prompt Paths

An open-ended prompt, such as choosing a place, identifying a duality, and responding to it with a point of view, can offer many possible outcomes.
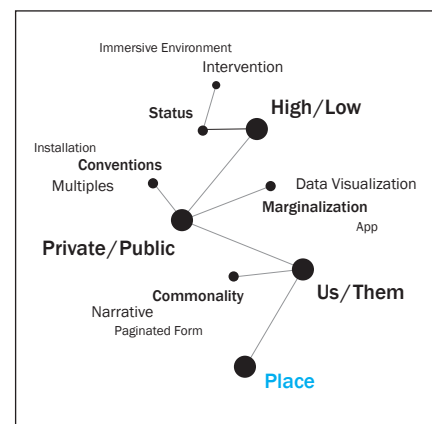
Questions

Do you encourage the use of varied visual languages within your courses, and what words best describe them?

How do you draw from each student's life experiences and help the student apply those experiences to a project?

When is a lack of project constraints counterproductive?

When might you allow your students to forgo best practices in search of an individualized process or outcome?

For more info, read my book *Introduction to Graphic Design Methodologies and Processes*

35

Providing Access Points

Students may need help gaining access into difficult issues, theories, approaches, or projects with open-ended outcomes. An access point provides students with a foothold into a project and a pathway to develop it.

Access into projects should begin with a thorough discussion at the beginning of a project that includes all pertinent components: deadlines, goals, methods and processes to be employed, and strategies for achieving criticality in the outcome.

This can be furthered with examples from past student projects, noteworthy professionals, and even your own creative practice.

You may introduce or review different approaches, and allow your students to choose those that they find most effective. Some students prefer imagery such as mood boards and thinking maps, while others prefer language alone through the writing of attribute lists or questions and assumption lists. A foothold could also emerge from research in the form of a visual audit (collection of visual imagery or designed material on a given topic), as well as positioning matrices.

Example

Concept Development

Language can be used to begin a project in a number of ways.

Thinking Map
· Free association on a chosen word
  (Place in the example to the right)

Questions / Assumptions
· Who should tell the story of this place?
· This place has an untold story

Attribute Lists
· Diverse, Authentic, Historic
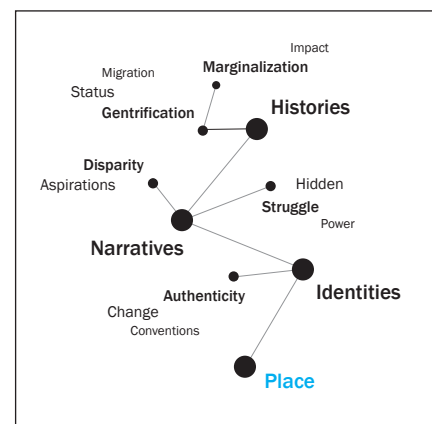
Questions

When do you require students to use a specific methodology, and is it project-dependent?

When are you most hands-on in student project development?

Are you open to students using approaches not taught in your course?

How do you manage students who are converging and diverging at different times in a project?

Using
Local Examples

Using local examples of design in your teaching can help students experience context and better understand the strategies that led to the design.

Common, everyday interactions and experiences on campus and in the city can be good material for teachable moments. Venturing outside of canonized design examples reinforces the concept that visual messages and experiences are context-specific and found everywhere.

A discussion using local examples can be broken down into:

· Issues, such as sustainability
· Values, such as status
· Ideals, such as simplicity
· Organization, such as location
· Interpretive lenses, such as humanist
· Motivations, such as profit-making

Example

Examples

You may choose to focus on how an image supports a written narrative or expresses a visual narrative, and/or how it references other images, styles, traditions, or events.

> **Persuading**
> Local election poster (rhetoric)
> "1/2 Off" or "2 for 1" coupon (enticement)
> Branded paper coffee cups (status)
>
> **Illuminating**
> Tree leaves (temporal beauty)
> Fortune cookie (anticipation)
> IKEA wrench (cultural artifact)
>
> **Informing**
> Lost dog sign (heartfelt emotion)
> Dollar bill (denotation/connotation)
> "Hello, my name is…!" name tag (prompt)

Questions

What in your daily commute could serve as the starting point for a class design example?

What pairings or dualities (e.g., high status/low status) exist around you and could serve as a discussion prompt?

Which retail brands connote authenticity and which connote insincerity?

What visual material at the intersection of Monroe and Wabash is ripe for a discussion?

Evaluating During and After

You may supplement critiques with rubrics or narrative assessments that personalize grading criteria and can provide students with a more illuminating and informative evaluation.

You may be using evaluation rubrics to appraise your students as a required component of the course, such as in VCD 2900. These are necessary to meet accreditation standards for measuring student achievement. Without evaluation rubrics, the school is ineligible to offer government-subsidized financial aid to students.

Rubrics can be useful because they reveal patterns of common difficulties and successes among students. Without rubrics, you need to choose another way of keeping your students apprised of their progress throughout the semester. This might include asking your students to complete a personal skills assessment on the last day of the school term. The exercise may actually be more revealing to them than an evaluation from you.

Additionally, you may allow students to redo work and designate SAIC Critique Week as the deadline. Students can make big leaps in skill development even over a few weeks, and you should encourage development and reward their efforts.

Example

Rubrics

Rubrics identify where students are located via grading criteria and can reveal class patterns. Rubric language describes demonstrable skill sets from Exemplary (5 pts) to Not Present (1 pt).

Exemplary Rubric Definition

Synthesizes, analyzes, and evaluates thoughtfully selected aspects of ideas or issues gleaned from the class and connects to personal growth (5 pts).

Rubrics						
Student A / Project 1 / Criteria X, Y, Z						
Student A	15	14	13	12	11	>
Project 1				12		
Project 1	05	04	03	02	01	
Criteria X			03			
Criteria Y	05					
Criteria Z		04				

Questions

How do you convince students to value the course learning experience over their evaluative numerical marks?

What are the critical criteria in your grading, and are the criteria course-specific?

If you do not currently use narrative written grading assessments, how might they play a role in your teaching?

Should VCD's evaluative criteria be consistent across courses from beginning to advanced? If not, how should it change?

38

Doing

This section examines ways of improving your communication, persuasion, and management teaching skills. Developing these skills is critical to becoming a teacher who does more than just lead projects and convey information, but who also develops the potential of each student and builds their passion for doing more.

39

Describing Quality

Describing quality is difficult because no single definition or metric can apply to all course activities and outcomes.

From the first class meeting to the last, show your students that everything you do is thoughtfully considered, from the design of your course materials to your engagement in critiques.

To begin the quest for quality in your students' work, you might ask them to bring in an object of commonly accepted quality, and then discuss how it relates to the course design subject matter and what makes it good.

As part of that discussion, have your students create positioning matrices of objects and messages from high to low quality and include the criteria that support their positions in these matrices.

Example

Quality

Which aspects of quality do you emphasize and would move left toward a plus sign (to increase emphasis)?

+		-
+	Invention	-
+	Desirability	-
+	Appropriateness	-
+	Creativity	-
+	Effectiveness	-
+	Criticality	-
+	Simplicity	-
+	Endurance	-
+	Beauty	-
+	Originality	-

Questions

How is your assessment of the quality of student work similar to or different from the assessment of your own work?

What words would you add or replace in the above diagram to best define quality in your course?

Through which interpretive lenses do you define quality, and are the lenses project-specific?

What examples from architecture, music, or literature do you use to describe quality?

During Course

Setting and Maintaining Expectations

Each class has its own personality and student skill sets, and thus it may be difficult to reach the same quality level of work from year to year.

Having your course known for its rigor is a compliment as long as that rigor helps students produce good work and cultivates their interest in the course subject matter. Your expectations need to be level-specific; beginning-level courses should be graded on a smaller skill set or workload than in intermediate-level courses.

You should have high standards, but with those come the responsibility to be kind and empathetic as you guide students toward achievement. Otherwise you risk turning students away before they have had sufficient time in the department to decide if they will continue.

It takes a skilled and experienced educator to present students with challenging yet achievable goals and leave them wanting more.

Example

How would you rank these course components in terms of rigor and time?

· Project complexity
· Project workload
· Project approaches
· Project deadlines
· Project open-ended nature
· Needed software acquisition
· Critique and grading expectations
· Amount and type of homework
· Course pace

What best describes your course learning curve and when—if ever—does it plateau?

· Evenly paced
· Steep
· Front-loaded
· Back-loaded
· Quick
· Difficult
· Linear
· Unique
· Overwhelming

Questions

Do your student achievement expectations change as the term moves along?

What would a timeline of your course activity depict and what variables are most telling about your approach and expectations?

What aspects of your course are most rigorous, and how do you break them down into manageable parts?

What tangible rewards do you offer your students for a job well done, e.g., place student work in a hallway display case?

For more info, review the course grading forms

During Course

Motivating and Persuading

The interaction between you and your students is a negotiation. As you exchange views, move your students toward what you consider valuable.

Students are more likely to accept constructive criticism from you if they believe in your skill as an educator and in the project at hand. You hold a position of power and should lead by instilling pride in growth and accomplishment as a motivational tactic.

Persuasive teachers are good at extending a conversation, agreeing to small points while slowly and calmly asking questions, and making comparisons and giving their opinions and reasons for them until their position is fully expressed and hopefully adopted.

Instead of asking direct questions ("why did you make this type so big?"), consider asking questions that cumulatively lead toward the direction you want your student to engage ("the typography hierarchy is askew given the overall reading experience and messaging goal"). You might even prepare a line of questions ahead of a class or critique to be best prepared.

Students are motivated by many factors, including tuition cost, peer recognition, self-esteem, and fear of failure. They are also motivated by genuine caring and convincing visual demonstration of your advice.

Example

Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs

Esteem and self-actualization are effective motivators. When students perceive their own growth and feel rewarded by it, they will want more.
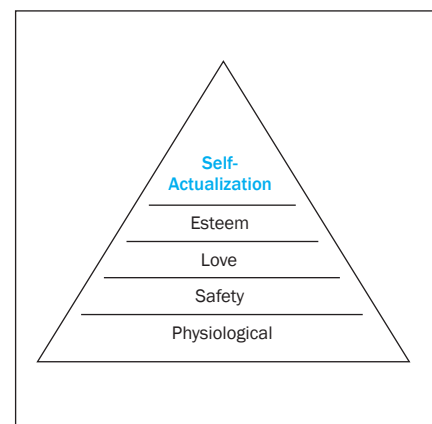
Questions

How do you respond to students who say they have studied your course content before?

How do you craft and present a persuasive argument? Approaches can include choosing a single key point to drive home, offering a compliment at the beginning of the conversation, using the student's observations as a springboard for further discussion, etc.

To what extent do you use competition or enthusiasm as a form of motivation?

If one of your struggling students stated that your expectations are too high, what is your response? Would your response differ if the same question were asked by one of your most able students?

For more info, read *Getting to Yes*

42

Stepping
In and Out

When given too much direction, students become dependent on faculty and are ill-prepared for making decisions when they leave school. They may also feel little ownership of the work.

Knowing when—and when not—to provide constructive criticism and advice to students is a skill learned over time.

When to step in and out is largely context-specific and led by intuition and experience. You might step in to clarify, reinforce, listen, and nudge. You might step out to give space and time for reflection and experimentation. As you gain insight into each student's tolerance and openness to critique, it will become easier to sense when and how far to step in and out.

Example

What advice would you give a colleague when a student

· wants direction but not guidance.

· is unable to diverge and converge with other students at important key moments.

· moves too quickly to allow for critical reflection.

· is unable to accept your insight into the approaches—metaphors, analogies, methods, or processes—introduced to start and develop projects.

What advice would you give a colleague when the class

· abilities are too broad to equitably address every student's individual needs.

· is unproductively straying from course goals, objectives, and descriptions.

· is unable to move from the abstract to the applied, and finds concepts and theories incomprehensible.

· does not work well together in critiques and collaborative projects.

Questions

How detailed and directive does your advice to students need to be in order to reach your course goals?

How far toward failing a project could your students go before you intervene and change their direction?

How do you make a directive appear as a healthy and welcome challenge?

If one end of a spectrum is "helicopter parent" and the other is "hands-off," where is your teaching approach, is it fixed, and why?

43

During Course

Finding
the Connection

Finding a connection with students is the mysterious part of teaching. There is no single formula to making it happen.

Building a rapport is the first step toward connecting with students.

Connections between you and your students can occur when they make a discovery that you guided them toward. Giving each student individualized challenges shows them that they are unique and valued. Students will very likely reciprocate your respect and sincere desire to work with them as individuals.

Even seemingly simple acts can create a connection, such as calling students by their first names. It can also be helpful to express empathy for your students' struggles and convey an appreciation of the course challenges. Disclosing your vulnerabilities, struggles, and passions can be a way to lessen students' fear of failure and overcome their self-consciousness.

Example

Storytelling

Sharing through storytelling can help you make a personalized connection with your students. It is easier and more interesting to place oneself in a story than to deliver a dry account of personal facts, and easier for students to remember a story's key aspects. To start, you may capture your students' attention by posing a question that you will ultimately answer as you move from staging the setting to the message itself.

To the right is an outline of a first-person story told by my former mentor, Professor Hu Hung Shu, which conveyed a struggle and left his students with something to ponder.

Setting
A young man entered compulsory army duty.

Activities and Decisive Moment
He faced a daily drill of repeatedly digging out foxholes and re-filling them. To help break the monotony of the drills, he decided to enhance the foxholes—complete with ash trays—each time.

Message
Design opportunities are everywhere—you just need to be mindful of them.

Questions

What can you do to further help your students (e.g., come in early to class or stay late afterwards, meet students in your office over the lunch hour or on a non-teaching day)?

How does humor (perhaps self-deprecating) play a role in your teaching?

When you look at your students, do you see yourself as you were when younger, and do they see you as someone they want to become?

What do you say to your students on the last day of the course as parting inspiration?

44

Fostering Curiosity

Curiosity can be one of the most difficult attributes to instill in your students. You need to know your students well to find their curiosities and interests; what intrigues one student may be of no interest to another.

You may not be able to make someone curious, but you can provide them with experiences that trigger curiosity.

As a starting point to fostering curiosity, you might pull your class out of its normal routine to see things anew. This might include juxtaposing objects or messages and discussing their connections or dichotomies, as well as sharing your own curiosities and experiences about the objects or messages and the learning gained in the process.

Curiosity can lead to the development of new skill sets and areas of exploration, and also provide the satisfying feeling of a quest. Wanting to know more is powerful motivating force. But, students must be willing to embrace the unknown, risk failure, and endure frustration. Hopefully the project's finality provides satisfaction that overcomes the trials endured along the way.

Example

How do you develop curiosity in your students?

Show
· Have them bring something puzzling or odd to class

Seek
· Have them go on a walk to photograph interesting and unintended pairings, then discuss the pairings' juxtaposed meanings and visual design principles

Tell
· Ponder out loud and tell a personal story about being curious and what you learned as a result

Questions

What would you add to the list above?

Besides asking questions during class, how do your students display curiosity?

What fosters your curiosity?

What examples do you show of curiosity exhibited in disciplines outside of visual communication design?

Visual Communication Design Teaching Strategies   Guiding Undergraduate Studio Courses   Doing > Moderating Participatory Critiques

45   During Course

Moderating
Participatory Critiques

Before your first participatory classroom critique, discuss effective language, respectful behavior, and the value of guiding versus directing. Encourage students to give feedback in a way that leads to improvement and not lowered self-esteem.

Critiques should balance honesty with encouragement. A gentle suggestion may be just enough to get the result you want and for the student to stay engaged in your instruction. Encourage students to ask probing questions about visual and conceptual decisions instead of directly stating what they should do instead.

Avoid lengthy and repetitive large-group critiques in which students have their work critiqued for a few minutes and then sit idly and mentally check out. Research has demonstrated that the human attention span for a single event or subject is only 10-15 minutes, and that information retention is best achieved when the information is broken into small parts.

Compared to large-group critiques, individual, small-group, and group critiques in forms described here and on the following pages are most effective because they involve more of the class more often and promote deeper feedback.

Example

Critiques

Which critique evaluative criteria do you focus upon, and do these change as the school term progresses?

Process Development or Growth	Originality or Value
Difficulty or Reach	Final Outcomes or Proficiency

Questions

To what extent do students help determine critique criteria?

What can you change from critique to critique on different days to make them more effective?

When might it be useful to write one-on-one, 10-15 minute in-class meeting times on the front board for your students to sign-up?

Under what circumstances would you cancel a critique and what might be the consequences?

Visual Communication Design Teaching Strategies   Guiding Undergraduate Studio Courses   Doing > Moderating Walkabout Critiques

46   During Course

Moderating Walkabout Critiques

The "walkabout" critique, which references the Australian aboriginal ritual walk through the wilderness in search of enlightenment, can be highly effective.

In this critique approach, students lay out their work or bring it up on their laptops, rate their classmates' work according to pre-set criteria, and then walk around the room to view and discuss each student's work.

Before a walkabout critique begins, each student receives colored sticky notes and places the notes on their classmates' work according to pre-set criteria. These criteria can include semiotic qualities (red sticky note for effective syntactic, yellow for effective semantic, and blue for effective pragmatic) or other qualitative traits.

You and the students then walk around the room, stopping at each student's work to talk. Afterwards, you can pick a composition and ask those who reviewed it to talk about the work. Everyone should be prepared to share their assessment of each student's work.

An alternate version of this is the "cold read," in which the critiqued student is silent until after their classmates have critiqued it. Another version of this critique, without sticky notes, is peer presentation. For this, break the class into teams of two students each. Each student learns about their teammate's work and presents it to the class as you walk about the room. This approach creates bonds among students.

Example

Which approaches and definitions best describe your critiques?

· A two-way dialogue
· A way of pointing out directions
· An opportunity
· Not an endurance test
· A time for asking questions
· Listening and not interrupting
· Explaining in a respectful tone
· Being patient and expressing empathy
· Avoiding the word "should"
· Considering others' positions

Questions

How would you prioritize the above list?

How do you instill confidence in your students so they develop their work and participate in critiques without reservation?

How do you transition from progress critiques to final critiques?

Do you critique the way you experienced critiques in your undergraduate school, and if so, what have you improved upon?

47

Moderating
Written Critiques

Written response critiques are helpful to students who find it difficult to view the work of others, process and formulate their thoughts and impressions quickly, and then verbalize them.

This critique approach keeps more of the class engaged and can improve the quality of feedback.

Create a critique form with a list of categories and questions about the project at hand. For example, in VCD 3045 these categories might cover strategy (audience research), appearance (content organization and emphasis), and behavior (user navigation through content).

Give each student at least three copies of the critique form to leave at their work stations, to be completed by their classmates.

Upon critique completion, each student can choose to reconcile or average the content of their received critiques, or discard the most and least favorable critiques in lieu of the median critique. Go to each student's work station and ask the students who reviewed the work to say a few words about what they wrote. Everyone should be ready to speak about the classmates' work they reviewed.

Example

Criteria

Sample written critique criteria

Interaction Design Considerations
· Strategy, appearance, behavior

Semiotic Lens Approach
· Syntactic, semantic, pragmatic

Content Process
· Gather, analyze, present

Interaction Design Considerations and Questions

Strategy
Who is the target audience?
What are the conveyed attributes?

Appearance
How is hierarchy created?
What characteristics create consistency?

Behavior
Is the experience appropriate to content?
What feedback signals are effective?

Questions

If your students were to assume roles in a critique, what titles might you use, e.g., skeptic or enthusiast?

When might written feedback be most useful and least useful?

What are the phases within your critiques? For example, do you open with a discussion of concepts followed by form and meaning, and close with a summary and general statement?

In what ways do your online course management tools contribute to or detract from criticality?

48

Closing

This section examines approaches to analyzing your courses and ways of improving your teaching.

49

Analyzing Your Courses

Any changes to your courses should take into account your ability to teach broader or more specialized content, as well as shifts in design thought and in the department and school strategic plan.

Analyzing the content and focus of your course can be accomplished through self-reflection as well as through viewpoints outside of your own: students, faculty, colleagues, administrators, and accreditation reviewers. As you reconcile the likely differences of opinion, you may have to modify the course and your approach to teaching it before you teach it again.

Decide what criteria you will use to determine successful aspects and those that could be improved. Your criteria may include the following.

· Ease in which you deliver content
· Adherence to current and emerging critically based pedagogy
· Reception you get from the students
· Quality of resulting student work
· Contribution to the department curriculum
· Criticality of your projects and depth of instruction

Example

Course Content

Where are your students' strengths?

L Low
M Medium
H High

Where is the emphasis of your course content?

L Low
M Medium
H High

Content	L	M	H
Code / Craft / Software	o	o	o
Collaboration	o	o	o
Composition / Color	o	o	o
Critique / Presentation	o	o	o
Imagery	o	o	o
Issues Social / Cultural	o	o	o
Methodologies	o	o	o
Process / Documentation	o	o	o
Systems	o	o	o
Rhetorical Approaches	o	o	o
Strategy	o	o	o
Theory / History	o	o	o
Typography	o	o	o
Voice / Self-Evaluation	o	o	o
Writing	o	o	o

Questions

Which content is the most difficult to teach, and which is most critical?

Where are the overlaps between your students' strengths and your course content, and how might that inform your teaching?

Are your course aspects, such as color terminology and characteristics, color interaction principles, color application principles, etc., developed sequentially or simultaneously?

When might you forgo a skill set for the greater good or to keep the class moving ahead?

Before Course

Positioning Your Courses

Undergraduate design courses are linked in a so-called "scaffold" manner. The lower level courses develop the skills needed in successive courses up the scaffold. Wherever your course lies in the scaffold, a key positioning issue is the transference of course skill sets from one course to another or from one level to another.
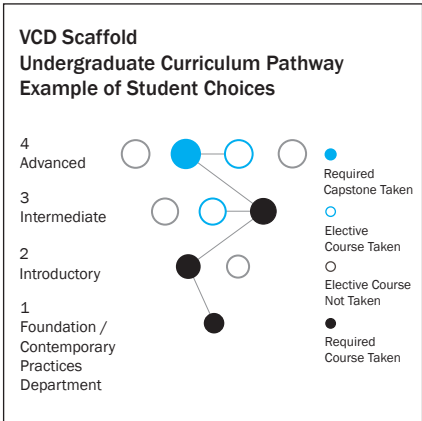
Ideally, the skills students bring to your course are a fit for achieving its goals and objectives, and the skills they leave with prepare them for subsequent studio design courses. Smooth transitions occur between some courses and levels, such as from VCD 1001 to VCD 2000 level courses. But the transitions between other courses or levels can be rocky. For example, if a student's previous courses were print-based and did not directly address user requirements, interactive design course VCD 3045 can come as an unfamiliar way of designing that takes time and effort to master.

Compare the course you are teaching with other courses in the curriculum to locate redundancies or content gaps. It may be that your course description needs to be re-written to better explain and differentiate your course in the department curriculum.

Example

Scaffold Curriculum

In this simplified model, students take the few required core courses in each level as well as those of personal interest as they move toward the advanced level. By not requiring students to take every VCD course in all levels, students can take studio courses in other departments and build an individualized learning experience.

VCD Scaffold
Undergraduate Curriculum Pathway
Example of Student Choices

4 Advanced

3 Intermediate

2 Introductory

1 Foundation / Contemporary Practices Department

● Required Capstone Taken

○ Elective Course Taken

○ Elective Course Not Taken

● Required Course Taken

Questions

How is the VCD undergraduate curriculum similar to or different from your undergraduate school's visual communication design curriculum?

Where is your course located in the undergraduate curriculum, and how does its position influence your goals and objectives?

Which contrasting words best describe the VCD undergraduate scaffold (simple to complex, singular to multiple, discovery to application, self to others, etc.) and which do you most value?

When do students achieve the most noticeable conceptual growth in the VCD undergraduate curriculum?

Growing Your Skills

Growing your skills can be as difficult as teaching for the first time because growth, inevitably, can reveal areas needing improvement.

If this is your first TA experience, your growth will occur naturally through observing, leading, continual note-taking, and lots of reflection.

Growth requires taking a serious look at your existing and developing skill sets. This may lead you to add new skills, improve existing skills, and/or change focus.

While there might be a good time to completely revamp your teaching, it can be better to make changes incrementally. This will give your changes time to take effect and may result in a more useful evaluation of their effectiveness.

As a word of caution, after you have taught a course repeatedly it can be easy to become complacent. The challenge of creating an educational experience and delivering it can also fade. Further, when you invest a lot of effort and time into developing a project or teaching approach, the tendency is to stick with it. Although these are understandable reasons to continue as you have been, even the best courses can be tweaked in response to successes and failures.

Example

Teaching Performance Skills

Where are your prioritized growth areas?

L Low
M Medium
H High

Skills	L	M	H
Motivating and Persuading	o	o	o
Conveying Believability	o	o	o
Individualizing Outcomes	o	o	o
Stepping In and Out	o	o	o
Building Student Interests	o	o	o
Describing Quality	o	o	o
Providing Access Points	o	o	o
Developing POV	o	o	o
One on One Guidance	o	o	o
Creating a Culture	o	o	o
Finding the Connection	o	o	o
Moderating Critiques	o	o	o
Evaluating and Assessing	o	o	o
Adapting and Changing	o	o	o
Fostering Curiosity	o	o	o

Questions

What kind of VCD support would help you improve your performance skills?

Which sources of feedback do you consider the most useful: mentor, teaching evaluation, colleague peer review, informal discussions with the department Chair?

Which performance skills have the greatest impact on your teaching?

If you were to re-order by importance the list of performance skills above or the contents of this entire handbook, how would it be organized?

Before, During, and After Course

:

Finding Resources

Print and Online

08 Opening

09 course materials
10 designandculture.org
11 nasad.arts-accredit.org
12 ed.gov
13 John Dewey, *Experience and Education*, Free Press, 1997
14 Manfred Maier, *Basic Principles of Design*, Van Nostrand Reinhold, 1981
15 John Bowers, *Introduction to Two-Dimensional Design, 2nd Edition*, Wiley, 2008
16 Meredith Davis, *Graphic Design Theory*, Thames and Hudson, 2015
17 arteducators.org

18 Defining

19 Alice and David Kolb, *The Experiential Educator*, Experience Learning Systems, 2017
20 unesco.org/education
21 Daniel Muijs and David Reynolds, *Effective Teaching,* 4th Edition, Sage Publishing, 2018
22 Meredith Davis, *Teaching Design*, Allworth, 2017
23 educators.aiga.org
24 dx.cooperhewitt.org
25 pbs.org/program/art21
26 designforamerica.com
27 cumulusassociation.org

28 Framing

29 course syllabus
30 course schedule
31 chronicle.com
32 course past projects
33 course project prompts
34 John Bowers, *Introduction to Graphic Design Methodologies and Processes,* Wiley, 2011
35 Edward De Bono, *Lateral Thinking*, Harper Colophon, 2015
36 Martin Venezky, *It is Beautiful, Then Gone*, Princeton Architectural Press, 2007
37 course grading rubics

38 Doing

39 designobserver.com
40 course grading forms
41 Roger Fisher, William Ury, and Bruce Patton, *Getting to Yes*, Penquin Books, 2011
42 Seymour Sarason, *Teaching as a Performing Art*, Teachers College Press, 1999
43 ideou.com
44 Don Norman, *The Design of Everyday Things*, Basic Books, 2013
45 course syllabus
46 Buster Kendall, *Critiquing the Critique*, Pearson, 2009
47 course critique forms

48 Closing

49 ico-d.org
50 course curriculum diagram
51 ocw.mit.edu

Finding Resources

Select Bibliography

11 nasad.arts-accredit.org
This accreditation organization establishes national standards for undergraduate and graduate degrees in university and college art and design programs.

15 *Introduction to Two-Dimensional Design, 2nd Edition*
In this edition, I more thoroughly discuss the visual principles, methodologies, and theories that comprise a broad and holistic definition of two-dimensional design that underlie all of my courses.

19 *The Experiential Educator*
The authors explore the basic concepts of experiential learning theory, including the concepts of learning styles and ways of creating effective learning environments.

21 *Effective Teaching, 4th Edition*
A standard in the field, this book explores the effectiveness of different teaching approaches and their underlying schools of thought.

22 *Teaching Design*
Written by a leading design educator in the development and assessment of design pedagogy, the book thoroughly lays out teaching strategies to address the increasing complexity and interdisciplinarity of design.

23 educators.aiga.org
This website is the educator side of the AIGA (American Institute of Graphic Arts), the professional graphic design organization. It provides a forum and resources for graphic design curriculum development and faculty support

42 *Teaching as a Performing Art*
Sarason draws parallels between stage performance and classroom instruction, stating that students learn better when their teachers hone their teaching craft through rehearsal, stick to the script (curriculum), and know their audience.

Visual Communication Design Teaching Strategies   Guiding Undergraduate Studio Courses   Closing > Visual Culture and Community

54

Design: Visual Culture and Community

Overview of a project developed with with Karen Zimmerman, Professor, Illustration and Design Program, School of Art, University of Arizona

Introduction

This paper discusses the shaping of design education as a participant in the development of visual culture and as an activity connecting a breadth of disciplines.

Design education has too often focused on design as an activity of object making apart from the communities and disciplines that shape it and from the culture it creates. In a broad and critical sense, design examines issues, methodologies, strategies, and theories in its relationship to community and culture.

Our research is based on a collaborative project between the University of Arizona and Oregon State University to develop a General Education course called Design: Culture and Language. In creating the course, we believe that teaching is most effective in learning environments that encourage individual experiences and accommodate a variety of learning styles. We seek to promote design as a discipline and as a vital cultural participant.

The course's learning goals and objectives are centered around developing abilities to critically analyze and describe interactions and relationships, heightening awareness of the past, and making cross cultural analyses

· Study processes as well as objects (form-making is not a focus of the course).

· Create meaningful interaction spaces and events that encourage and foster participation and collaboration.

· View faculty as facilitators and mediators rather than communicators of static bodies of information.

Modules

The course consists of four modules: an introductory module that focuses on theory, principles, methodologies, and issues in representation, form, and ideation; and three modules that examine theory and issues in identity (individual and collective roles and values),ritual (cultural conventions and roles), and story (public and private verbal and visual narratives and message making).

The course modules survey the critical issues of (primarily) applied design: private and public, collective and individual. Each module addresses issues of responsibility, participation, and interpretation with broad historical references. Design is approached as a discipline. While the modules contain aspects unique to design, they also share aspects found in other disciplines throughout the humanities.

Design: Visual Culture and Community

Influential Theory

Create Competencies and Evidence

We are guided by Bloom's taxonomy for categorizing the level of abstraction of questions that commonly occur in teaching. These are competence (knowledge, comprehension, application, analysis, synthesis, evaluation) and skill demonstrated (observation, understanding, using information, seeing patterns,-generalizing, comparing).

Create Varied and Personalized Learning Experiences

Supported by Learning Style theory, which describes how "concrete perceivers" and "active processors" absorb information through direct experience, i.e., doing and acting, and how "abstract perceivers" and "reflective processors" undestand experiences by reflecting and thinking about them.

Create a Community (and Culture)

Influenced by Vygotsky's Social Cognition theory, which holds that culture itself provides methods and tools for thinking. Student learning is affected by the culture and community of the course.

Create Commitment and Belonging to Community

Based on Communities of Practice theory pioneered at the Institute for Research on Learning in Palo Alto, learning is fundamentally social, i.e., learning environments are also social environments. The process of learning is inseparable from community membership; our identity changes in the group as learning takes place. Learning occurs as a function of the activity, context, and culture. Students teach other students

Conclusions

Based on integration of disciplines, cultural and social contextualization of design issues, and collective and individualized interaction, our research creates a new and, we believe, vital pedagogy of visual instruction, contributing knowledge to the disciplines of design and fine art and to the humanities at large.

Community is critical to learning, understanding, and change. The challenge before us is to consider how new technologies can be used to engage all voices and to foster critical dialogue, broad thinking, and shared understanding.

Visual Communication Design Teaching Strategies   Guiding Undergraduate Studio Courses   Closing > Strategizing Design Curriculum

56   Originally posted on aiga.org/voice-journal-of-design

Strategizing
Design Curriculum

Strategy is a key component in professional design practice, yet severely lacking in the design of educational experiences where understanding one's position relative to others is as critical.

I recently completed a comprehensive curriculum and strategic positioning analysis of the graphic design and digital media design programs at a small, private art school on the east coast. Located in a large metropolitan area, the school is a respected and established art and design academy with highly qualified faculty and a record of producing successful designers. While its primary mission is to educate students for entry into professional practice, it emphasizes the critical thinking skills stressed in liberal arts environments. I began the process by choosing four primary goals: continuity (find and address curricular gaps and overlaps), strategy (strengthen and position the curriculum to the program's peers), integration (define the relationships between the print-based Graphic Design program and the web-, motion-, and video-based digital media design program, and between academics and fine arts) and growth (aid the development of short- and long-term curricular goals and renewed mission statements).

I began the process by choosing four primary goals: continuity (find and address curricular gaps and overlaps), strategy (strengthen and position the curriculum to the program's peers), integration (define the relationships between the print-based Graphic Design program and the web-, motion-, and video-based digital media design program, and between academics and fine arts) and growth (aid the development of short- and long-term curricular goals and renewed mission statements).

My first task involved conducting a comprehensive audit of all promotional and curricular materials (online and print) that the school had published over the past several years. Changes and differences in program descriptions, degree requirements, mission statements and strategic plans were noted. This phase benefited greatly from a document outlining desired competency skills for each level of each program. Written by the school administration in preparation for a NASAD review just three years earlier, the document's stated learning outcomes, program missions, vision statement and short-term goals were a useful reference point.

Materials were gathered from faculty through formal and informal meetings including class visitations over a one-month period and the collection and review of syllabi and project sheets. Students were interviewed in small groups with the aid of a questionnaire designed to determine what the students thought was working (or not) and what they valued, e.g., one-on-one contact. I was careful not to initiate criticism of individual faculty, courses or situations; instead, I sought to provide an opportunity for students to think broadly and envision the ideal. Not surprisingly, the interviews provided a wealth of ideas, while the concerns were common to almost every school in which I have taught, e.g., not enough electives.

Strategizing
Design Curriculum

With this knowledge, I compiled a matrix (an intersecting horizontal and vertical line resulting in four equal quadrants) of courses and their projects and learning outcomes. Course-learning outcomes are perhaps the most critical aspect to the curriculum analysis process and should be the guiding force for any school's curriculum decisions. Well-defined learning outcomes can help create continuity among courses, limit content overlaps, close content gaps and ensure that faculty understand program goals. This is especially important at schools that rely heavily on qualified but transient adjunct faculty. While learning objectives should be specific, e.g., "demonstrate the ability to ?", they should also be open-ended enough to allow for faculty interpretation.

A competitive audit followed, which compared the mission statements, course listings and structure, learning outcomes, entrance requirements, portfolio review standards and other materials from comparable and select schools across the country. From this, several positioning matrices were created to visually locate the audited programs. For example, Matrix 1 examined program ideology (using the words holistic and focused at opposite ends of one line, practical and conceptual at opposite ends of the intersecting line), while Matrix 2 examined program structure (using the words emphasis and balance, separation and integration). The matrices supported a discussion of where each of the school's programs should move relative to others in its peer group.

As we reviewed the two programs, our discussion turned toward their future and their larger role in design education and practice. How can we predict changes in design, its roles and its value to society? What is the single most important characteristic differentiating the school's graphic design and digital media design programs? Should we merge the programs?

Further discussion points included adding two additional courses, one in collaboration methodologies and one in design issues and ethics; more fully integrating new media and conceptual writing throughout the curriculum; and championing the year-long senior thesis course. Also discussed was the value of open-ended physical outcomes, furthering links to the school's academic offerings, and pursuing academic collaborations with the city's other universities and disciplines.

Because designers must increasingly draw from a range of disciplines to effectively identify, analyze and solve problems, a strategic and holistic approach to curriculum development is critical in shaping a program's identity, purpose and role. Identifying a program's relationship to its institution, immediate community, profession and other institutions can result in a program that is far more than a collection of courses and is instead an innovative, evolving entity.

Originally posted on educators.aiga.org

Lagom: Finding Balance in Lapland

Sweden may be one of the few countries in the world in which culture and design can be described in a single word: lagom.

In every Swede's vocabulary, sparingly used but widely applied, the word essentially means finding and exhibiting balance, yet has multiple connotations depending on context. In some cases it might mean "don't show off," while in others it might mean "all in good measure." No word in the English language corresponds to lagom. A Swede might say "Vattnet är lagom varmt," which translates as "The water is lagom warm" and means the water is neither too warm nor too cold, but just right.

The understated nature and balanced approach of lagom is expressed throughout the country in a variety of ways and across a range of public situations. Official signage, for example, functions more as invitations and requests than obligations and demands. Depictions of adults guiding children, exuberant pedestrians walking, and gentle notifications of doggie bag availability seem more like statements related to civic pride than directives. Implying "please" seems to be just enough.

As of this writing, the hockey season has begun in Sweden, snow is expected in Lapland, and the locals have installed studded snow tires on their vehicles in anticipation. Little salt is applied to the roads; instead, the majority of roads are deliberately left with a layer of snow ideally suited for studded tires. Equally balanced are the hockey games, which combine strategy and rugged skate play but rarely fighting, an act considered an affront to the sport.

The balance and civility implicit in lagom even extends beyond Sweden's borders. Sweden recently announced it would offer blanket asylum to any Syrian refugee—the first European country to do so.

I recently returned from northern Sweden where I conducted my annual workshop for thirteen first-year students in the MA Interaction Design program at the Umeå Institute of Design. This time, the studio-based workshop explored approaches to organizing interviews, photographs, and observation notes previously compiled by the students over four days' time in Abisko, Sweden, ten hours by train north of Umeå. The workshop's purpose was to develop points of view for an interactive and interpretative way-finding system that could be used by Abisko citizens and visitors.

Visual Communication Design Teaching Strategies   Guiding Undergraduate Studio Courses   Closing > Finding Balance in Lapland

59

Lagom: Finding Balance in Lapland

A small, remote town on the Sweden-Norway border in northern Lapland, Abisko is both a tourist destination and an important center of Arctic research, drawing researchers of climate change from around the world. Under the leadership of Niklas Andersson, MA Interaction Program Director, the students had thoroughly explored the town just before I arrived. Hailing from eleven different countries, their diverse backgrounds brought a range of interpretative perspectives social interactions among the researchers, tourists, and locals, and more. Because the school year was in its first week, their time in Abisko was largely their introduction to Sweden and lagom.

My workshop began the process of finding balance among content, targeted audiences, message purposes, and desired responses for the design of open-ended outcomes, such as physical maps or iPhone applications. It presented an interesting challenge to the students because the design solutions were meant to be implemented in a country foreign to almost all of them.

As we analyzed their research, lagom came up and the various ways it is expressed, including the national custom of fika (daily, repeated, and much- beloved work breaks centered on the drinking of strong black coffee). We agreed that embracing if not appreciating coffee without cream as well as other Swedish cultural conventions, routines, and rituals would be key to designing in Sweden.

The concept of lagom may be too abstract to function as a design method per se, but it can serve as a guide. Among Swedes there's no single application of the word in the same way they have little agreement on the boundaries of Lapland. Lagom is a prompt to consider the embedded role of designers in culture, and in this way may hold wide consideration. For the thirteen students, lagom is leading them to consider their own cultural values and their place as they live and design in Sweden.

While Swedish design exhibits functional simplicity and elegance, conveys honesty, and is an extension of lagom, applying the concept to design problems outside the country doesn't necessarily dictate a particular look, imply a process, or promote a given value. In this sense, lagom is as neutral as Sweden itself, assuming that neutrality can actually exist.

Words, regions, and countries are many-layered. Whether in Abisko, Umeå, or elsewhere, through government policies, organized research projects, visual depictions, or expressions of civility, the search for balance among the various components is a complicated but worthwhile undertaking.

Originally posted on designobserver.com

A Lesson
from Spirograph

While recently going through some items in my mom's basement, I found the "1967 Toy of the Year."

With the exception of a few missing pieces, the Spirograph I shared with my brother was almost perfectly intact: plastic circles and rings, colored pens, pins, storage tray, a piece of cardboard, a pad of white paper, and the "pattern booklet."

The still-popular, mass-produced toy from the 60s is the embodiment of controlled emotion in the face of the decade's social unrest and conflict. The Spirograph promoted adherence to procedures and non-controversial design through a methodical process.

Although the Spirograph provided hours of fun, wonder, and amazement for my brother and I as we formed our simple patterns, using it again as an adult has prompted a few thoughts on wonder and its limitations.

Designed by British engineer Denys Fisher in 1962 and acquired by the American manufacturer Kenner Toys in 1966, the first and simplest of many subsequent Spirograph versions hit the stores in 1967, the year we received ours as a Christmas gift. The accompanying manual stated that the toy "stimulates the imagination and develops creativity," and that there would be "no limit to the different designs you can make!"

The set has 18 sizes of small circles that fit into two large rings. Designs are created by placing a pen in a circle's holes and moving the circle inside a ring, which is pinned down in the cardboard to make it stationary. The pattern booklet shows a dozen designs and describes the required ring, circle(s), and pen positions. For example, one formula (abbreviated) reads: "Pin RING no. 144/96 to Paper and Baseboard, the No. 1 mark at the top...with pen in Hole 3 draw another pattern. Repeat, using Holes 5 and 7."

The design procedure is both methodical and repeatable, with the patterns yielding virtually exact copies by all users. The most fun for us came not by following the patterns or the rules but randomly mixing colors, moving the circles and rings at will, and placing lots of pinholes in our designs.

The Spirograph demonstrates, if not promotes, the belief that design can be formulaic and that good design has something to do with simplicity and objectivity. However, qualitative aspects such as emotion, irrationality, and instinct are largely missing. The patterns themselves make no direct reference to a user's nationality, ethnicity, social class, or gender. Choices are officially confined to color and template combinations.

A Lesson
from Spirograph

The focused geometric and rational visual language and limited plastic components restrict the range of outcomes and equalize abilities. It brings to mind a Swedish saying my wife told me: "Everyone wants you to succeed, as long as you're not doing better than they are." Our designs were original but not too original.

We received our Spirograph as the space race was underway and the Cold War was yet to thaw, the summer of love was over and the Tet Offensive was soon to begin. Soon my brother would receive his draft lottery number. Perhaps the Spirograph offered a bit of rationality and order to the chaos. It was predictable and socially safe. Any combination of templates and color would result in a Spirograph manual "sanctioned" design. The toy gave the illusion of counter-culture experimentation, yet furthered the establishment adherence to staying the course.

Yet I felt a sense of pride in the detailed patterns I could draw. It was incredible, magical, how quickly overlapping circles would create a dynamic and mesmerizing design. Even more, I was in awe of the more complex and colorful patterns my older brother could create. Perhaps he was working through the stress of receiving his impending call to duty.

What set the Spirograph apart from our other toys in that era was the suggestion that we were actually making something (art). Drawing patterns was more than simply assembling parts in various combinations to create a temporary object to be taken apart (e.g., Legos) or moving a stylus to create a temporary design to be erased (e.g., Etch-A-Sketch).

Allowing repeatable solutions, minimizing differences, and channeling outcomes in part describe the 1967 Toy of the Year. Denys Fisher's design was an outgrowth of his work on Vietnam-era munitions, research no doubt guided by procedures and constraints.

Thankfully, my brother made it through the Vietnam War without getting drafted, and we recently played a round of Spirograph together. At the bottom of the box were some patterns we had drawn 41 years earlier. Looking back, I clearly saw how limits can provide a sanctuary, foster exploration, and with some imagination generate beauty. But the random pinholes in the official paper pad reinforce the notion that sometimes moving outside of what's expected has its place, too.

Notes

63

Notes

64

Visual Communication Design Teaching Strategies: Guiding Undergraduate Studio Courses

John Bowers

A Handbook for
John Bowers'
Visual Communication Design
Teaching Assistants
VCD 1001 / VCD 2900 / VCD 3045
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