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Reflection and Graphic Design Pedagogy: Developing a Reflective Framework to Enhance Learning in a Graphic Design Tertiary Environment

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Research Background

While there is a tradition of research in design pedagogy, literature specifically engaging with graphic design pedagogy is an emerging area. The main area of interest to this study is the loss of learning opportunities in traditional graphic design pedagogy due to a primary focus on project outcomes without formalised design process discourse. A component worthy of further investigation is the role reflection can play to provide a framework for engagement with the design process to enhance learning outcomes for the graphic design student.

The current pedagogical approach employed at the University of Wollongong is based on a blending of project-based and studio-based learning. Utilising either of these strategies or a combination is a common approach in many graphic design tertiary programs. (Davies & Reid, 2000)

Project-based learning has been identified as a 'comprehensive approach to classroom teaching and learning that is designed to engage students in investigation of authentic problems'. (Blumenfeld, Soloway, Marz, Krajcik, Guzdail & Palincsar, 1991) By placing students in realistic, contextualised problem-solving environments, project-based learning can serve to establish bridges between knowledge gained in the classroom and real-life experiences. (Blumenfeld et al, 1991)

Drawing on Blumenfeld et al. (1994), Barron, Schwartz, Vye, Moore, Petrosino, Zech & Bransford (1998) I have articulated a generalised representation of project-based learning (see figure 1). First, there is the articulation of a driving question from which the students then enter into the activity of designing, which is usually collaborative in nature. As the project develops, the work is formatively assessed from which the students then revise their work entering into further design activity. The students cycle through these three steps before proceeding to the final step of project presentation.

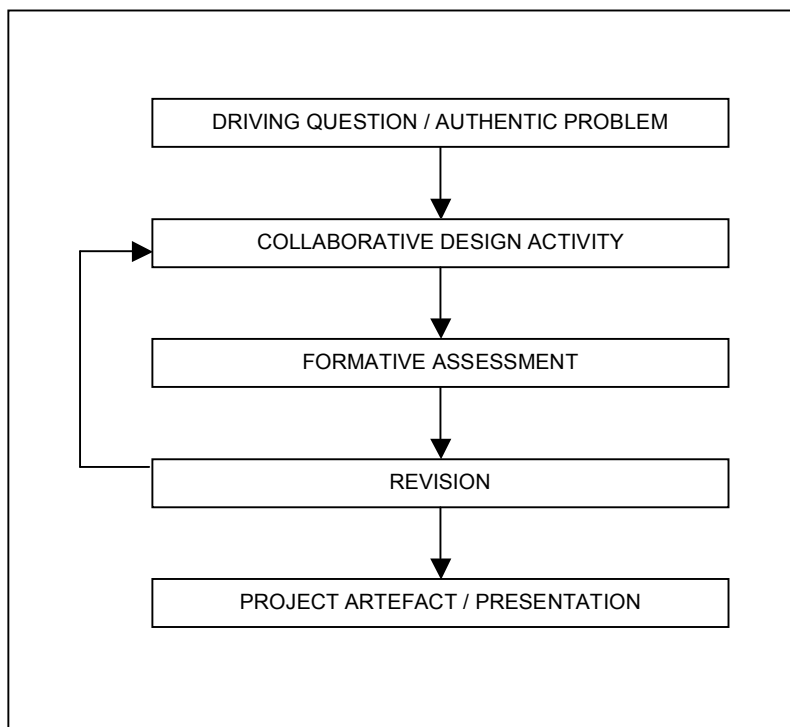


Figure 1: Project-based learning (generalised model); based on Blumenfeld et al. (1991), Barron et al. (1998).

Studio-based learning has emerged from the design discipline of architecture. Lackey (1999) identifies the important features of studio-based learning, setting the design problem, periodic lectures, critique of student work (four distinct types: desk critique; pin-up; interim/midterm critique; and final critique), and assessment by jury. In the studio, the design teacher engages the student in action-based activity. (Kvan, 2001) The relationship in this setting between teacher and student, is framed by the master-apprentice approach. (Schön, 1987)

The four fundamental steps in the studio-based learning process have been described (Kvan, 2001) (see figure 2). First, there is the formulation of the design problem, then exploration of solutions through action-based activity, followed by problem re-examination. The student recycles through these steps before the student proceeds to the final step of examination by jury.

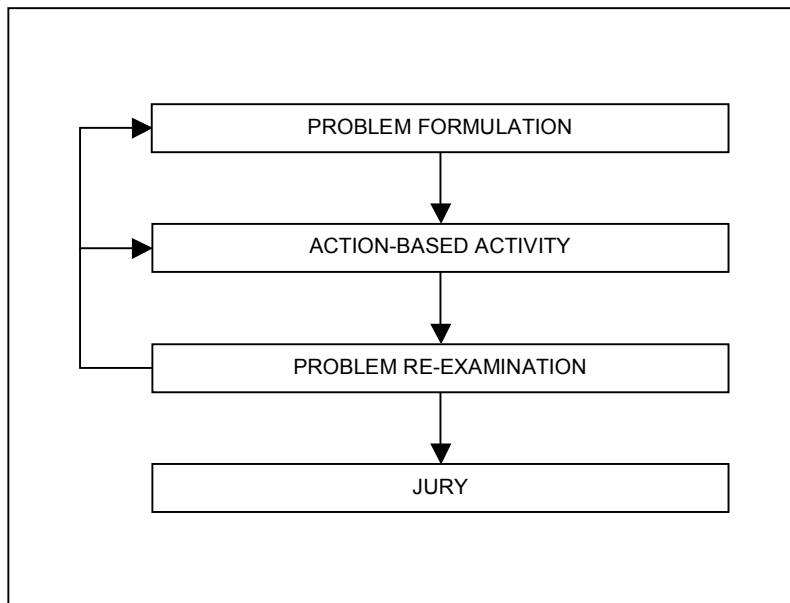


Figure 2: Studio teaching cycle (Kvan, 2001).

Over time the author has observed that students do not necessarily take forward their knowledge from project to project, or subject to subject. Many students focus on the project outcome with limited ability to articulate the design process. Understanding the design process is an important aspect of becoming a professional graphic designer as this can provide a platform to transfer expertise to different design contexts.

The inclusion of a reflective framework in traditional graphic design pedagogy has the potential to provide a scaffold for the learner to engage with the design process. Reflection as a means to enhance learning in education has been well documented. (Dewey, 1933; Boud, Keogh & Walker, 1985; Eraut, 1994; LaBoskey, 1994; Hatton & Smith, 1995). However, as previously stated, literature engaging specifically with graphic design pedagogy is limited. The literature that does exist primarily revolves around Donald Schön's reflective practitioner framework (Schön, 1983; 1987) and engages with architecture (Quayle & Paterson, 1989; Proudfoot, 2000), industrial design (Valkenburg & Dorst, 1998) or design education in general (Waks, 1999; 2001; Tonkinwise, 2005).

The concept of 'reflection' in the twentieth century is commonly credited to the educationalist and philosopher John Dewey (Schön, 1987; Ghaye & Lillyman, 1997; Waks, 1999; Griffiths, 2000; Rolfe, 2002). Drawing on Dewey, Hatton & Smith outline reflection as 'an active and deliberative cognitive process, involving sequences of interconnected ideas which take account of underlying beliefs and knowledge. Reflective thinking generally addresses practical problems, allowing for doubt and perplexity before possible solutions are reached'. (Hatton & Smith, 1995:34)

Of particular importance to design pedagogy is establishing an environment in which the student engages in a professional context and activity. Schön (1983; 1987), drawing on Dewey's theory of reflection, outlines the concept of the 'reflective practitioner' as a means of engaging in professional activity. This provides a framework for understanding and plotting the process of design practice and activity. Schön's theory is based on a constructivist view of human perception and thought processes; that the designer constructs their view of the world based on their experiences (Valkenburg & Dorst, 1998).

Schön (1987) maintains that reflection is intimately bound up with action. He rejects the theory of technical rationality that distinguishes professionals by the extent of their 'book knowledge'. Design practice is action-oriented and relies on an implicit knowledge that resists definition within the paradigm of technical rationality (Schön, 1983; 1987; Valkenburg & Dorst, 1998).

Schön (1983) highlights reflection as a critical element of professional design activity and articulates two types of reflection; reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action. Reflection-in-action takes place when the design professional is 'surprised' by, or experiences a unique situation during the development of the design solution where as reflection-on-action involves the review of actions from the recent past (Schön 1987). Eraut interprets Schön's reflection-on-action as the 'process of making sense of an action after it has occurred and possibly learning something from the experience which extends one's knowledge base' (Eraut, 1994:146).

Boud, Keogh, & Walker, building on the work of Dewey, define reflection in a learning context as 'a generic term for those intellectual and affective activities in which individuals engage to explore their experiences in order to lead to new understandings and appreciations' (Boud, Keogh, & Walker, 1985:19).

While acknowledging that reflection does take place at an unconscious level, of importance to Boud et. al. is the role of conscious thought in the reflective process as a means of formalising an intentional learning from experience. This could be interpreted as a process of 'conscious detachment from an activity followed by a distinct period of contemplation'. (Hatton & Smith, 1995:34) This process as outlined has similarities with the final two problem-based learning stages of abstraction and reflection, as described by Koschmann, Myers, Feltovich, & Barrows (1994). As such, problem-based learning has the potential to inform the integration of reflective strategies in a traditional graphic design educational framework.

Problem-based learning has been described as an instructional educational methodology in which students engage with contextualised problems and look to discover meaningful solutions (Rhem, 1998). An essential aspect of problem-based learning is the use of 'real-world' problems to frame the approach to learning (White, 1996). Students work in small groups to discover solutions to the problem. It is through this discovery that the students identify what they know and importantly what they don't know, establishing a framework in which to approach the problem (Duch, 1997; Major & Palmer, 2001).

Five fundamental steps in problem-based learning have been identified:

1. problem formulation;
2. development of a solution through a self-directed learning approach;
3. a re-examination of the problem to test the proposed solution;
4. abstraction where the solution is contextualised with other known cases;
5. final reflection stage where the students reflect and critique their learning process seeking to identify areas for future improvement (Koschmann et al., 1994).

The student group cycle through the first three stages until a satisfactory solution is developed before moving to the stages of abstraction and reflection (see figure 3).

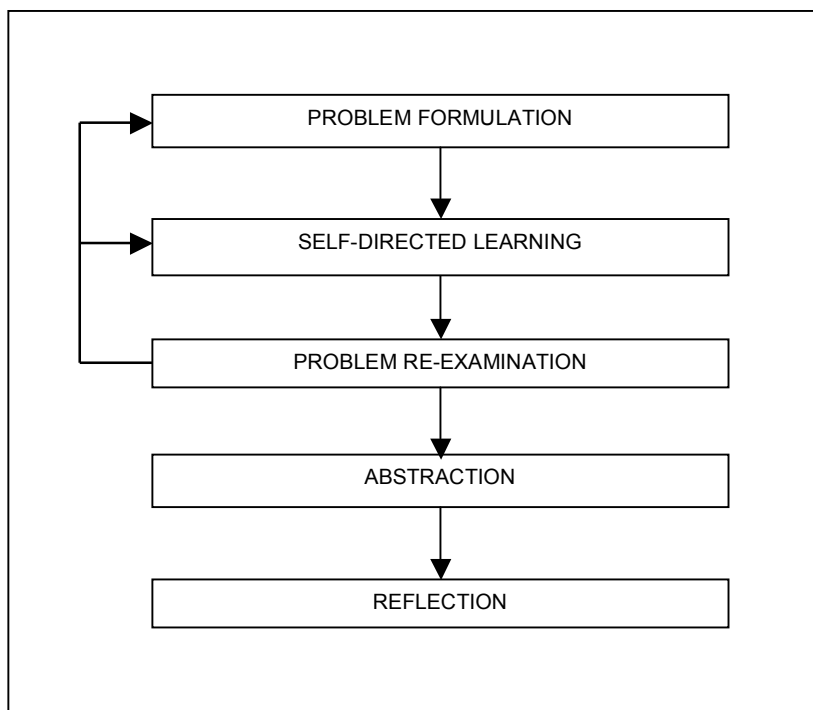


Figure 3: Five steps in problem-based learning (Koschmann, Myers et al., 1994).

The inclusion of the abstraction and reflection steps, are of particular interest to this study as these steps have the potential to inform the inclusion of a reflective framework in a traditional graphic design education environment.

Development of a reflective framework

The proposed reflective framework is based on the foundation principles of studio and project-based learning, incorporates elements of Schön's reflective practitioner framework, and includes the abstraction and reflection steps of problem-based learning as articulated by Koschmann, Myers et. al. (1994) (see figure 4)

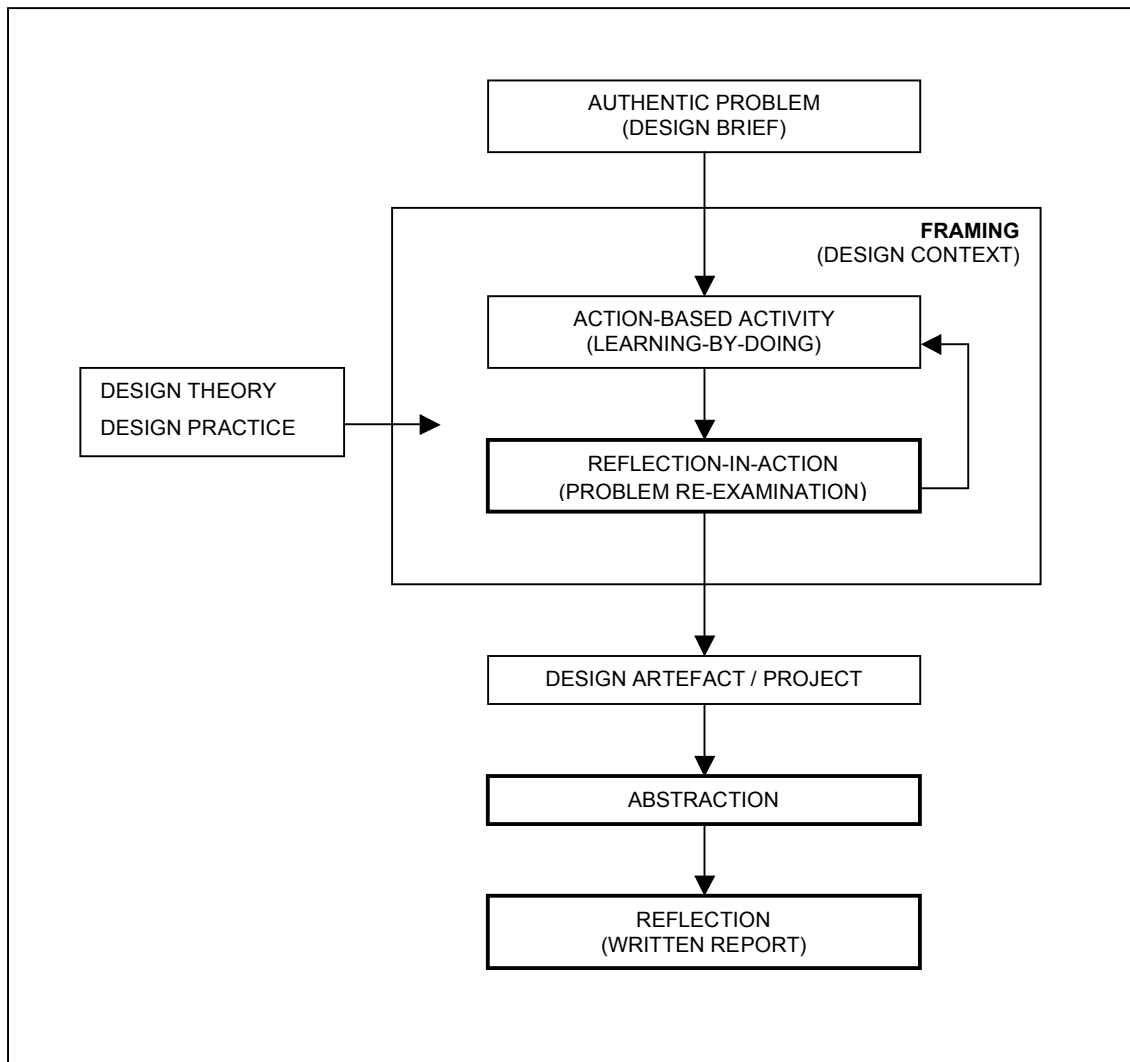


Figure 4: **Reflective Framework developed by the author.**

The students are given an authentic design problem, which is then framed through the establishment of the design context. Within this frame the students develop a solution in the form of a design artefact through a cyclic process of action-based activity and a reflection-in-action process, before presenting the final design artefact for assessment. During this process the students receive aspects of design theory and practice relevant to the subject objectives and the posed design problem. Once the design project has been presented the students commence the final stages of abstraction and reflection, which is articulated through a written assessment task.

Assessment has been identified as an integral aspect of learning (Gibbs & Simpson, 2004; Drew & Shreeve, 2005; Ehmann, 2005) that motivates and directs student learning (Boud, 1990; Briggs, 2003). The inclusion of a formalised assessment task in the reflective framework motivates and focuses the student to engage with the final stage of reflection and provides them a platform to articulate their understanding. ‘Assessment that explicates process, how students work, has the potential to redirect the learner toward reflection and understanding.’ (Boud, 1990; Ehmann, 2004:76)

Journals can be a useful learning strategy to encourage students to actively engage in the reflection process (Cantrell, 1997; Langer, 2002; O'Connell & Dymont, 2006) and document evidence of learning (Davies 1998). The journal can provide a valuable vehicle for the development of reflective professional practice (Ghaye & Lillyman, 1997; Clifford, 2002) and establish a means for the student to distance themselves from their experience (Walker, 1985). Quayle & Paterson note the importance of techniques such as journal keeping and visual note taking in the design process to 'encourage internal dialogue'. (1989:32) The journal process has been credited as a means to evidence a deep approach to learning and as a more reliable means of establishing student understanding than relying exclusively on the final design artefact. (Davies, 1998)

Concerns with the journal as a learning tool have been identified and include 'procrastination, superficial and unreflective entries, waning enthusiasm, and unwillingness or inability to reflect'. (Ghaye & Lillyman, 1997:57) Identifying critical incidents in the design activity which learners document in their reflective journal, have the potential to address these concerns. Tripp states 'incidents happen, but critical incidents are produced by the way we look at a situation, it is an interpretation of the significance of the event'. (Tripp, 1993) It is through the reflecting and analysis of these critical incidents that 'assist the practitioner in moving their practice forward and obtaining the expert . . . status'. (Ghaye & Lillyman 1997:80)

The process and reflective assessment task encourages the student to identify critical incidents from the design process and contextualise them within the outcomes of the final design artefact. This is significant in that the student assumes responsibility for identifying important moments of the design process there by encouraging them to be independent learners. Of significance for the assessor is that the students process journal is then not required, side-stepping ethical issues that can arise when viewing a personal document, and reducing the need for the assessor to trawl through a potentially detailed journal fishing for critical incidents.

Applying the reflective framework

The reflective framework was initially introduced into a final third year undergraduate subject primarily in the form of the process and reflective assessment task, undertaken after completion of the design artefact. The students are asked to respond to a fixed set of headings, which are designed to explore their engagement with, and understanding of, the design process and how their learning might be applied in future situations.

While assessing the student submissions, I observed that most students did not make the most of the opportunities to reflect on the design process and analyse the design outcomes. In response, I have introduced the process and reflective assessment task at the second year level and have carried it through two third year subjects. This allows the students to practise and refine their approaches through feedback and further discussion of reflection in the teaching program.

The students are asked to submit the process and reflective report one week after the major

project presentations. This allows the students time to distance themselves from the project (abstraction stage) and reflect on the final project outcomes that, importantly, are informed by the feedback provided at the presentation stage.

Observations

After 12-18 months of implementation anecdotal evidence suggests an improved learning as the result of the introduction of the reflective framework. This can be evidenced in an improved design dialogue from the students and increased engagement with the postgraduate program. However it was also felt student opinion would play an important role in the continuing development of this framework. In the first instance this has been achieved by incorporating three questions specifically engaging with the reflective framework within a fourteen question survey that was seeking feedback on aspects of subject delivery.

The survey was presented in an online anonymous format using a five-step Likert scale of: strongly agree; agree; uncertain; disagree; and strongly disagree. Of thirty-nine students enrolled in the subject, twenty participated in the survey providing a 51% response rate.

60% of the respondents agreed or strongly agreed that the reflective assessment task aided their understanding of the design process. 10% were uncertain, with 30% disagreeing and 5% strongly disagreeing. With 40% of the students uncertain or disagreeing this would perhaps suggest further work is needed developing and/or clarifying the assessment task in relation to the design process.

When asked whether the lecturer had encouraged them to reflect on what they had learnt, 75% agreed or strongly agreed, 10% were uncertain, 10% disagreed and 5% strongly disagreed.

Finally, while 50% of the students agreed or strongly agreed that formalising reflection in this subject provided an effective model for thinking about practice, which is a significant outcome, 40% of the students remained uncertain. This is an important issue and would suggest that further work needs to be done within the subject to scaffold the linkages between reflection and thinking about practice.

The process and reflection report has provided a successful platform for the design students to develop an application for postgraduate study. This has seen an increase from one or two candidates in the course work masters program to fourteen in 2005. This sudden large increase in numbers posed a number of other problems of course. There are currently six enrolments in the 2006 program and it will be interesting to note what happens in 2007.

Future directions

The next stages will involve:

- Inclusion of further teaching and learning material engaging with the process and techniques of reflection;

- The development of a more comprehensive survey to gain an understanding of why a significant portion of the students remained uncertain about the role of reflection has to play to encourage thinking about practice.

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