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Locating the critical space in teaching graphic design and new media

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Locating The Critical Space
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deas, -isms, concepts and thoughts that can then be "welded" to graphic
design products in a concrete and vivid way -- a notion of theory as
value-added service. We end up with a split between theory and design
which defeats the role of theory as a critical and analytical part of the
design business or education program. This article argues that it is an
else economy to have such an oppositional split between theory and
practice or studies and production.

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Tertiary teaching of graphic design and new media in recent
years has undergone a dramatic and exciting cultural change.
Variously located in faculties of creative arts, communications,
visual arts and journalism, subjects in design studies and
production have become increasingly appealing to students and
academics alike. Rapid developments in computer technologies
and software packages across the media, entertainment,
advertising and arts industries, has meant that students now see
the broad range of design courses as highly desirable in
employment terms.

While the learning and acquisition of software skills often
remains the driving motivation for students enrolling in graphic
design courses, the theoretical, critical and analytical degree of
rigour employed in the study of design subjects remains poor in
many cases. This is partly due to the rapid growth of design
disciplines and the lack of academics qualified to teach at the
postgraduate level.

The teaching of design has also suffered, along with media
arts generally, from its poor academic image in the eyes of
government funding bodies. Compared with more established
disciplines in the sciences for example, when it comes to gaining
competitive research grants, the creative arts discipline is often not in the race. The scholarly output of design disciplines is more often found in popular magazines, industry journals or on web sites and gallery walls than in traditional refereed academic journals. However, there are some positive signs in Australia that many non-refereed ‘publication’ outlets (in a broad sense – exhibitions, CDRoms, web journals) are now being treated as equivalent to refereed journals.

The merging or collapse of previously discrete and specialist industrial areas within the pre-press and printing processes under the umbrella of desktop computing, combined with the rise of postmodern approaches to hybrid art forms, has meant that students now see their careers shifting across media and across professions as a matter of course. Pedagogy is following this trend in many universities.

There are advantages and disadvantages to this fluid and eclectic nature of media arts education. While some faculties have tried to resist these economic, technological and cultural changes by building pedagogical walls around their disciplines, other faculties have sought to embrace the best aspects of ‘transdisciplinarity’, multimedia production and cultural studies theory to forge new ways of teaching and learning. In this article, we will focus on developments of our graphic design/new media curriculum at Wollongong University in the light of these changes.

Following the economic and political pragmatism of the 1980s, and the influence of digital technologies, the boundaries dividing commercial graphic designers from artists, art workers and crafts practitioners have become significantly more blurred. Staff and students within creative arts faculties now embrace the crossover between art forms and notions of high and low art. Print making students, influenced by the national debate on art and design are beginning to experiment with furniture design. Music composition students are working on digital three dimensional modelling. The result is that visual arts students are demanding an educational mix that will give them new opportunities within an emerging Australian new media arts industry.

The design studies course at Wollongong University was a response to both the national policy debate on art, design and commerce and a sign of the shifting ground in contemporary visual arts and crafts practice. The graphic design and new media program now encourages collaboration across art forms and provides students with a framework of creative image making skills that are equally at home in the commercial environment or
The role of design theory within this transdisciplinary climate has undergone significant change. This revision process offers a chance, for design departments and creative arts disciplines generally, to rethink the relationship between theory and practice, between vocational training and critical production. However, the revision process also throws up a number of deeply and widely held conventional views about design theory and practice that we feel tend to hold back the development of design courses. In teasing out a few of these more conservative ideas we will map out where we are now coming from philosophically and how we want to strategically place ourselves within the educational marketplace. In so doing we will discuss our educational methodology across both graphic design and new media design fields.

The idea that theory can be engaged in any pure research sense still remains alien to many designers and academics alike. Conventionally, design theory is seen as a valuable tool when treated as an applied methodology. Rick Poynor, in his introduction to Lupton and Miller’s Design, Writing, Research, declares that the authors are interested in theory “not as an end in itself but for the ways it can be related to the artefacts and practices of design” (p.ix). There remains a reactive notion that theory is of little value on its own — as though theory can exist in isolation from practice, or that theory is indeed not a form of practice itself.

Design theory is a catch-all term used to encompass any critical thinking that occupies a metaposition to producing physical products indexed to the terms, “design work”, “output”, or simply “design”. So we find the label “design theory” including for Poynor, for example, “post-modernism, social questions, historical context, and so on”. Theory is a carrybag into which is tossed among various ideas, -isms, concepts and thoughts that can then be “welded” to graphic design products “in a concrete and vivid way”. This is a notion of theory as value-added service. We end up with a split between theory and design which defeats the role of theory as a critical and analytical part of the design business or education program.

We argue that it is a false economy (and one that is not reflected in the professional environment) to have such an oppositional split between theory and practice or studies and production. It is also somewhat ironical that design departments are often the last ones to take seriously the role of theory given that design can be argued to impact on a wide range of other professional media such as film, theatre and art, all of which have such strong theoretical and critical histories. This is partly due to the internal resistance of designers to think of their work as open
to rigorous analysis in the same way as the fine arts have been.

"Design", like advertising, is often thought of as outside the analytical loop. The persistence which the utilitarian thinking attached to "good" and "bad" design has not helped the situation. Design criticism in turn has tended to fall into a binary opposition: between the so-called "positive" method, linked to examining a designer's intentions and strategies adhered too, and the "negative" method that focuses on finding good and bad points in a design job. Both approaches are limited and fall short of providing a rigorous and flexible theoretical model for the analysis of design.

This is why the ground has shifted from a dependence on psychological, aesthetic and behavioural models of making sense of visual language structures to the cultural studies field of poststructuralism that questions such notions of positive and negative readings, artist intentions as indicators of success or failure and, indeed, preoccupations with correct readings. Philosophers and critics such as Jean Baudrillard, Francois Lyotard, Frederic Jameson and Hal Foster have all helped raise the importance of design as a worthy topic for critical analysis. Magazines such as Eye, Emigre, and anthologies like the Looking Closer series have also gone a long way to enriching the design field.

Yet, graphic design as a discipline is still struggling to be recognised within the wider academic community -- just look at the small number of PhDs in the field or the poor recognition design grant applications get in relation to science and engineering applications, for example. Ironically, design is no less engaged with visual communication than is film, for instance, and is more socially pervasive than the visual arts. It is the rapid rise of interactive multimedia that will by default drag graphic design into the critical sphere of theoretical research. Students and academics within universities and colleges see digital new media as a mix of traditional media (along with their theoretical and historical baggage) and so feel more comfortable in addressing new media in terms of film, video, photography, sound and literature.

Of course, in many ways new media requires new theoretical models and approaches to analysing its products and discourses. This process has only just begun. Even so we now find web design and multimedia design courses springing up within arts and communications degrees around the world. Such courses are both feeding off the rising flood of magazines, books and conferences devoted to these new media technologies and also desperately keen to legitimise themselves as discipline fields complete with theory components at both undergraduate and
postgraduate levels. If this movement is to have any real educational value, and we would argue it does and should, then it will only occur if there are more critical and theoretically informed publications, conferences, books, web sites and courses established to debate and realise just what a new media culture and society might be. If there is to be an industrial benefit beyond a purely market driven response, then some widely held ideas about what design theory is and does need to be also more vigorously questioned.

Victor Margolin, in Design Discourse, puts forward the holistic idea that design is both art and science, process and product, disorder and order. The same rhetorical argument is often applied to creative advertising, that often called “mother” of graphic design. In both cases, the result is philosophically driven to the same cul de sac -- design and advertising end up standing for everything and nothing. If we analyse the discourse of design and advertising we can see a number of crucial differences that allow us to isolate ideas that impede the development of design as a discipline.

Advertising is amoral by nature — it is obscenely honest about its persuasive and seductive role in the marketplace. Advertising has now evolved to a point where the textual game engaged in by both reader and promoter is openly declared by both parties, and is even integral to the game of making sense of an ad. Even when advertising engages in political or community announcements, the propaganda role is minimised by the advertising declaration. In the age of lifestyle management choices, seduction is much more effective then coercion.

Design discourse, on the other hand, still remains riddled with moral codes and ideals. Modernist designers feel duty-bound to trot out arguments on how we should live our lives and see the world, by design. Working out a Golden Mean order out of chaos, clearing out ‘white space’ from among the tangled weeds of graphic information, or laying down laws for best practice in typography in a digital age of grunge polymorphic realities, often constitutes the driving ideological force behind what is called “design theory”.

In pedagogic terms, the idea that the practice of innovative design can exist within a world free of theory is misguided. However, the study of design history and analysis of design products and professional practices can and do work without having to actually produce concrete design outcomes. Providing students with subjects that directly engage theoretical, critical and
analytical ideas and strategies in tandem with production tasks can lead to a more critically informed practice. The Cartesian circuit of thinking and doing (mind and body split) applied to educational programs tend to reinforce the notion that good designers are born (with talent) not grown or that ‘thinkers’ are not ‘doers’. Our approach at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels is to analyse and criticise the material production of design products within the products’ cultural, historical, political and social contexts.

“Design” as a discipline, not unlike cultural studies, film or visual arts, incorporates theoretical ideas and concepts from other philosophical movements to form a hybrid theoretical approach. The distinguishing features of design theory therefore relate to those aspects of current critical theory across fields including semiotics, psychoanalysis, philosophy, feminism, history, aesthetics and linguistics. However, such a theory will only make sense to academics, students and designers in the industry if it can function in a real work environment. The beauty of such a theoretical movement is that it is flexible enough to move with the times, yet critically rigorous in its focus on its objects of study and production.

The interdisciplinary approach now so much in favour throughout the arts faculties has been used by designers for years out of necessity (through its avoidance of formalising a cannon of texts or unique pedagogical line to tow). The resultant overlap of interests between designers and engineers, educators, film makers, sound and video artists is strongly evident in the growth of sub disciplines in digital media arts. We now teach web and interactive multimedia design, collaborate with sound, video, film makers and graphic artists. In a sense, design departments are truly multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary in nature, operating as a set of plugins or modules each designed to perform specific functions within the same academic program.

Teaching design within this mixed diet of digital and analog environments means that staff and students must be technologically multiskilled in operating hardware and software, yet equally, if not more skilled in research methods, concept development, project management and art direction. Our design graduates will have a number of careers that might migrate across the broad field of visual communication arts, media arts, advertising, public relations and other industrial contexts.

From our surveys of graduating students, it is clear that most students are now working on a project basis rather than
occupying any one job for any length of time. This is particularly
the case with web and multimedia design. Graphic designers are
also beginning to feel the forces of outsourcing and freelance
consultancy particularly in directions taken by major government
and corporate clients. A student may have a vision of being a
graphic designer yet after graduating may find that the
marketplace needs competent critical web designers and so on.
Taking this into account we must provide a mix of production
and studies skills relevant to a number of career options within a
globalised economic environment. In short, we must rethink how
we teach as well as what we teach to a wider market (often
internationally based) with diverse needs and expectations.

Our strategy is to place production skills in a context that
recognises the theoretical, historical, cultural and social
consequences and implications of designing products for specific
audiences. There are many other educational institutions and short
private courses offering specific computer software and "how­
to-do-it" courses in web publishing or desktop publishing.

As a university course we see our role less as trainers of
software but more as sites for the critical and innovative
exploration of design as a communication process and cultural
practice. It is the "how, where and why" rather than the "what"
questions that increasingly interest us as academics and
professional designers. As the economic and temporal pressures
to produce pastiche versions of fashionably successful design
solutions grows ever stronger, we find that students need even
more the critical space and time to experiment, to make wonderful
mistakes and to try out radical solutions to given briefs.

Students see the value in sharpening their ability to come
up with new approaches rather than in following the latest
'stylistic permanent wave'. It is therefore crucial to integrate
sufficient space and time into the teaching program for student
presentations to the class, critical feedback sessions and peer group
discussions. Wherever possible industry experts should be
couraged to come in to provide critical comments on student
work. It is also necessary to reward conceptual risk-taking rather
than faithful reproductions of well-worn or cliched design styles.

Of course, as the adage goes, every artist begins with
pastiche, and students in their first encounter with new design
ideas, usually want and need to try and replicate the "look" if not
the philosophical approaches of the "-ism" studied. And this is
an important phase of the creative process and should be given
ample room to be performed. However, it is only after students
have worked through these technical and conceptual exercises that the real work begins. By the end of their undergraduate degrees students should have a portfolio of completed work that demonstrates a bold manipulation of a wide variety of styles and critical approaches rather than a repetition of any one design doxa.

At the postgraduate level, design and new media students face a task that is both exciting and slightly daunting. The expectation is that postgraduate students should be researching and analysing design issues and push the conceptual and creative boundaries of the media they are exploring. With a rapidly changing set of technological, cultural and industrial boundaries surrounding new media, this task is all the harder for students. Even so, the reward for performing the task well is high -- a good job in an exciting creative field.

The need for highly skilled postgraduate students in this expanding field is great at the moment and the dynamic nature of the jobs open to our students across community, corporate and government sectors, means that the commitment shown by students grappling with the latest versions of software, new techno-languages and industrial practices, pays off.

A significant challenge for educators like us in this discipline area, is to try and keep up with these technological changes while keeping our minds on the research and critical focus. It is all too easy to get sidetracked into chasing the tail of techno-evolutionary quests. At the end of the day, it is the ability of students, and staff, to find creative solutions to design problems, that adds a high currency value and flexibility to their degrees and courses.

REFERENCES


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