Writing & Research in Graphic Design Discipline

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Abstract

We don't really come across many research papers or writing on graphic designing. While searching for research papers on graphic designing, one may come across questions like- Why do graphic designers not contribute to design research? Do they not have the apt knowledge of design research? If they don't have the knowledge, then who has? Why does design faculty not have knowledge of research paper writing? If they cannot contribute to the design research, who will? How will today's students learn this skill? Every publication and printed material regarding design should involve research and writing. Problems within pedagogical approaches, graphic design studies and the expansion of written research in graphic design should be explored. Analysis, formulation of ideas and problems with solutions should benefit the growth of the individual designer and the graphic design discipline. Modifications in academic graphic design programs, faculty development and an analysis of design publications can help design research.

Keywords: Design Education, Design Theory, Design Methodology, Design Creativity

1. Introduction

Many professional designers, design faculty and students often lack the knowledge on the importance of written research. However, writing for design is essential. In contemporary world, the role of a graphic designer is not limited to only one domain. It is incorporating theory and detailed information with creativity in an otherwise practice-based discipline. An excerpt from the *First Things First 2000 Manifesto* reads, "We propose a reversal of priorities in favor of more useful, lasting and democratic forms of communication - a mind shift away from product marketing and toward the exploration and production of a new kind of meaning" [1]. Written research is an apt method for the generation of a relevant design. Advancement and

contemporary changes within academic graphic design studies that advance the level of written design research can lead to consequential changes in the design profession.

2. Method

A qualitative approach was taken to establish an analysis of information from various written resources. A series of questions related to the problems within written research in graphic design were proposed such as problems existing in design education, faculty, publication and students, potentials, observations and actions taken in design education. Lastly, the importance of research in graphic designing was discussed. Advancement and contemporary changes within academic graphic design studies are summarized in the discussions section. The findings help in analyzing the reasons why changes in academic graphic design studies towards written research are necessary.

3. Results

The following section examines current academic graphic design studies, faculty development, publications and students' perception in relation to written research for design with the importance of design writing and research.

3.1 Problems in current academic graphic design studies

Academic graphic design studies lay the foundation for the students learning graphic designing. Unfortunately, there are not many academic records or research paper available for students which motivate innovation and inspiration for young minds. The courses available today are more projects oriented than motivating students for independent learning. "Many students now leave undergraduate school with impressive portfolios that demonstrate well-developed formal sensibilities, particularly in typography and computer skills. The downside of this success is a tendency for these graduates to regard education as a passive process, spoon fed from teacher to student and complete in four years, rather than lifelong self-initiated learning. This attitude can lead to a plateau of competence — resulting in the predictably slick work we see around the world — and discourages further growth in challenging graduate study" [2]. Research, writing or theories are the words seldom used in the curriculum of various graphic designing courses or programs. "Rarely does one encounter any course called 'design theory' " [3]. Undoubtedly, these programs prepare students with many artistic and technical skills but there is a lack in research and independent thought process.

Writing in some programs plays a trivial role in students composing and communicating research and ideas and this important aspect is not only taught to the students. "A problem yet to be corrected is the persistence of many small mediocre graduate programs attached to large (and equally mediocre) undergraduate university programs, in which graduate study is largely a remedial extension of insufficient undergraduate work" [4]. The resources for teaching are not available which makes writing or doing design research even more difficult. There are very few universities in the world that offer a PhD in Design, Graphic Design or Graphic Communications. Furthermore, there is not clear understanding of what a PhD in Graphic Design should actually entail. While most universities focus on training that teaches graphic communications skills, technical applications and practice in the printing industry, a Doctorate is the highest level of university degree usually awarded for a lengthy piece of original written research. The two important words here are: research and writing. Does it implement that faculty, students and/ or industry professionals are only focusing on the short term goal of creating technical skills and not communicating the ideas and expressing the learnt technical skills. Shouldn't the PhD program focus on written communication and graphic research? Shouldn't the technical skills come from workshops, undergraduate and continuing education courses, rather than from a PhD?

3.2 Challenges Facing Design Faculty, Publications and Students' Perception

Since many design faculties have no writing or research experience and a limited number of PhD programs in graphic designing, it is inevitable that the lack of written knowledge is trickled down to the young students. Design programs cannot evolve unless faculty members do. Self learning and faculty development are utmost important to integrate writing into academic design studies. Ellen Lupton addresses this issue in her article *Writing 101: Visual or Verbal?*, "How are graphic designers learning to write? Since the late 1970s, a movement known as Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC) has argued that writing should be taught in every course on campus, not just in specialized composition courses. Because each discipline—from art to engineering—has its own standards and conventions, faculty in each field should be teaching its own practitioners how to write. Yet few design educators have the time or confidence to load this duty on to their studio courses" [5]. Faculties that wish to change the current scenario may also run into problems on not finding enough and proper resources on design research. Graphic design sections in books stores and libraries discuss only about the technical aspect of a design. The idea behind the design and the creative process behind the visual output are often missing. These publications are just the visual examples of a design for reference with little or no explanations. They lack any substantial content that provides any insight into the

designs themselves. Unfortunately, design students are drawn to the visual trends and techniques rather than its functionality and meaning. The available publications do a little to enhance the interest of students in reading. The books are written with the purpose of giving only small amount of information. Students are left to gain information from content deprived publications. Scott Carlson in his writing, *The Net Generation Goes to College* addresses young students as "…smart but impatient. They expect results immediately. Raised amid a barrage of information, they are able to juggle a conversation on Instant Messenger, a Web-surfing session, and an iTunes playlist while reading Twelfth Night for homework. Whether or not they are absorbing the fine points of the play is a matter of debate" [6].

3.3 Potential and Prospect in Academic Programs

Though are problems related to graphic research exists, there are convincing aspects of academic programs, faculty development, design publications and design students that can change things. Steven Heller explains that, "Theory provides the basis with which to ask questions not only about the work, but also through work. And if nothing else, what design lacks in terms of interesting work these days in not necessarily more visual variety, but rather more provocative questions and polemical answers" [7]. He refers to such question-asking as problem-posing education and states that it, "…centralizes the student as an active agent in the formulation of projects that question what we, as a profession, already know as well as things that we might never had considered. In a problem-posing education, students must be able to critically examine their world and their role within it. This means that a critical disposition on the part of the student and teacher is necessary to fully capture the radicalism of the proposition" [8]. Writing and design should be taught to go hand-in-hand, not as separate identities. Introducing writing into academic studies through problem-posing and writing in design courses are two means of implementing change. Each student design project can be initiated with some form of written research. The writing projects for students don't need to have thousand-word papers rather; it can be initiated through shorter and less formal writing tasks.

3.4 Potential and Prospect for Positive Action in Faculty Development

Is it necessary for all design faculties to become experts on writing? It is not. In fact, it should be a conscious decision and effort from design faculties to indulge oneself in research writing. But all design faculties should appreciate and embrace the positive and significance writing has on design. Workshops, lectures and tutorials can help design faculty to build a positive with students for design research. Design faculty can bring in outside support by introducing design-writing experts, editors and researchers into the classroom.

3.5 Potential and Prospect in Today's Design Students

Today's students are much more technically advanced than their earlier generations. They may have a complete new idea of design research. The focus of faculty for inspiring such students for design research should be placed upon their strengths rather than their weaknesses. They may even have better and more concrete idea than the faculty on design research. The faculty should encourage such ideas and implement different methods to create a friendly environment wherein students can incorporate their ideas in research writing. The students of today's generation has a desire to do good and is referred to as, "people (who) want to change the world…They want their time working for an employer to mean more than just helping 'The Man' pay his mortgage…They want to be part of an organization that is aligned with their personal values" [9]. Today's generation is not only interested in earning a paycheck but also to contribute to society through their designs. Written research encourages students to implement their thoughts. It provides them with the knowledge on the local and global issues that they want to make a difference in.

3.6 The Importance of Design Written Research

"Research is not…some pedagogic make-work or punishment. It is rather a necessary dimension in undergraduate and graduate programs" [10]. "Training students to produce effective research is a positive addition to their skill-set. How they are taught to research so it enhances their physical output as it expands their creative freedom is the next big academic challenge" [11]. Apart from benefiting students in communicating ideas better, written design research is important to aid the practice of graphic design. "This impasse between theory and practice in graphic design must be bridged, not for the sake of theory, but for the sake of practice. However, the challenge is to both theory and practice. For theory, it means engaging in the making of graphic design, not simply a means for critical reflection about the work, but a critical intervention in work. For practice, it means rethinking the very definitions and limitations of graphic design, not simply to add a little intellectual glamour to an everyday practice nor as a rally cry to colonize other areas of creative endeavor, but to finally understand graphic design as a form of social practice" [12]. Such actions are important to establish graphic design as a credible and reputable profession and discipline. It implements that designers are also writers.

What works in favour of design research writers is that the research and writing process is not so different than the research and design process. The challenges of writing are also similar to those of design. "Ideas and spoken words are ephemeral. As soon as they are expressed they begin to fade in the minds of listeners. To preserve them, words and ideas need to be recorded…. Once captured, however, they ossify.

An idea written down becomes dissociated from the mind that produced it….Writing then, is a continual struggle to find ways of keeping one's ideas and intentions, while also preserving them in a form that allows them to be stored, copied and communicated to a distant audience" [13]. Like design, "We undertake research when we wish to explore an idea, probe an issue, solve a problem, or make an argument that compels us to turn to outside help. We then seek out, investigate, and use materials beyond our personal resources" [14]. Furthermore, "Learning how to write a research paper, then, can help prepare you for assignments in your professional career. It is difficult to think of a profession that would not require you to consult sources of information about a specific subject, to combine this information with your ideas, and to present your thoughts, findings, and conclusions effectively" [15].

4. Discussions

A lack of written research in graphic design is disturbing but fortunately, change can be made through teaching methods such problem-posing education. Writing and research can be integrated into programs through: projects, workshops, lectures and seminars. Even faculties without a background in written research are able to advance their teaching to obtain more meaningful design solutions from their students. Students can be encouraged to write upon understanding how writing can empower their design projects.

5. Conclusion

Though it has been challenging, initiatives have been made in design research and writing. Written research can drive the graphic design discipline forward from being mere aesthetically inclined to a more significant piece of work. Design writing and research will further establish the discipline of graphic design as an intellectual process. Changes within academic graphic design studies can prepare student designers to be more than visual artists, technicians or craftsmen.

6. Acknowledgement

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