

A Visual Narrative Teaching Model in Graphic Design

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Abstract

This paper explores a teaching model that situates the student in a visual narrative environment that reveals the complexities of real world situations. The model simulates follows the professional process of a graphic designer and client as they engage with the wide range of issues and skills needed to create a corporate identity.

The teaching package interface is a graphic novel that utilises a flexible mode of delivery to internal and external graphic design students. It builds upon a preference that most design students have for visual-spatial learning by exemplifying the visual aspects and situating the issues within a context of a character-driven story.

The package encourages deeper learning by interactive involvement, multimedia and parallel exercises to transform the narrative into knowledge. This package showcases a model of design practice that enables discussion to assist students to form an understanding of the essential skills.

Conference theme:

Shifts in art + design practice and technology, defining new ways of working

1., Introduction

Changes in technology and the underlying economic constraints of students have called into question the efficiency of established methods of studying design while also creating opportunities for developing new methods for student involvement. This paper documents the search for a match between the potential of on-line learning with a form of teaching that can deliver content, engagement and an understanding of professionalism and the processes in graphic design.

I teach a blend of internal and external on-line students in graphic design and the teaching package that I will discuss is a second year subject 'Design for Industry' which is focused on teaching corporate identity, professional practice and the process of design. It has modules on corporate identity issues and logo design as well as on design issues such as the client dynamic, briefs and quoting and printing. Utilising the influence of practice-based learning, I plan to focus on emulating a realistic experience of the process of design and the professional practice of being a designer.

The project that I propose creates an online environment following an invented narrative of a designer and client working together to resolve a corporate identity for an eco tourism resort. It will situate the student within a professional process going beyond the visual artefacts to an experience of the thoughts, emotions and process which is enhanced with interactivity and feedback to promote deeper learning.

2., Background: Changes in Graphic Design Teaching

Graphic design education has grown out of the craft paradigm of master/apprentice studio-based learning where the student observes the master and is guided directly by him/her. This model has floundered with the proliferation of the computer as the indispensable tool for graphic design. It has led to each student having a complete individualised production studio that is their communication device, research tool, entertainment system and core to their lifestyle in their own home environment where they feel more comfortable in exploring their design solutions. Students feel a major restriction when having to work on different computers and within time restraints. Studio-based learning seems illogical and inflexible to a majority of students who would much rather work within their own environment and in their own time than in structured classes.

With the expansion of net-based communication such as blogs, forums and Facebook encouraged by the university, the students are more inclined to learn by themselves or with the assistance of their peers. With peer feedback they can obtain the gratification of near immediate response that they expect within their normal communication use of SMS and online chat. Peer learning and self motivated learning are very important to gain independence and individual solutions but in the early years it sometimes creates limitation of possibilities through lack of software knowledge or focusing too much on the outcome rather than the opportunity to learn by exploration of the possibilities.

A compounding issue is the financial necessity for students to engage in long hours of paid part-time work that has made flexible delivery increasingly important, but has created an internal student who works in a very similar way to those in the external or distance mode of learning. This has taken the student further from assisted learning to self-initiated exploration that may perpetuate inefficient or superficial processes.

3., Previous Teaching Materials

Over the past eight years I have been experimenting with different approaches to building distance-teaching packages trying to maintain some of the qualities of studio-based teaching without the face-to-face aspect. I have trialed audio and image enhanced podcast lectures, screen-capture video software tutorials and assessment methods, resource and problem based learning and blog-based learning journals and I have been considering the nature of next step in teaching resources.

The subject that I am looking to improve is focused on professional practice and building a corporate identity where the students explore the designing of logos and create identities from a brief with content modules on clients, ethics, design process, brain storming printing/paper and quoting.

4., Case Study Teaching

The difficulty in this subject is little material available which documents the way designers work. Most books specifically on graphic design do not provide much background but focus on the results of the design process. They lack background information on the struggles and the influences of the client that perpetuate the dominance of style over thinking in design. The best form to deliver this sense of detail seems to be something akin to the case study, which “has been widely used in other disciplines and it can be used effectively in design” (Breslin and Buchanan, 2008, p. 36).

Case studies are used extensively in law, medicine and the social sciences to emulate real world situations and get the students to apply previous learning to a specific situation and generate discussion on the multiple factors leading to decision-making. “An essential component of designing an effective learning environment is that it reflects all the complexities of the real world in which the learners will function after the planned learning activities” (Kanuka n.d.). A case study model allows skills and knowledge to be applied in context and “prepare them for the diverse and complex problems they will encounter within their profession” (Kanuka n.d.).

The debate surrounding the delivery of the brief to students examines avenues to pursue and aspects to be aware of but without specific full process examples it is difficult to generate further meaningful discussion. “Cases present solutions to past problems that may compensate for learner’s lack of experience and may help learners develop an understanding of concepts and strategies useful in similar situations” (Bennett, B. Harper, B & Hedberg, J. 2002. p. 4). Currently students seem to establish their own individual process without a strong model to guide them.

Design is a multi-discipline pursuit and students should be informed of the pressures, influences and problem solving issues as they move through their studies to go beyond mere visual solution towards a professional level of integrated problem solving. Bennett et al. reinforces this point when she writes “...case based learning involves complex, authentic situations in which the learner (usually a novice) must learn to think like a practitioner (an expert). This reflects a view that learning is a process moving towards greater expertise.” (Bennett, Harper and Hedberg. 2002, p. 2)

The appeal of situating learning in a case study type environment is that issues that are normally isolated can be matched to problem solving and provided in context of the real world situations. Instead of focusing upon assessable outcomes of skill acquisition and visual resolve, this type of focus to learning directs towards understanding of the multi-faceted issues and processes for a career.

The introduction of case study structure in UNSW (industrial design) concluded that it was helpful in “providing a structure upon which design decision-making can be based; it also makes the overall

thinking associated with the design process more apparent and transparent” (Green n.d. p. 1).

Teaching is episodic and normally a topic driven exploration of projects and aspects in the field of study. A detailed case study can give access to the cognitive processes and influences on the designer through all aspects, from client contact to quoting, brain storming, ethical issues and designer frustrations etc. that prepares the student to the real life situation and methods of coping with it.

A case study can address the difficulty in teaching ‘how to design’ which is extremely hard to communicate and quite individualistic but fundamental to the student’s ability to be successful. This is especially important in early years of study where it is more important to have a good design process than a great result. The case study can provide a specific design process model to discuss approaches in design and the possible alternatives in process.

5., Learning preference focus to the teaching package

A large scale, eight university study of engineering students in the USA identified that an average of 84% of their students were predominately visual learners (Felder and Brent). I have also identified the characteristics in my students that allows me to utilise the extensive research in focusing teaching materials directly to their preference and connect students to their natural mode of thinking and learning.

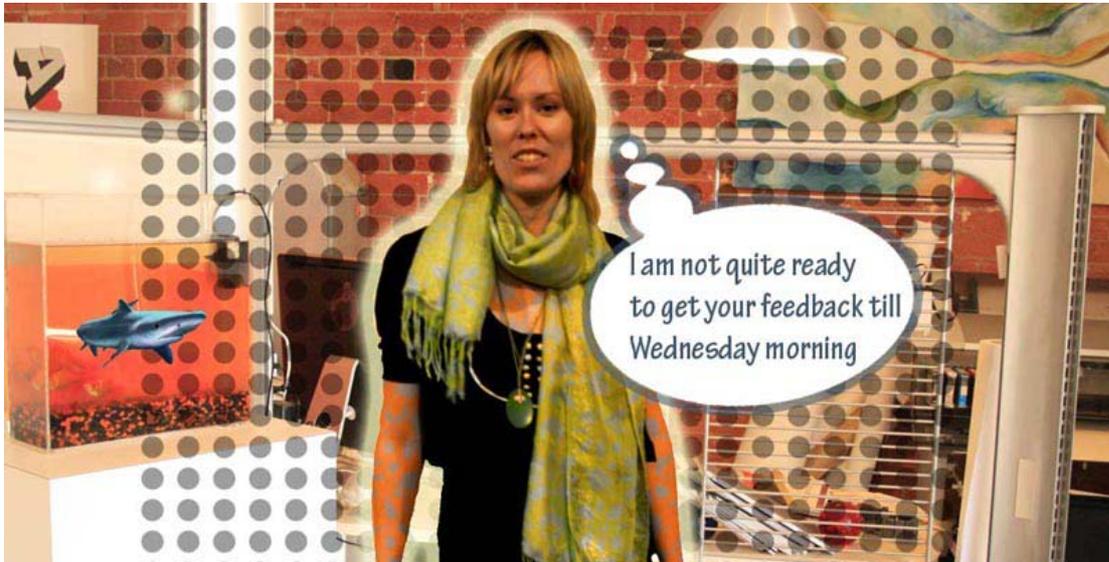
Those who choose a career as a visual designer are often visual-spatial learners and these students do not benefit from traditional verbal lectures, rote learning, verbal presentation skills and time based exams. As Silverman stated “visual-spatial learners may dislike school because of the over emphasis on lecturing rote memorization, drill and practice exercises, and the lack of sufficient stimulation of their powerful abstract visual reasoning abilities. (Silverman n.d, p. 3)”

The current research has identified “the undue emphasis given to sequential logic, and current theories of higher order thinking have endorsed a definition of higher order thinking which includes both creative (intuitive) and logical reasoning components” (McLoughlin and Krakowski. 2001, p. 4). My teaching has tended to follow the Silverman example because of my own preference for visual-spatial learning but it encourages me to direct the teaching this way while looking for a balance to creative and logical approaches put forward by McLoughlin and Krakowski.

Silverman (1989) established a list of techniques for the teaching of visual-spatial learners that defines a direction to my teaching program. She suggests the use very visual methods in explaining, building metaphors to connect ideas to visual parallels and the strategy to “(l)et them observe others before attempting new tasks (and) show examples of the finished product” (Silverman 1989, p.22). This defines the basis of what a visually rich case study is designed to do. The teaching package will also present overviews, give structure and is a continuous example that visual-spatial learners can ‘attach’ information to. This will be reinforced by visual design exercises outside the environment to encourage deeper learning. Added to this, the encouragement to search for creative solutions and build

personal design process models should give the stimulation and resolve an environment that Silverman proposes will encourage visual learners to flourish.

6., Resolution: The search for the form



Visual-spatial learning preferences, real-life simulation and deep learning of a case study defines the intended teaching package. I then turned to the search for an appropriate form to create the environment that would enhance the content. To align with the authentic learning model, the environment should be rich in emotional and visual cues that can give a sense of suspension of belief. Possibly the best and most popular form to do this is video, though the production time, costs and complications make it a difficult choice. The students certainly have a rapport with film but also an expectation of quality, which if not reached may break the suspension of belief and the student will find it more annoying than immersive. It is also very hard to modify and add things to the educational package in this form.

The second form that I investigated was an on-line digital comic that would give an opportunity for wonderful and unconventional visual extravagances, multimedia opportunities and interactivity. That form has a connection to the visual design world and is a good conveyer of information in written and spoken word, music, images and animations that seemed an ideal medium. It has a sense of teaching by its own visual nature in solving the picture frame and multimedia choices as well as a great conveyer of content. Yang states “the five identified strengths of comics - that comics are motivating, visual, permanent, intermediary, and popular - can be harnessed in practically any subject and at practically any grade level” (Yang 2003). This being said, it gives me confidence in the decision to go

in that direction over video where it might not be quite as immersive but compensates with greater interactions and attraction as well as being easily retraced.

These obvious strengths are reinforced by Chris Wilson's comment that "Comic literature is unique in that it combines text and art, which makes use of Multiple Intelligences" (and the) "two modes of input allow students to grasp meaning quicker and more efficiently" (Wilson 2008). Moving from here into movement and sound as well is a potent tool that I feel has been under-utilised maybe because of its production time and skill that it takes to build it.

When investigating the look and feel of the comic I initially examined animated simulated characters that use the computer to speak out the dialogue but the visual and audio quality was not representational for the quality that I saw as acceptable in a visual design course. It did give a sense of personal interaction but I thought I might be able to achieve a greater visual outcome by doing it myself.

I started sketching characters but for speed and a better rapport to be built up between the students and the characters I decided to use photography. I investigated a combination of filters to emulate the comic feel and made a rich visual styling. This graphic outcome allowed me to be able to manipulate and re-compose images and backgrounds and experiment with the visual dynamics that can be used to carry the emotional impact of the story.

7., Digital graphic novel is the message

The famous McLuhan phrase 'The Medium is the Message' might apply here, not to reflect that the medium of the comic/graphic novel as an important statement about graphic design but to infer that the movement towards this use of the popular street culture sends a message about what it is to learn and how education has been refocusing for student accessibility. The idea, that the educational package is aligning the 'message' or content to a more accepted cultural pursuit of the students is probably more to the point. Federman (2004, p. 2) explained "that it is not the content or use of the innovation, but the change in inter-personal dynamics that the innovation brings with it". I am hoping that the change that this generates will create a mesh of creative ideas between the students and lecturer.



The medium of the comic/graphic novel, being something unusual in higher educational teaching, might instil a welcome sense of breaking down barriers that students may have to text based instructional material and open up the opportunity for enjoyment of the learning experience. A digital comic has a recognised form that brings an anticipation that is based on extravagant expectations of visual dynamics. We know that the form has structure and expectation, the use of it as an educational tool may not be that innovative but it can be enhanced by multimedia opportunities.

8., Multimedia

The sequence of images is important to the visual-spatial learner but learning needs a structure which multimedia can produce in the many layers of visual messages, audio and interactivity with feedback. Mayer states that students “actively engage in cognitive processing to construct a coherent mental representation of their experiences...(including) organizing incoming information and integrating incoming information with other knowledge” (Mayer 2001, p. 50). Mayer maybe right but I feel that without reflection this process could loose interest for the student. This teaching package will have multiple choice interactions set out throughout the package, not to test the retention but to foreground the active learning in context to other things they know so that they can reflect and make sense of the learning. An example of this is a question relating to the reasoning for the designer’s motivation to take on the project with options such as “It is something I really believe in” then with a feedback of “Passion and design are good bedfellows”.

Another section instigates reflection by identifying the stress and pressure to resolve the design by asking a question of the student as to what to do. One of the options was to “Just leave it now for the

weekend” with the feedback of “It is great to leave the subconscious to do some of the work”. These questions have no right or wrong answer but are designed to get participation in building up their own design process and methods of coping.

One of the main opportunities of multimedia is its interactive nature and I had planned to have multiple paths of choose-your-own-adventure decision-making leading to a number of alternate outcomes. Branching options would have been at critical decision making points like font choice, colour direction and then shape etc and I think it could be very appealing though it didn't seem achievable to include this because of the complexity that this project already aimed for. So, I have created exercises that get the student to explore different avenues and alternative outcomes taking on different aspects and weighing importance in the project.

9., Integration into the subject

The graphic novel will cover the first five weeks of the second year subject generating discussions each week on the issues and skills involved. Running parallel to that will be five exercises that ask to utilise the scenario, their new knowledge to research and pursue alternative design outcomes. This will bring the student out of the comfort zone of drifting with the story and make them engage in the deeper learning of analysing the decision of the designer in the scenario and create their own personal responses. Exploring alternative models of how to design with discussion of options of the validity of the processes has been hard to generate without this teaching tool.

The experience of watching a detailed process and having designed alternatives will give them some understanding of what is involved and how to go about designing corporate identity with some confidence.

The second half of the subject will ask the students to transform their new knowledge to a completely different corporate identity project that will utilise their established design process and understanding of the techniques to solve the brief.

10., Conclusion

I see the form and structure of the proposed graphic novel in the case study style narrative as very appealing in educational potential to expose the real life issues to the students. The online graphic novel seems an engaging medium to focus the visually orientated students to an understanding of the design process and the design reality as well as creating an integrated environment to stimulate students.

This project will be tested by students who have previously completed the subject to gauge reactions, feedback and understanding as to how it differs in possible learning outcomes and engagement to the lecture mode in the previous teaching delivery. The next time the subject is taught, I will investigate

the teaching model and how it can be expanded into other subjects in promoting deeper learning and its ability to prepare students for the industry.

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