

Research in Graphic Design Processes: A Pedagogical Case Study

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Students' comprehension and utilization of process skill sets are essential. This provides them with methods to explore visual communication problems in ways they may not have otherwise considered. Additionally a focus on process provides a foundation for critical thinking and in-depth analysis essential for the practice of design. A key aspect of process integration into graphic design curriculum is for students to understand and utilize divergent and convergent thinking. This is central to good visual problem solving. These processes are applicable to both conceptual and formal development. The following problem was developed collaboratively for a 4-credit sophomore level course entitled, Graphic Design: Processes at Oregon State University. The emphasis of this 10-week course is to identify and practice a range of creative problem solving processes, informed by contemporary and historical theories and practice of graphic design.

Keywords: Graphic-Design, Process, Methods

The problem is presented in stages, promoting students to practice divergent and convergent processes within the duration of the problem. By exploring visually, through concrete visual studies, students build self-confidence in their observational, conceptual, and visual language skills. We also incorporate the theory of semiotics as a method of sign generation and analysis.

Problem Brief

Escaping from the expected is often difficult. Initial ideas and concepts for communication tend to be very literal and obvious. (A path of little resistance) Although conventional forms of communication may serve the obvious, they seldom function to engage the viewer in the process of meaning creation and therefore do not deeply resonate with the audience. To discover visual concepts and forms beyond the obvious requires processes that can realize unique and unexpected relationships. By developing a confidence and faith in one's own process, as opposed to a reliance on convention, will allow one to disclose a unique solution to any design problem. The goals of this problem are to understand and apply methods and models for expanding one's use of visual representation and processes for visual communication. You will be asked to employ various methodologies that are investigative and directive for the generation of multiple concrete visual studies. A continued practice and utilization of semiotic principles of icon, index, and symbol in sign generation and analysis is encouraged. This problem has three phases. Each phase will address a distinct aspect of process. The beginning phase of the problem will emphasize a divergent exploration through the use of mind-mapping and a morphology of binary oppositions.

You are asked to select a hand tool that is used to perform a functional action and is small enough to carry to class with you. Bring the tool to all class meetings. This tool is your point of departure and catalyst for the problem.

Phase 1 one and a half weeks long

You are asked to create 100 - 4" x 4" visual studies using the following.

Process

Begin by using a free-write and a mind-map of the physical tangible qualities of your tool, the actions/functions associated with the use of your tool, and the context of your tool. (What does it do? What does it do it to? How does it do it?)

Explore visually using the morphology of binary oppositions from the list provided. Utilize all 40 pairs from the morphological table. (80 visuals) Create 10 binary opposition pairs yourself (20 visuals) for a total 100 visual explorations.

Each word from the morphology should serve as a guide for each visual study. The goal is not to communicate the word, but to use the word as a point of departure for exploration. These terms function both as conceptual and formal benchmarks for the expansion of ideas and concepts for the visuals. Avoid excessive evaluation in your divergent process. Work intuitively. Permit the visual studies to reveal many disparate possibilities (i.e. the tools physical qualities in relation to the word, the

tools action in relation to the word, the results of the tools actions in relation to the word, etc.) Explore all media and formal design principles to create the visuals.

Morphology of Binary Oppositions

1. color / gray
2. infinite / finite
3. masculine / feminine
4. order / chaos
5. organic / mechanical
6. original / copy
7. mortal / immortal
8. experimental / normative
9. science / art
10. modern / post-modern
11. construct / deconstruct
12. loud / quiet
13. liberal / conservative
14. lie / truth
15. diverge / converge
16. curvilinear / linear
17. specific / general
18. fast / slow
19. action / reaction
20. dimensional / flat
21. pragmatic / poetic
22. old / new
23. active / static
24. direct / indirect
25. closed / open
26. defined / undefined
27. funny / serious
28. sweet / sour
29. elated / dejected
30. awake / asleep
31. positive / negative
32. smooth / textured

- 33. fragmented / whole
- 34. entrance / exit
- 35. past / future
- 36. correct / incorrect
- 37. smart / dumb
- 38. intentional / unintentional
- 39. mind / spirit
- 40. local / global



The results of phase one are presented in the student gallery for critique and exhibition

Phase 2 half a weeklong

Modes of Expression

Disclosing Content through Analysis, Selection, and Editing.

Begin by examining the range of the visual language of your 100 studies. Create image juxtapositions and multiple image combinations that begin to communicate a message. Make observations of the signifying nature of your images (iconic, indexical, symbolic) in their relationships to each other. These groupings will determine the potential content and concept for further elaboration.

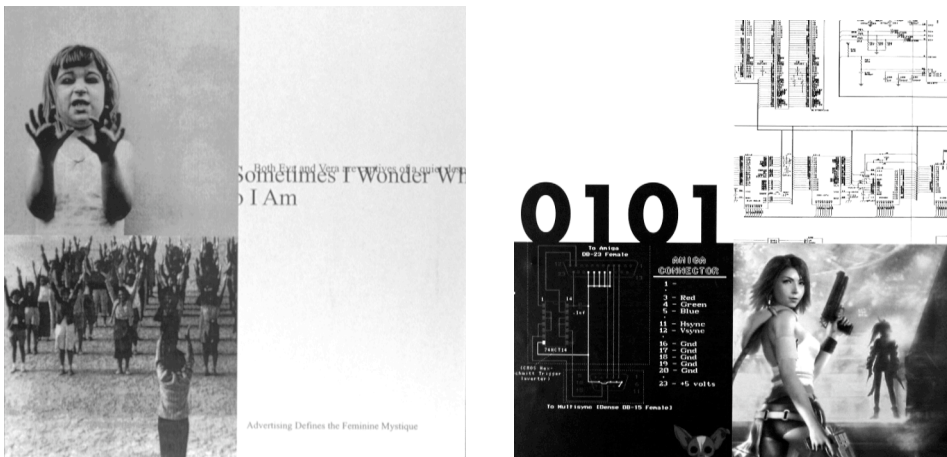
Define in writing the content and concept revealed in your observations for further exploration. (1 to 3 sentences—due next class period) Based on your preliminary content and concept directions, select, edit, and explore additional visual studies to create 3 groupings of 4 - 4"x4" images that communicate this content and concept through these three 3 different “modes of expression:”

Practical (pragmatic) a language-use that communicates information with clarity and directness. ¹

Poetic a language-use, which communicates by stimulating the imagination, evoking the viewer to participate in the experience, to have a greater awareness of the content and richness in meaning and understanding. ²

Persuasive (Hortatory) a language-use, that communicates with encouragement for a “stand” or a personal position (with ulterior motives?) as in advertising, propaganda, political speech...spin. ³

Each new grouping should address the communication objective of your preliminary content and concept directions through the distinct mode of communication. Your image selections can be altered and expanded through the use of cropping, substitution, addition, deletion, and other alteration operations.



Final Phase one week long

Communication and Sequential Form

Description

Communicate your content and concept defined in phase 2 through the use of visual sequencing in a 5 page, accordion fold book.

Learning Objectives

Understanding and application of visual sequencing.

Use of hierarchy – both conceptually (syntactic) and formally (semantic)

Demonstrating and successfully employing the principles of—balance, harmony, rhythm, repetition, hierarchy, movement, proportion, contrast and unity while communicating a particular message.

Creation of visual language based on concept.

Part to whole integration, working both conceptually and formally—Addressing functions of the individual page, a spread, and the whole unfolded book. (Word/image/page/whole integration.)

Further development of process skills by employing thinking skills—creative thinking, critical thinking, divergent and convergent thinking processes.

Criteria

5-page, 8" x 8" accordion folded format (full open size 8" x 40") One-sided printing only.

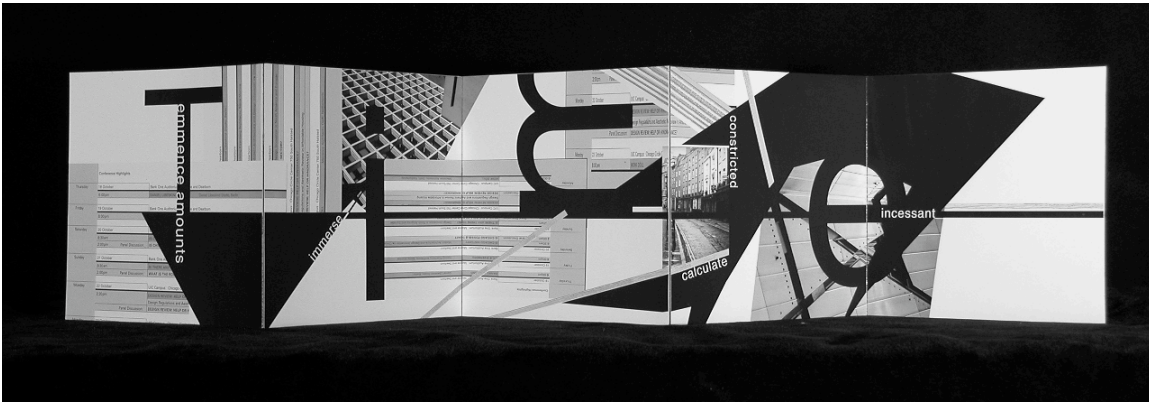
Scored and folded to 8" x 8" finished size.

Integrated imagery and text.

Process

Designate one of the modes from your phase 2 studies as the dominant content and concept for your communication. Utilize the other modes to assist the communication in a secondary manner. Creating a communication that functions on many different levels.





Problem Evaluation

By requiring extensive divergence in such a short time frame, the students could not over analyze their process. They had to employ and entrust themselves in intuitive methods for multiple image generations. In phase one, interim class critiques focused on divergence of conceptual approach and various mediums and methods used to create concrete visual studies. A rewarding aspect of the this stage of the process is for the class to install their 100 studies into a gallery space for a week, and to observe an entire room filled with thousands of images from floor to ceiling. This transformation of the gallery into a giant morphological table provides a forum for a two-fold objective. First, by being a practical method to present and discuss the results of this phase. Second, by generating a collective

and collaborative visual experience in the gallery, creating a place of continued observation, analysis, and synthesis for the student, their classmates and the public. The students, and other observers, see for themselves the strengths of a process that can reveal unique ideas through divergent methods.

In phase two, class discussion revolved around content definition, communication objectives, and the modes of expression. Students realized how they could readily create and shift meaning within a communication with subtle image and form changes. We also discussed as a group the differences of this convergent phase compared with the earlier divergent phase of the problem and how each phase supports each other towards a solution.

In the final phase of the problem, students readily oscillate between divergent and convergent processes. They focus on establishing a visual language and incorporate design principles to support the communication. In the final critique students were amazed by how far they had come from their original point of departure, and how quickly the components, that were developed earlier, could create the final piece. They began to see the benefits of clearly shifting back and forth between divergent and convergent modes of thought and process. We observed how capable the students are with clarification and communication of complex content. Their life experiences influence their process and the subsequent content by engaging them directly in a current cultural and visual context, making the results diverse and innovative. Students also further developed their skill in evaluating how images are communicating. Additionally revealed through the problem process is the students' understanding of image sequencing as a framework in preparation for future study in time based mediums.

Endnotes

1. Tom Ockerse, **Graduate Studio** (Rhode Island School of Design) 1993
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid.