

Collaborative Approaches to teaching Design History

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'Most Design schools and colleges do not offer history survey courses that tackle more than a superficial canonical timeline....and even if there were more trained educators, most schools claim they do not have the finances or underwriting to maintain a critical history program,' explains Heller (2005: 95). In graphic design, the outcome is not solely dependant on creating an eye pleasing artwork. A successful graphic design is judged by its solution and how the designer has balanced and interpreted the concept as well as how the audience responds to it and associates the concept with their own experiences. It is therefore essential that students have a sound understanding of not only the cultural context of their design and its meaning, but also an understanding of how this piece of work sits in a historical dialogue. 'While it is [sic] not the primary job of design educators to develop the next generation of social critics, why shouldn't designers be fluent in a critical language? For that matter, why shouldn't we encourage designers to become critical historians?' writes Heller (2005: 93). In 2010 the lecturers at the University of Canberra Graphic Design discipline (UCGD) set out to re-structure their Bachelor of Graphic Design course offering by creating an emphasis, not only on teaching practical graphic design skill sets, but in designing a course that would effectively infuse the historical context of design to inspire critical analysis and new research in the field. We have founded our study on Stephen Heller's influential text *The Education of a Graphic Designer* as it fits with the current educational paradigms set forth by the executive of the University of Canberra. The following paper presents an overview of design history education and reflects on the application of Heller's theories in creating a series of design history units for the UCGD course.

Literature Review:

According to Eskilson (2007:10): 'It is my belief that graphic design history has too often been presented through a parade of styles and individual achievements devoid of significant social context and that this tendency has obscured much of the richness and complexity of its development.' Effective teaching of graphic design involves the process of critique, peer review, research and practice-based learning (Heller 2003: xii) History units developed for UCGD therefore utilize a multi-dimensional approach. According to Biggs (1999: 87): 'Interacting with peers is usually more interesting than listening to lectures [and] increases self-concept, communication skills, self knowledge.' Based on this principle?, student interaction through critique and group work is a focus of the History units. 'The study of theory and of criticism should inform the process of creating graphic design and this study should affect the quality and content of the students work,' says Mayer (in Heller 2005:99). In all newly developed units in the UCGD course offering, critique and reflection are included to give the student a well-rounded approach to design thinking. All units in the UCGD Bachelor of Graphic Design will employ critical thinking and historical knowledge to solve problems. According to Biggs (1999:169): 'Assessment by portfolio leads students to see it as a powerful learning tool and as requiring them to be more divergent.' History units created for the

Bachelor of Graphic Design do not rely on traditional assessment of essays and lectures. UCGD lectures have attempted to create assessments that incorporate historical research through practical application for the creation of a design folio of work. Through the generation of a folio of practice-based and research activities, students leave the course with a significant resource with which they can draw upon in their future design career.

Heller (2005:95) proposes that design history units should address the following:

1. The historical timeline
2. How to research and analyze historical data,
3. How to discuss and critique this data,
4. How to integrate historical precedents into contemporary practice,
5. How to apply historical knowledge in critical analysis about contemporary design,
6. How graphic design historically intersects with other design and mass media,
7. How design and art historically influence one another
8. How design was influenced by social, cultural, and political, not to mention technological events of the past,
9. How history is collect and written and,
10. The language of criticism.

Based on these principles, Heller establishes a framework for applying the above to teaching design history. UCGD history units utilize Heller's (2005) framework as means to effectively integrate design, technology, research and critical analysis into the Graphic Design programme. The following goes through Heller's ten principles and relates their application to UCGD history units. As a measure of the success of these models, a student evaluation survey along with a teacher opinion survey was given at the end of each unit. The surveys give insight into the effectiveness of the delivery and the relevance of the unit contents.

1. Introduce students to the milestones and form-givers of graphic design through reading, lectures, exhibitions and anecdotal or oral histories:

In the UCGD history units students are introduced to milestones in graphic design through a sequential lecture series. A series of lectures are prepared by individual lecturers teaching in the programme and are based on a single historic period. The lectures are presented sequentially starting with a lecture on the meaning and symbolism present in indigenous design and its relation to contemporary Australian Design. As well as giving a survey of the time period and placing milestones within the context of design that was produced in that time period, the lectures relate the material to design principles. The following is an example of the lecture schedule from Graphic Design Principles and History 1 and how this relates to the timeline and principles of Graphic Design:

Lecture 1: Indigenous Design

Presented by the National Gallery of Australia, this lecture addressed the design principles of dominance and rhythm in the application of Indigenous artworks. Students took a field trip to the museum and were guided through the exhibition of Indigenous works by experts who described the symbolism of the paintings and their connection to contemporary design.

Lecture 2: Medieval Manuscripts

This lecture, presented by Dr. Lisa Scharoun, covered the design of the Golden Ratio. Through an understanding of the techniques utilized in the preparation of Medieval Manuscripts, the lecture explained the processes involved in bookbinding, layout and typography and how they related to contemporary book design.

Lecture 3: De Stijl

Presented by Geoff Hinchcliffe, this lecture addressed the design principles of proximity, white space and unity. In exploring De Stijl, the lecture covered individual pieces that were exemplars of the movement. Through an understanding of how design principles applied to the De Stijl Movement a comparison was made to the application of white space, proximity and unity in contemporary design.

Lecture 4: Russian Constructivist Posters

In a lecture exploring Russian Constructivist posters, presented by Anita Fitton, an understanding of the design principle of contrast was introduced. Using the posters as examples, Ms Fitton explained the application of colour and typography in generating effective contrast in a design. Contemporary examples of design based on the principles of Russian Constructivism were presented to give students an indication of their usage and relevance in modern day society.

Lecture 5: International Style

Presented by Tat Ming Yu, the lecture on International Style generated an understanding of the principles of alignment and balance. Though an explanation of the grid system and how it was refined during the twentieth century, an understanding of the standardization of design in this period was reached. Students were given examples of how the grid systems created during this period are applied to contemporary design.

Lecture 6: The London Tube Map

In a lecture exploring the origins and design of the London Tube Map, Tat Ming Yu applied an understanding of the design principle of Gestalt. By looking at the separate elements of the Tube Map designed by Henry Beck in 1933, Mr. Yu illustrated the importance of line, color and typography in creating coherent and efficient design strategies. Students were given examples of current transport maps as a means to show how the principles are applied in a contemporary setting.

The lectures presented in the series all present a relevant time line, which with students can reference significant design developments. Lectures also aid in providing antidotes and historical facts, which give significance to the overall understanding of design history. Lectures are followed up with further references to readings and resources to extend knowledge in the areas specified.

2. Surveys the continuum of all design from the mid-nineteenth century to the present.

UCGD Design History Units presents a continuum of design through the lecture series in each unit. Design Principles and History 1 looks at the application of design as a process of visual communication through the understanding of semeiotics, symbols and their usage design. This unit explores these principles in a continuum from the Paleolithic period to the present. History 2 is an overview of Graphic Design and its reliance on printing from the late 19th to the first half of 20th century. This unit presents a thorough understanding of printing technologies, how they have evolved and their relationship to the field of graphic design. History 3 is a survey of typography and covers the evolution of typography from basic forms to complex visual meaning. The lecture series in this unit focuses on important typographers and their role in shaping the Graphic Design industry. History 4 presents a contemporary survey of design through a series of lectures based on the work of contemporary designers who are leaders in the field. Significantly, History 4 tasks the students with reflecting on how designers have adapted to the dramatic changes in technology and how their contributions have shaped the presentation of information across the globe.

3. Integrates popular culture throughout design history by focusing on specific events, objects, and individuals who have influenced this culture.

In each unit students are presented with activities related to specific design periods. The activities require the student to apply historical techniques to contemporary popular culture. Examples of the activities and their relevance are outlined below as a means to show how this has been applied.

Activity 1 (History 1): Indigenous Design

In this activity students were asked to identify indigenous symbols, colours and patterns in contemporary advertising campaigns. The activity generated an awareness of the appropriation of traditional Indigenous imagery for commercial purposes as a means for discussion on the ethics of this practice.

Activity 2 (History 3): Past and Present Typefaces

This activity asked students to compare old hand-cut typefaces (such as Bodoni and Baskerville) with contemporary digital typefaces (such as Optima and Arial). Through the comparison, students were asked to identify current digital typefaces and generate new solutions for extending old typefaces. The outcome of this activity was an understanding of the unique characteristics of old typefaces. Students

were able to identify these characteristics in new styles as a means for reflection and critique of typographic design and terminology.

4. Finds means of exhibiting in various media these historical and contemporary intersections.

In all history units, students present research on historical design periods in a variety of mediums. In History 1, students prepare oral presentations comparing historic and contemporary movements. Using multimedia presentation techniques, students display imagery and examples of the intersections in design periods. To form an understanding of the history of print and its relation to the graphic design industry, in History 2 students create magazine advertisements using historic and contemporary printing methods. In History 3, students are tasked with creating an original typeface design based on extensive research into historic styles of typography. To form an understanding of contemporary design techniques, History 4 tasks students with creating designs across a range of media, which includes traditional and new media techniques.

5. Promotes original research as a means to uncover and thus continue to critically pursue new historical avenues.

The first history unit prepares students for critically analyzing and pursuing research into historical periods. This is established through group presentations where students are tasked with comparing and contrasting historical design periods. Through this process, students generate questions, dialogues and examples as a means to form new research into historic design periods.

6. Focuses on the historical derivations of type and why typefaces were created at particular time.

All history units emphasize typographic design, however, History 2 and 3 specifically address the historical origins of typefaces and their usage in-depth. Through an understanding of printing technologies and their evolution, students are given an awareness of how typographic design follows technological advance in the field. Tasked with creating their own typeface in History 3, students must research and form an understanding of the history of typographic form.

7. Discovers the origins of graphic design in relations to advertising and printing.

All units in the history stream address the relationship of graphic design to advertising and printing, however, History 2 delves into this area in-depth. The lecture series in History 2 covers the usage of printing in generating advertising in the late 19th and early 20th century. Excursions to a printing museum and a contemporary off-set printer provide the students with experimental knowledge of the origins and

evolution of printing and advertising. History 2 gives an overview of how graphic design artifacts operate as instruments of propaganda and persuasion through examples of historic and contemporary advertising campaigns.

8. Introduces the critical voice that enables students to discuss the past and present in formal and practical terms.

UCGD History units address the critical voice that enables students to discuss the past and present through applied activities, presentations, examples and excursions. Throughout the history stream, students prepare practical projects and critique them to form an understanding of the historical foundations of design. This enables students to learn the “language” of graphic design by utilizing design terminology within the context of written work and critique.

9. Encourages research and writing through papers and journals that critically analyze new data.

Research and analysis is emphasized in all history units and presented in a way that builds the students' research skills. In History 1, students are given an overview of design research, writing and thinking techniques. They then work in groups to prepare presentations on historical design topics. History 2 builds on the student's ability to research and analyze design by tasking them with preparing reports comparing past and present technologies. Following on from this, History 3 tasks students with providing an in-depth research report on how individually created typeface designs address a current and relevant problem in contemporary society. In History 4, students must complete a research report that critically analyses new data and demonstrates an advanced skill set in design analysis.

10. Builds an environment in which history is an integral part of all design teaching.

The UCGD course is built around a unified structure in which all units feed into each other. As lecturers are all encouraged to present their historical knowledge through the lecture series, the entire teaching team is involved in creating both history and practice based units. Design history is referenced throughout the three year programme and therefore complements all levels of study to enable a constant dialogue between the past and present.

Conclusion:

Overall, the following structure grounds the history units with a solid emphasis on research, analysis, critical thinking and practical application of design principles. Through this foundation, students attain historical knowledge of styles that will provide them with an awareness of elements and principles. A

collaborative approach to lecturing, which provides a continuum of historical periods, provides the students with a variety of approaches and insights to design history. Applied activities presented in the history units support the lecture series, provide students with practical application of historical design techniques and address the learning outcomes through the use of new and traditional mediums. Graphic Design history units give an in-depth background of the industry and its relationship and integration with the history of typography, printing and advertising. Through research projects, group work and practical assignments, students develop research, presentation and analysis skills that encourages them to pursue a deeper understanding of the graphic design profession. History units ultimately give students an edge in rationalizing their design work as well as providing them with the ability to present an educated position on the past and present advances in graphic design.

Outcomes

History units 1 and 3 were run over a fourteen-week period in Semester 1, 2011. During this period, lectures presented the format as specified in the first section of this paper. History units 2 and 4 are currently in the process of being development and will run in Semester 2. Observations from Semester 1, 2011 will help to inform the effectiveness of the methodology applied and possible areas for refinement and restructuring.

Effectiveness of Delivery Techniques

The unit was delivered in traditional mode with a one-hour weekly lecture and a one-hour weekly tutorial. Both units had significant group work elements. History 1 employed peer review of group presentations whereas History 3 utilized continual group critique of typeface design throughout the unit. History 1 and 3 used a delivery method that included all five lecturers in the UCGD teaching team. The lecture series was delivered in a way that included all teachers. Each lecturer developed a lecture and subsequent activity to address the design principles delivered in their lecture. Lectures were presented fortnightly and all five teachers were responsible for the delivery of one tutorial and one lecture in both history 1 and 3. A single convener who dealt with the overall administration oversaw the units.

Positives: The development of a group presentation in History 1 was beneficial in providing students with research skills. This also aided in their ability to work as a group to present research effectively. Group critique in History 3 provided students with opportunity to see the evolution of the group's typefaces and allowed for constant review and refinement of their work. By exposing students to multiple lecturers, they gained the benefit different delivery techniques, unique experiences and different viewpoints. By sharing the workload, lecturers were able to spend a significant amount of time developing their individual lecture and activity.

Negatives: Some participants of History 1 saw group work as a negative as people were grouped with unreliable classmates and felt that their own marks were compromised as a result. Critique in History 3 was often poorly attended as some students did not see the continual benefit of refining their work. Both

History units suffered from a lack of structured tutorial content. Outside of presentation and critique times, tutorials were set as consultation time and some students found this unproductive. As lecture activities were developed individually, this posed problems for other tutors to review the activity response as they lacked the insight from the lecturer that created the initial activity. It was difficult to create coherence in the activities for this reason. Having all teachers lecture and tutor in this subject resulted in an overload of working hours. It was therefore necessary to change to only two tutors during the semester. Although necessary, this caused some confusion and inconsistency in the overall delivery of this unit in Semester 1.

Student Outcomes:

Overall both History 1 and 3 generated highly relevant outcomes for students. Presentations in History 1 were largely of a high quality and displayed the students' ability to research and present their ideas. For many students, the typefaces created in History 3 showed an ability to address a relevant societal problem through the application of graphic design and provided them with a unique folio piece for future presentation.

Potential Areas of re-development:

Based on this experience, history units will be re-developed to address the negatives. Whilst retaining the positive aspect of lectures delivered by different lecturers, activities will be more streamlined and defined by a single lecturer. Presentations and critique will be retained however tutorials will be more structured and group participation more closely monitored with defined milestones.

Overall effectiveness of this model:

The History units created for the Bachelor of Graphic Design at the University of Canberra were formed through a solid methodology as a means to inform practical graphic design knowledge within a historical context. They were created to help students solve problems through the understanding and application of historic principles. Based on the unit satisfaction scores for both units along with individual teacher evaluation, however, significant work needs to go into revising the units. This pertains more to the logistics and day-to-day running of the units than the actual foundations and principles delivered through the methodology stated in this paper. Reflecting on the past semester, with a few minor adjustments the history units can be highly effective in meeting the learning outcomes and information needs of graphic design students.

References:

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