

Visual Design Connections: Technology And The Artist's Hand.

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“The problem,” I said, “is disconnect.” I was thinking out loud about my first semester of teaching Digital Design. I’d spent several years as a graphic designer before coming to art education. In my mind, a diversity of media and concepts made sense as a comprehensive approach to visual communications. I believe visual design to be a process of intentional activities, wherein structure is created through visual organization, creative problem solving, and thoughtful arrangements of content and form.



But this idea seemed to elude my students of design. Learners find computers to be seductive tools – they make perfect boxes and circles, and Photoshop allows users to manipulate digital files in unbelievably fun ways. I was concerned that designs bereft of any idea or concept could be presented in slick, “finished” form, allowing learners to think their designs were “good enough.” Components of a design – words, typefaces, images, and arrangement – seemed to be treated as separate, disconnected elements

In Digital Design, learners strive toward the following outcomes:

- To design and implement graphic images by developing ideas on paper, manipulating Principles of Graphic Design, and translating drawn sketches into digitally-generated designs.
- To identify ways to use elements of typography as components of a design and to identify ways to use typography to legibly articulate a specific message in a meaningful way.
- To emphasize the ways in which designers work collaboratively to create visual designs that have purpose and designs that are intended to carry a message.

rather than a planned and balanced visual blend. I worried that, once on the computer, my students seemed so excited to be using this incredibly powerful tool that they neglected to make preliminary sketches or to rely on any form of artmaking “handwork.” Missing, was evidence of the artist’s “hand.”

Rather than relying on design software to provide pat visual solutions, my design assignments are intentionally intended to foster thinking. Learners must create visual solutions for ill-defined problems, forcing themselves to examine multiple appropriate solutions, rather than one, single “right” answer. I now begin each semester with an authentic and personal learner investigation into the Principles of Graphic Design. Learners explore and demonstrate their understanding of each Principle by developing sketches and final design solutions that represent Balance, Repetition, Unity, Emphasis, and Contrast. Their culminating activity will be to assemble each design into a “Principles of Graphic Design” poster, printed out on our large-format color printer. Learners must work with pencil and paper to develop initial ideas before bringing those ideas to the computer and making them “real.” Along the way, learners must acquire the necessary knowledge to use various forms of handwork in conjunction with Photoshop, scanners, digital cameras, and printers. In short, learners become familiar with the basic tools of the graphic designer.

The plan, then, became one of integrating a variety of media, both handwork and digitally-influenced, into each learner’s day-to-day learning enterprises. We began by creating a series of collages, created only from printed letters found in newspapers. Learners constructed designs that employed symmetrical, asymmetrical, and radial balance, created from careful arrangements of various sizes, colors, and weights of letterforms. Later, these handmade constructions were scanned and digitally manipulated as learners began to experiment with the introduction of cool, warm, and analogous color harmonies.

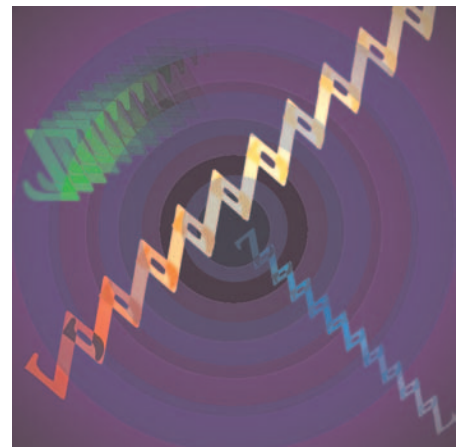
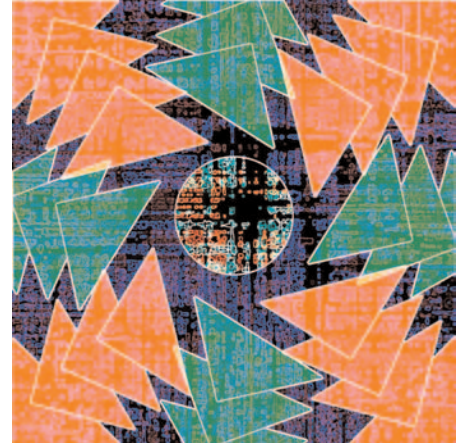
Our learning environment is proactively collaborative. I



find that when one learner discovers something new – a particularly interesting technique, visual effect, or end result – it won't be long before nearby artmakers are experimenting along a similarly experimental path. Learners next made use of Photoshop as a artmaking “medium,” employing a variety of shapes, colors, gradations, graphic symbols, or elements of typography to create their design. In this situation, they were not allowed to use any kind of scanned image or photography: The entire composition had to be created from scratch and rendered digitally. Learners were then encouraged to compare and contrast the differences of geometric design inherent in the software-based design against the characteristics of the hand-made collage designs.

In the next stage we found ourselves addressing two concepts: typeface designs and the principle of contrast. Learners began by exploring and experimenting with single letters and characters from a variety of typefaces, paying particular attention to the unique design characteristics of each letterform. Learners began to playfully arrange each character to construct a design resembling a face, relying upon the natural contrast of white lettering on a black background. They could twist or turn characters but could not otherwise alter the typeface design in any way. Sketches were first made on paper and then translated into digital media.

Learners were particularly intrigued with an assignment to work with a digital camera in photographing from a close-up point-of-view. We experimented with a variety of unusual objects – in particular, the appearance of drops of food coloring in clear water as it swirled and dissipated. Images were brought into Photoshop for further enhancement and manipulation, and clearly illustrate the principle of “emphasis.” Learners were also encouraged to create sketches by hand, scan them in, and “layer” their work into the design, to print out the design and further manipulate it by hand, before finally returning the image to a digital resource.



Once learners had successfully created five sets of designs illustrating each Principle of Graphic Design – Repetition, Balance, Unity, Contrast, and Emphasis – their culminating assignment was to create a poster and print it on the large-format printer. Posters were then saved as exemplars for the next semester of learners.

After a variety of visual experiments were conducted, learners were more confident in their understanding of how designers make application of the Principles of Design, the use of domain-specific language, fluency of approach to media, and they had learned to successfully manipulate various forms of visual imagery. Our design class comes to rely on a tested maxim: Think. Look. Do.

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