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Integrating Non-Traditional Materials Into The Design Process.

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As a design educator with 20+ years of industry experience, overlapped with 15+ years of academic experience, I have witnessed many changes—not least of which, in *myself*.

As a part-time design educator, I taught a nice range of design courses. From Typography to Information Design, from Corporate Identity to Packaging. For ten years, I sharpened my own understanding of all of these topics while working with students to help them wrap their heads around the concepts as well. By the time I was ready for full time academia, I thought I had a pretty good grasp of the creative mind and how I could help students navigate their way through course content.

What I later came to realize, is that I probably more accurately had a pretty good grasp of the creative *designer's* mind.

In 2012, I accepted the full-time role as Course Lead for a 2D Design course within the Art Fundamentals program at Sheridan College. The student profile within this program is quite different than those I had become accustomed to. Art Fundamentals is a 1-year, post-secondary certificate program, meant to give students practical understandings of various visual arts and also to help them build a portfolio as they apply for the degree and diploma programs they ultimately would like to get into. Because of Sheridan's reputation, we attract students from around the world who are often referred to the Art Fundamentals program if they are not-quite-ready for their first choice of program.

Each September, we have an intake of 400 students into our program, with another 100 as part of our January intake. Students take courses in Colour Theory & Painting, Life Drawing, Drawing Systems, 3D Design, and 2D Design. While some students coming in to our program have an interest in pursuing graphic design, most come with dreams of getting in to Sheridan's Bachelor of Animation program.

In working with students who had not yet made up their mind about pursuing a career in design—as I had become accustomed to, in the decade before taking on this role—I learned quickly that there are certain vocabularies and conceptual understandings that I had come to take for granted as an educator of visual communications. I realized that instructions given to complete tasks needed to be more explicit and detailed, and that expectations of student output had to be contextualized within the broad scope of expectations of our student body.

This became a lot of work. And it forced me to have a better understanding of all of the concepts I was trying to convey in class so that I could more easily help guide students through concepts they did not necessarily grasp naturally. Add to this that our program has a very high percentage of students who require academic accommodations; students struggling with various anxieties, mental and physical disabilities, and even several students each year who would be classified as being on the autistic spectrum.

Ultimately, I am a much better teacher for my experiences. But I had to come to a better understanding of my students and focus less on my own needs as an academic.

Art Fundamentals students come to design projects with a much broader range—not only of expectations, but—of abilities. In teaching design projects to *design* students, I look back and realize that there was a certain level of complacency on my part, as well as on the students' part, about project expectations. I did not question the projects I was assigned to deliver, nor did the students push very far outside of pre-conceived expectations.

In Art Fundamentals, students are looking to do work they can put in their portfolios and don't always see the merit in having to take a course in graphic design. Some students are looking to do illustrations, some want to learn software, but ultimately, all just want to be pushed and stimulated.

Before I was able to change the curriculum for 2D Design, students were all forced to complete projects in similar ways, using the same media—often, paint. Those who were good with this media, thrived and succeeded, those who struggled, did not. I decided that *choice of media* had to become a part of the design process for each project. Those who wanted to paint, could paint. Those who wanted to draw, or work digitally, could do so. This opened up the opportunity for students who needed specific media explorations in their portfolios to treat design projects as potential portfolio pieces, regardless of the program they were applying for.
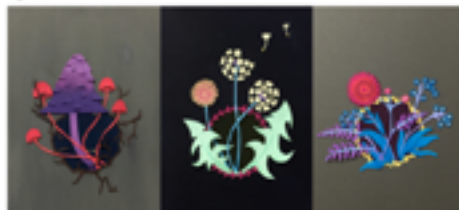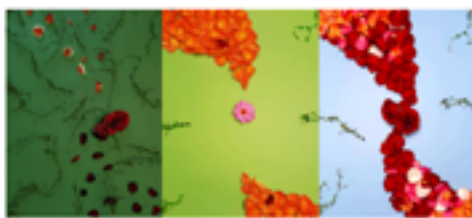
This also opened up the opportunity for me to expose students to media options they might not have considered previously.

By embedding media options into the design process expectations for each project, students were *forced* to explore multiple media directions before settling in on the most appropriate one for their concept. As long as the final output is two-dimensional, I encourage students to explore as many media options as possible.

An interesting thing happens as the first semester unfolds. Ultimately, students gravitate towards doing work in media that they have some familiarity with. Whether it is a comfort level with paint, or pencils, or a particular piece of software, most students stay within their comfort zones on the first couple projects as they are still primarily concerned about the grade they will receive for their output.

I relish the full class critiques on those first few projects. Most everyone has done a very nice job on their project, but an awakening begins to happen when someone completes their project using a different media than the majority. You hear comments like: "I didn't know I could use _____" or: "I hadn't even considered using that media in my project, but it works so well in yours!"

These sorts of revelations lead to discussions about other media that might be possible, media that might be beyond the students' initial instincts, and ultimately, media that might not be considered traditional media at all. Students begin to realize that perhaps there are opportunities in the project description, opportunities in the directions to explore non-traditional materials in a way that might actually make their communications more successful.

As a for instance; in the third project of my 2D Design foundations course, we introduce colour for the first time and limit students to working with plant forms to communicate abstract concepts. Students are encouraged to study the form and colour of various plants and are asked to use those forms in three separate layouts. The compositions have to communicate themes of Love, Horror, and Adventure respectively and should look like they are a part of a system. While most students will paint or draw their plants (some digitally, some traditionally) the odd student, each year, will question if it's possible to simply use actual plants within their compositions? To which the answer is: of course.

When you allow students to begin working with non-traditional materials, you also have to accept that their process is going to come together in a very non-traditional way as well. Students may start with initial sketches and thumbnails, but ultimately, the bulk of their learning and decision-making is going to come while interacting with the materials. During this phase, it becomes imperative that the student document every stage of their process and this can be done by taking notes or doing more sketches, but it is probably more productive to simply document the process through photographs. These photographs don't have to be high quality. Photos taken with smart phones are more than sufficient for submitting digital images that will show the professor what their process entailed.

I have never shied away from showing examples of student work from previous years as examples to current students about ways to approach a project. I have no concerns about plagiarism because I will be guiding students through their processes on a weekly basis and I see only benefits from speaking critically about previous projects and letting students know where previous projects fell short, as well as where they succeeded, and I find this is a good way to get stronger projects submitted year after year. But when introducing a new project, or proposing the concept of working with non-traditional materials in the first place, it can be difficult to show examples of relevant work.

In my own design practice, I admit to not having much to show in the way of working with non-traditional materials myself. As I began to really wrap my head around some of the concepts I was encouraging students to explore, it became apparent to me that I needed to try these techniques out for myself.

In May, 2016, I attended a one week residency for design educators, hosted by Design Inquiry (designinquiry.net). The residency was held at The Poor Farm, on Vinalhaven Island, in Maine. For six days, I mucked around in the mud, experimented with materials, and forced myself to experience design through new perspectives. I decided to try to create three posters on a subject that is close to my heart.

I have a Master's Degree in Environmental Studies. My research during my master's studies revolved around the integration of sustainability issues into the design classroom. I was also trained by former US Vice President Al Gore, as part of his Climate Reality Leadership Corps, and now volunteer my time to give talks on the effects of climate change. Choosing to design posters that

promote sustainability within different industries was something I had had in the back of my mind for some time. I also saw it as an excellent opportunity to work with non-traditional materials to promote these messages. I decided to try and visually represent the dichotomies that exist within our patterns of consumption. Each poster would combine materials that present a strong juxtaposition between products and unsustainable modes of production.

The posters are primarily typographic and the words *This Is Not Sustainable* are the most predominant elements in each layout. In one poster, I created letterforms out of lightbulbs placed on a bed of coal to illustrate the unsustainable use of coal as a means for generating electricity. In the second poster, I cut letterforms out of beef and placed them on corn feed as a representation of industrial farming. In the final poster, the letterforms were painted with (water-based) oil onto a rock surface that was consumed by the rising tide as an illustration of the unsustainable use of oil and its devastating impact on the planet.

In each case, I documented my process from initial notes and sketches, to photographic documentation, to digital production. The final posters are quite large at 36"x72" (3 feet wide and 5 feet tall) and have a nice impact on the students when I bring the actual prints into class for presentation purposes.


My week at the Design Inquiry residency was a productive one. With no connection to the internet or cell phone coverage, it was easy to focus on my work. Without familial responsibilities, I was able to work uninterrupted from dusk until dawn each day. I am indebted to my wife who facilitated this excursion and accepted full responsibility of our then 3- and 5-year-old children as they spent the week exploring the mainland coastlines of Maine.

In the evenings at the Poor Farm, I was able to recap my days with the other design educators who were attending the residency and we all compared notes about the projects we were working on and discussed our progress. I would highly recommend the experience to all design educators looking for an opportunity to give themselves over to a project. Being able to reflect on the process in real time, with peers, was a very productive aspect of this process and I believe it helped me to refine my concepts and explore possibilities I might not have otherwise.
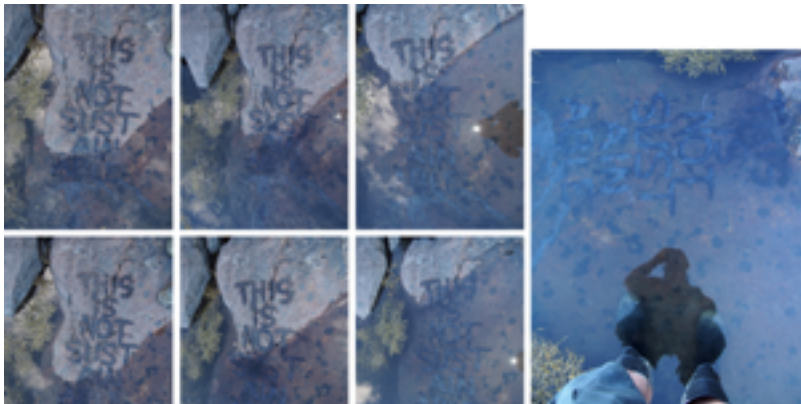
This experience helped to solidify many of my ideas about collaborative working environ-ments and gave me further examples for students about the benefits of sharing their work with their peers. I talk at length with my classrooms about how we all grow to become better artists/ designers/ creatives by working with others, as opposed to guarding our efforts and working in proverbial bubbles.

The reactions I have received from students about the work I put in to the posters has been overwhelmingly positive. Students appreciate that I am also producing work using the same strategies and techniques I promote in the classroom. I believe it adds a level of credibility to the process when they see that I do not simply dictate that students *should* do this sort of work, or that I am *suggesting* that they try it. Rather, they see that I can back up my suggestions with actual understanding of the level of work that will be involved at the suggestion of working with non-traditional materials. Not only have I experienced this sort of work on my own, but I have lead by example when it comes to documenting the process and not taken short cuts along the way.

In my own processes in producing these posters, I made mistakes. I encountered road blocks that required me to think of alternative ways of trying to achieve my end goals, and it is ultimately this sort of problem solving activity that cannot be reproduced by simply sitting back and *imagining* what the end results will look like. One of my ultimate goals in teaching a foundations-level design course, is to try and instill a work ethic in my students that encourages them to look beyond their initial concepts. That in pushing themselves to come up with multiple solutions for any given problem, they will inevitably come up with stronger results.

When you are working with non-traditional materials, when you are forced to interact with materials and explore the possibilities that are inherent in the objects you have at your disposal, you are forced to make decisions you could not possibly have foreseen before interacting with those materials. I freely admit to my students that I am no genius and that chances are, despite all of their late-teen confidence and self-absorption, that they probably are not geniuses either. That all too often, the creative and visual arts are seen as disciplines practiced by naturally gifted individuals who are so creatively gifted, that ideas simply pop into their heads. But that in reality, their most significant successes will come, quite simply, from hard work. From being able to *think on one's feet*, from having the ability to recognize when a project is going in the wrong direction, or a solution simply might not work, and having the confidence and work ethic to be willing to make changes and re-work that which you have in front of you until it *does* work. That moments of genius/ sparks of inspiration/ ah-ha moments are actually few and far between.
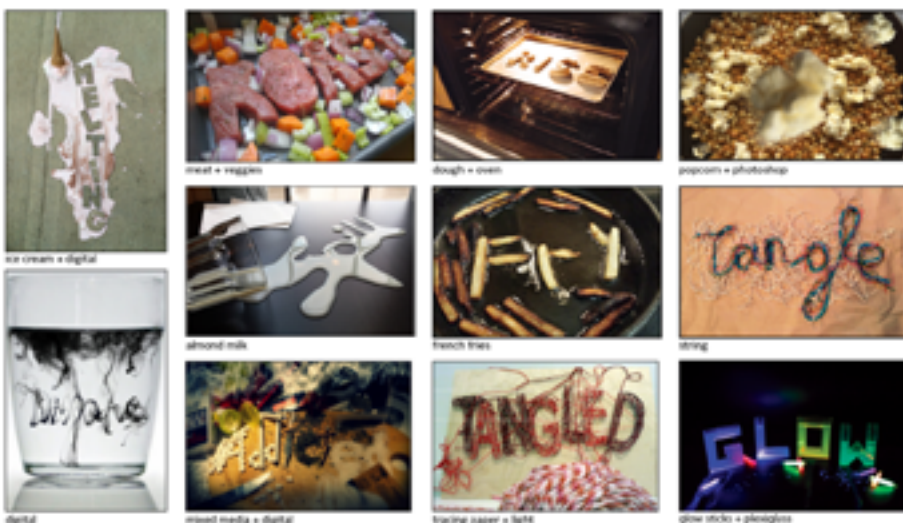
Working with non-tradi-tional materials to create visually stimulating com-munications forces stu-dents to look beyond their areas of comfort, to look past their initial concepts, and to create work that is genuinely different from anything they have ever seen or done before. And in so doing, they are expand-ing their scope of what they see as creative work and they are also expanding

their understanding of what they themselves are capable of producing.

The visual arts are often limited to paint and drawings and—increasingly—digital work that is driven by the capabilities of software. In getting students to work with non-traditional materials, not only are they expanding their understanding of visually stimulating work, they are also expanding their own pre-conceived ideas of what they themselves are capable of creating.

In the final project of the first semester of 2D Design students follow up their experiences with plant forms and colour, to create typographic compositions that involve one word. The goal of the project is to define the word through the composition and the way the word is illustrated. As with all projects, students may draw or paint their layouts, but this becomes an easy exercise to push them to consider working with non-traditional materials. Students much choose a verb or adjective or descriptive word. Nouns are not permitted. If a student were to choose the word spill, then the question becomes: *what spills*? A glass of water, milk, or juice. Oil spills. You might spill a drink on your shirt, you might spill it on the table, or floor.

As they begin to explore the possibilities, I encourage them to work with the actual materials and see if they cannot create compositions using non-traditional materials.

At the beginning of the second semester, as an introduction to their first project (the creation of an alphabet) we do an in-class exercise where I ask students to create a composition of their own name on their desk, using only objects they brought with them to school that day. They have 30 minutes to complete the task and I encourage them to use the full 30 minutes. It is too easy to put three pencils together to create a capital A. Using the full 30 minutes requires them to look at the objects they have at their disposal and to try various ways they might create the same letterform.


The alphabet project still allows for students to play to their strengths, and those who wish to create portfolios for their respective program choices can still do so. Students wishing to pursue animation for example, might create an alphabet out of cartoon-style characters. Students with strong illustration skills might illustrate letterforms using

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inanimate objects, or interesting textures and forms. But there is still plenty of opportunity to use non-traditional materials and to photograph the results. I have seen students experiment with constructing their letterforms using wood and nails as well as with toothpicks and jewelry. I have seen experimentations with shaving cream, food items, and even fire.
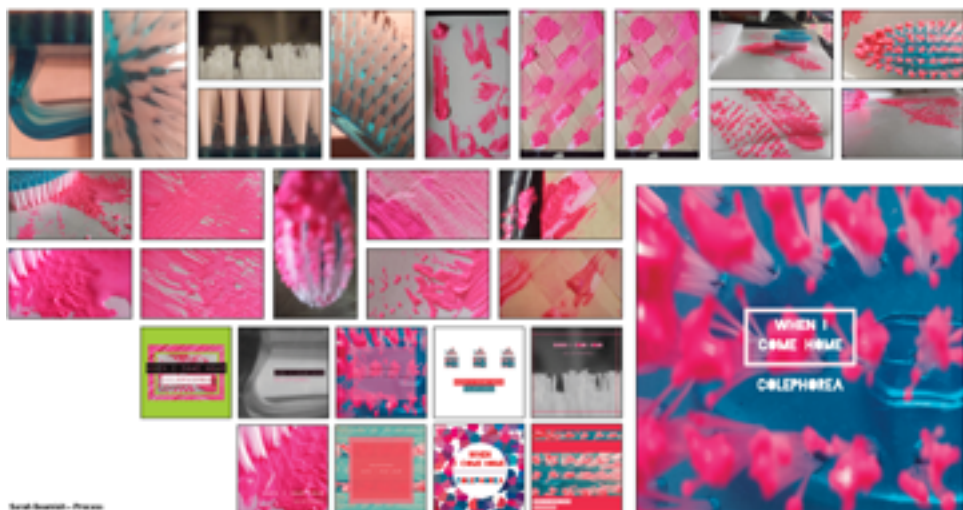
As long as students are exploring a *breadth* of different ideas from the outset, as well as going into a *depth* of explorations once one direction has been settled upon, then I am happy for them to experiment with multiple solutions. Breadth and Depth are the two main criteria I use to break down the expectations I have for submitted process work. The numbers will vary from student to student, but they all have a very specific understanding of my expectations when I frame their process in this manner.

Following the alphabet project, I share my experiences in creating the posters on sustainability. The timing in the semester is good because they have already been exposed to the idea of working with non-traditional materials, but they now get to see how I have applied the technique to something that might be considered a more commercial output. A visual communication with a specific message that is driven by the media choice in the final composition.
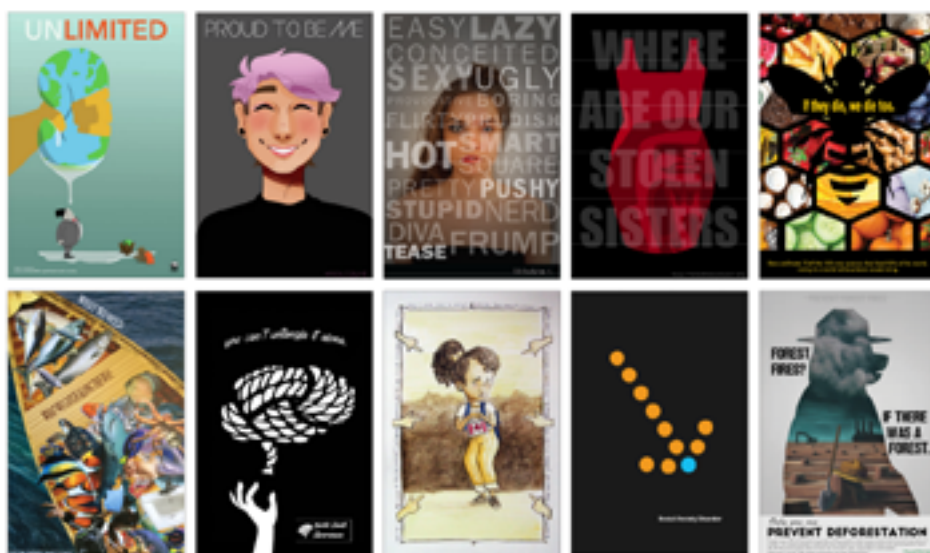
The project that follows the alphabet project is the creation of a poster that promotes social good. Students are able to choose the subject of their poster and it becomes a nice opportunity for presentations and discussions in class about current events and topics that concern them. In this project and the one that follows— an introduction to information design—I have found that most students will move away from working with non-traditional materials, finding it easier to work with photographic or illustrated images. But I am not looking to force them to work in any media they don't feel is currently appropriate. As with all projects, explorations are expected in the process leading up to the final layouts, but as long as the *breadth and depth of explorations* includes various media experimentations, I am happy.

We close out the final semester with a quick, two-week project where students are asked to design an album cover. Students are asked to choose a dollar-store item from those supplied to them in class and to use it in the creation of their album cover artwork.

Students may photograph their object, they may include it in an illustration, they may even use it to create the artwork itself by using it as a tool to paint with, for example. The name of their fictitious band and the album name are generated through randomized online procedures so that they do not waste time coming up with the ideal words or phrases. Focus is placed squarely on the generation of images and typographic experimentation. This project is meant to be fast and fun and students often report having enjoyed the process of this project the most, when reflecting on their experiences in the semester.

In encouraging students to work with materials they might not gravitate towards naturally, I hope to engrain a sense of curiosity and experimentation into their creative processes. I admit to being at somewhat of an advantage in teaching Art Fundamentals students, in that I do not need to place much emphasis on the learning of software, or the finer points of typographic layout. I am still able to touch upon standard learning outcomes of any foundations course in graphic design by introducing the students to the elements and principles of design, but knowing that students will get more formalized training once they get into their programs of choice, I am a bit more free to allow students to experiment and have fun with their creative outputs in my class.

Lastly, in the five years since I started teaching in Art Fundamentals, we have seen the number of students choosing to pursue graphic design after completing our program steadily increase year-after-year. I have also heard anecdotally that students in the Bachelor of Design and Bachelor of Interaction Design programs at our school who have come through Art Fundamentals are consistently at the tops of their classes in those respective programs.

I have found it liberating, as a design instructor, to incorporate choice of media for each project into the students' design processes and I see working with non-traditional materials as an extension of this practice. While I recognize that my situation may be somewhat unique amongst design educators, I do wish I had tried some of this methodology while teaching in more traditional graphic design programs and my hope is that my perspectives and stories resonate with some readers of this paper.