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A Semiotic Rosetta Stone Workshop: Enhancing visual communication through design semiotics

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Workshop purpose and primary aims

In this 90-minute design semiotics workshop, ADIM delegates will learn how the quality of user-participation can be enhanced by improving the visual communication within designed outputs. The workshop's aim is to provide a direct, hands–on experience, to explore how iconic, indexical and symbolic semiotic representation can improve design's message, concept or affordance. It will complement the conference sub-track 5.e Seeking signification in transformational times: design semiotics and the negotiation of meaning.

Theoretical relationship

Over 90-minutes through two exercises and a plenary, the workshop will explore how C.S. Peirce's pragmatic semiotic theory of Semiosis can be synthesised into design practice. The triadic nature of Semiosis focuses on the inter-relationship between the design concept, how this is visually represented, and how this representation affects how the intended meaning is finally interpreted. The workshop exercises take a Constructivist approach to facilitate participants' own revelation as to how design outputs can be improved through applying the triadic relationship of Semiosis.

Ethical Issues

As the proposed workshop will be an 'opt in' attendance for participating, an ethical informed consent agreement form will be issued before the workshop begins. Only the work of those participants who sign and consent to their workshop outputs will be used in any ongoing analysis or reflection in the report or future papers.

Workshop approach

The approach for the 90-minute workshop would follow this structure:

00:00 Welcome, workshop aims, semiotic audit (@ 20 mins)

- Welcome message
- Projection of a semiotic audit form and explanation:
  - Participants will have a paper copy of a semiotic audit form
  - They will complete first section before workshop begins
  - This captures the initial level of pre-existing understanding of semiotic theory
- Then an overview of rudimentary Semiosis and its triadic relationship between concept, its representation, and the role of interpretation in the context of designed artefacts.

00:20 Exercise 1: Symbolic representation in designing effective visual communication (@20 mins)

- Using print outs of existing design campaigns, products, etc. participants will discuss in small group the principle of the symbolic representation of the concept present in the design example.
- Using scissors/markers/etc. participants will indicate what they believe is the symbolic representation visually communicating the intended message in the design example.
- Participants will then be asked to connect the designed connotation to the basics of Peirce's semiotics using their own design terms.

00:40 Exercise 2: Indexical and Iconic representation in designing effective visual communication (@20 mins)

- Again*, using print outs of design campaigns, products, etc. participants will discuss in small group the principle of the indexical, and then the nested iconic representations of the object present in the design example.
  *each table will have several versions of the design examples so that multiple passes at analysis can be made by the designers

- Using scissors/markers/etc. participants will indicate what they believe is the indexical representation in the design, and then break the design down further into its iconic elements that help visually communicate the intended message or affordance.
- Participants will then be asked to connect these to the basics of Peirce's semiotics.

Figure 1: Example of plenary session with displayed worksheets

01:00 Plenary and Completion of semiotic audit (@30 mins)

- The results of exercise 1 & 2 can be displayed by group on a wall (see Figure 1), and feedback their assumptions which can then be discussed. Through this plenary phase participants can begin to understand how much of their tacit knowledge can be mapped to pragmatic semiotic theory, and how they can seek more theory to increase the effectiveness of their visual communication within designed artefacts.
- Participants will also complete the 2nd section of the designer semiotic audit form.
    - This captures their level of desire to understand more Peircean semiotic theory, and to ask how they would like that to happen.

01:30 Workshop Ends

Takeaways for the participants

The workshop participants will work together in small groups using handouts and an A3 worksheet. On this worksheet, they will annotate their emergent understanding of the inter-relationship between the design concept, how it is visually represented and interpreted. Then in the final plenary part of the workshop, the participants will discuss in their own words how they understand how the manipulation of iconic, indexical and symbolic representation affords different levels of meaning.

Strategy to capture content and results

The final plenary session is important to the Constructivist approach we take, as from a pragmatic position the participants' understanding emerges from the acts of engaging in the process of unlocking theory within existing design practice. Participants can opt into supplying their emails to be kept informed of the ongoing research.

Results and final reflections for consideration

The completed worksheets (or photographs of them), plus completed semiotic audits, will provide the workshop team with valuable sensory data to be further analysed as part of continuing Semiotic Rosetta Stone research. This ultimately is to define more designer-centric methods of disseminating Peircean theory into design practice.

Space requirements

A digital projector for our Mac laptop, in a room with flat tables and wall space for display will suffice.

Maximum number of participants

A maximum of 20 participants (5x groups of 4).