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Introduction

A recent revitalization of first year curriculum and pedagogy at OCAD University (OCAD U) has begun to acknowledge the corporeal effort of design practice; the bodily presence of doing, making and thinking. While the focus of sustainable design is often outside of the individual – considering the impact we have on our environment – core graphic design studios at the first year level have begun to introduce the consideration of sustainability as it pertains to the individual effort. Graphic Design studios at OCAD U are thus moving towards a reflective conception of design as sustainable; how specific philosophical approaches can underpin and reinforce a greater reach in design process.

The First Year Program at OCAD U is a foundation that exists between disciplinary specificity and the broader territory of design practices. A common reality across disciplines is the need to extend the philosophical roots of sustainability beyond externalized concern, back towards the individual practitioner; sustainability is not just an issue for the environment, it is also very much an issue of individual process. Donald Schön's *The Reflective Practitioner* provides a model for the consideration of design practice as inherently reflective – that thought-in-action is fundamental to actual design decisions. John Dewey's *Experience and Education* espouses a deep respect for active experience in the educational process. Schön and Dewey offer an essential approach of in-process investigation that points the way to a philosophical foundation of encouraging sustainable doing – doing that by its orientation is geared towards maintaining its creative arc.

While the focus of First Year at OCAD U remains craft-process skills and language-acquisition, the identification of sustainability as a necessary quality of design practice itself has paved the way for a philosophical underpinning that brings students into a more holistic relationship to design practice. Empirical design tactics and schemas that help students document and reflect on the provisional and ever-shifting nature of design as a lived-process. Redefining what can be seen initially as a linear practice, first year Graphic Design studios begin the engagement with design as a malleable practice. Students are asked to sequence and re-sequence project iterations in initially simple process books that are themselves provisional and subject to reinterpretation until the final weeks of a semester. The timeline of the process books follows the generation of project work, so nothing is left until the ultimate end, but is as much as possible handled 'in the middle'. In this sense experience-as-lived (the doing) and experience-as-reflected-upon (documenting the doing) are equal as both contribute to sustaining the effort of design practice.

Locating Experience + Purpose

John Dewey's *Experience & Education* models a simple yet powerful series of concepts regarding education as a transformative experience. For Dewey, the nature of experience is crucial, as it is a negotiation, not an absolute, and certainly not uniform nor consistent across students. An experience is an interaction between objective or external circumstances and subjective or internal circumstances. The sum of these circumstances Dewey refers to as *the situation*.[1]

As an activity, design instantiates a unique interplay between the internal and external realities of experience, in that students of design must learn to negotiate between them constantly, slowly growing in their ability to move projects forward through reflection on previous experiences to guide future actions. For Dewey, the utility of thinking through experience in education is for students to accomplish precisely this – to learn specific situations necessitate specific kinds of negotiations between internal and external conditions.[2]

The eventual result of negotiations between internal and external circumstances is for Dewey, the arrival at purposeful action. The formation of a purpose is arrived at through three distinct processes: a) observation of surrounding conditions, b) knowledge of what has happened in similar situations in the past and c) judgment which puts together what is observed and what is recalled to see what they signify.[3]

This process presages what will be presented next in the scenarios of Donald Schön, but it also outlines the reason for the formulation of the case-study project in question at OCAD U. Students of beginning design need a space in which they can capture their own experiences as they evolve into ever more purposeful decisions in design practice. The movement from lived-experience to documenting reflection-on-action fixes moments of intent that result in progress through the development of a designed response to a given problem.

Locating Reflection

The scenario presented by Donald Schön in *The Reflective Practitioner* serves as a significant touchstone due to the three dimensions of experience the author observes between a student Petra, and a professor Quist. Of the three significant observations – *1) domains of language used to frame problems, 2) the actions taken on the problem and their implication to future actions, and 3) the change in approach to the*

problem given a + b, it is the first, language, that is at issue in this paper.[4]

At any level of design education but of particular import in beginning design is the acquisition of design language. Schön's observation of Petra's ambiguous design language implies that progress in design activity is simultaneously formal and verbal. Aspects of the student's struggle in the Schön case are based in language – elements of form are described verbally with affective quality, rather than with effective or normative reality. The description of forms that are 'cute' – cause the student to become 'stuck' on issues that seem intractable.[5]

The imposition of a logic, system or governing behavior to the design problem begins a conversation that Quist uses in a twofold manner: 1) *a logic is useful so long as it helps frame the problem in useful terms;* 2) *a logic is useful in so much as it allows for the generation of useful form*.[6] The simultaneous need to attribute language to the problem and to ways of making establishes the complexity of design as a reflective practice. Design for Schön is both a matter of problem definition and description, but also a matter of unraveling the narrative of actions that may or may not lead to other future actions.

The scenario Schön interrogates is architectural in nature, but the core conventions remain intact across disciplines; design as an iterative process needs clear verbal definition in order to be able to initiate the internal conversations that are the mark of reflective/aware practice. Though first year studios in design introduce a breadth of design language across disciplines, particular attention is paid to the relationship of language to form, and of form to action. Design in a linguistic sense is framed as a transformative act that needs description in order to be understood and communicated – once communicated, repeated in cycles of activity and reflectivity.

Documenting Reflection, Editing Experience

The meeting point between Schön's interrogation of design language, and Dewey's description of experience and purpose lies in documentation. The mediating experience of capturing reflection as it happens in a stream of consciousness conversation with a design problem is the capture of design decisions and their implications. For the design student, language can be a lexicon and form, a descriptive and generative agent. The specificity of documenting design activity itself reveals the ways in which language guides and informs nascent process, and allows for the unpacking of internal circumstances that, lacking visible form, may not find physical presence without a suitable schema or method. In short, what Schön presents in captured conversation is too often not captured in studio, and what Dewey terms experience and purpose is thus never fixed, never reflected upon, nor used as a didactic tool.

The expectation that first year students will be able to write reflectively is not the point – all students need to be able to do is attach a basic design vocabulary to their actions in studio. The synthesis need not happen 'in action', but may necessarily wait – a posteriori – to be re-introduced after the work of the semester is done. In many ways this gives students the formal experience of dealing with the work of the semester, and the linguistic experience of unpacking their process as initially distinct aspects of design.

First year Communication Design students at OCAD U have been engaged in a project that allows for just this type of a posteriori reflection, drawing forward the importance of the conversation with one's work, and the integration of language with visual form to arrive at new potential understandings of their own process. The insights garnered in this project serve to provide students with a lens to clarify when they are productive, and when they falter in their process. In so doing, students enter their next semester with a sense of the reflexive nature of design, that the practice of design as a process can be learned, refined and sustained though the study of the practice as a thing in and of itself.

Observations Project

The basic premise of the *Observations* project is to record thoughts, group and desk critiques, charrettes through any means – audio, video, photography, note-taking and any other strategy that a student might need during the course of the semester. No insight, however insignificant is overlooked, and the only requirement in the documentation is that a basic design language of elements, principles and actions (Fig. 1) is used as a reference to allow for necessary specificity. Students are given basic typographic parameters to follow in the transcription of their collected notes, and specific material parameters for the construction of an 8.5 x 11" book. The project hinges on the fact that the construction of the book is driven by basic, handcraft techniques that have several effects on the process of assembly. As students type their collated notes, one pass of linguistic proofing occurs; the notes are then printed and cut apart to be imposed using basic paste-up techniques that employ tape, glue, wax and other means of adhering the cut words into the book signatures. It is the second pass of proofing and selection during paste-up that embeds reflection into the process of assembling the book.

If the process were entirely digitized, cutting and pasting would have little physical consequence. (See Fig. 1) Composite typographic tools such as *Adobe InDesign* and *QuarkXPress* allow for effortless positioning and repositioning of text and image. Paste-up as a photomechanical process however, requires students to question the association created between their selected language, and the form to which it refers – as there is a physical cost to change during paste-up. The second pass on the recorded language affords students a chance to link a nascent
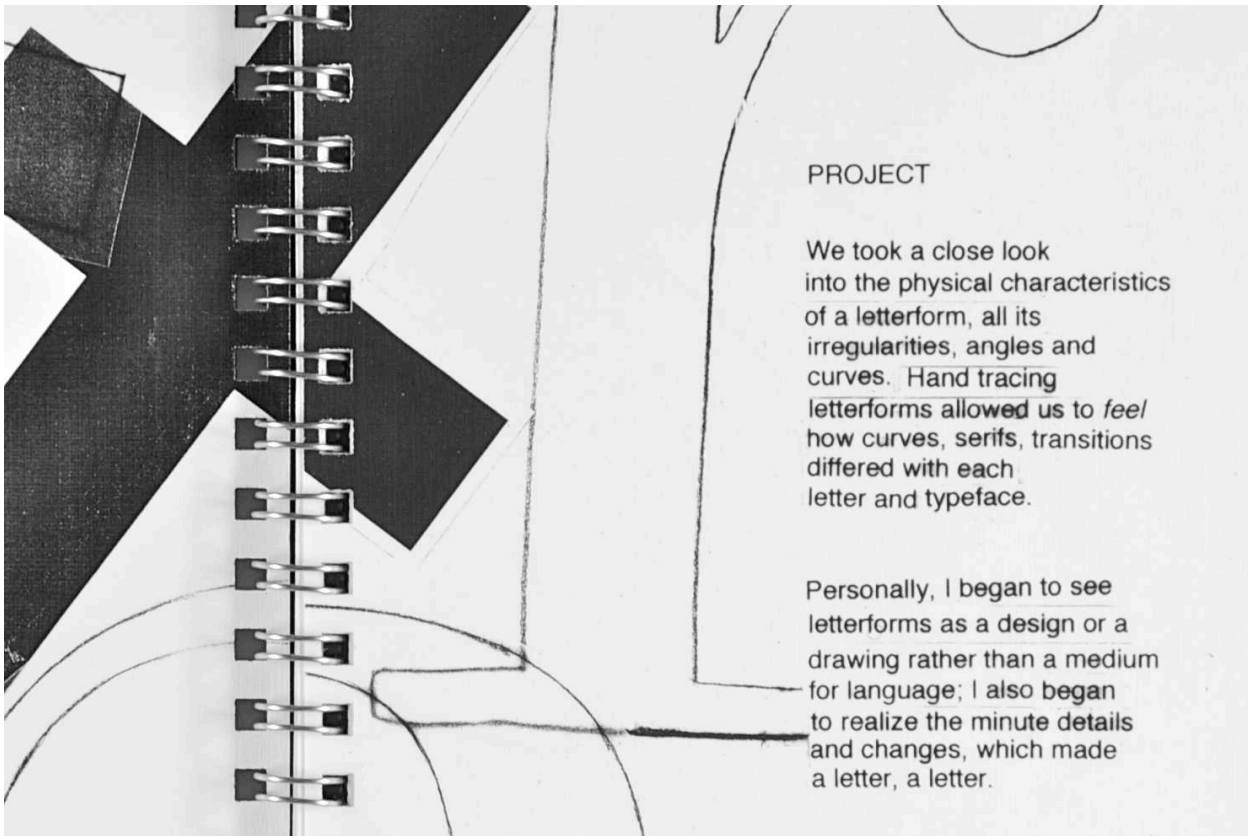
PROJECT

We took a close look
into the physical characteristics
of a letterform, all its
irregularities, angles and
curves. Hand tracing
letterforms allowed us to *feel*
how curves, serifs, transitions
differed with each
letter and typeface.

Personally, I began to see
letterforms as a design or a
drawing rather than a medium
for language; I also began
to realize the minute details
and changes, which made
a letter, a letter.

Fig. 1. Detail showing cut-lines + shadows in paste-up; rather than attempt to hide these occurrences, they are accepted as part of the process, in fact celebrated as indicative of the material process itself.

design lexicon to their work and to establish a relative baseline for when their process resulted in successful outcomes.

The linkage between action and outcome via a basic design vocabulary is thus made twice; once in the initial transcription from note to basic typography, and again from galley-type to imposed type. The physical effort here is crucial, as moving back to the example in Schön's *The Reflective Practitioner*, the professor and the student converse while engaging the work before them through drawing; an activity that Schön reveals to be simultaneously visual and verbal.[7] The *Observations* project takes this basic premise one step further in that the elements the

students are drawing with are themselves linguistic in nature and form.

Posthumous Process

The basic premise of the *Observations* project is to record thoughts, group and desk critiques, charrettes through any means – audio, video, photography, note-taking and any other strategy that a student might need during the course of the semester. No insight, however insignificant is overlooked, and the only requirement in the documentation is that a basic design language is used as a reference to allow for necessary specificity. Students are given basic typographic parameters to follow in the transcription of their collected notes, and specific material parameters for the construction of a 5.5 x 8.5" book.

The small scale allows for continued formal investigation even as it constrains complex

language and commentary. As each sentence is composed of paper fragments, brevity becomes a welcome strategy.

Fig. 2. Formal + verbal associations are here made visible between the ragged edge of paste-up typography and a single cropped letterform.
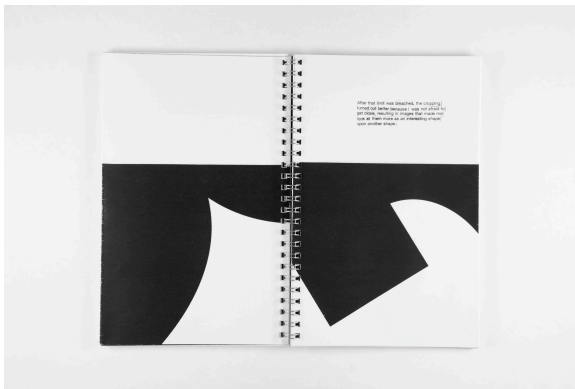

Fig. 3. Though primarily a reflective project, the students still produce formally engaging documentary work that serves to further their sense of sustaining their process after the 'real' project work of the semester.

While students might recognize the work of the *Observations* project to be posthumous or after-the-fact, it remains a significant activity to consider the documentation and reflection on one's process as worthy of the same attention afforded the previous project work of the semester. The basic sequential form of a book constructed through paste-up techniques, in contrast to a blog or wiki engages students in the physicality of language and its implications. The confrontation between designer and material

resistance, however slight, opens an opportunity to discuss the import of current decisions (in the making of the book) and how they effect past decisions (in the execution of an earlier project). (See Fig. 2 + 4) The back-and-forth allows for a conversation about the nature of the studio experience – as Dewey would put it – a conversation between internal and external conditions. The fact that the project provides a space, literally in the book, and figuratively in discourse, for the nascent unpacking of experience gives process its proper place as design an iterative behavior.

The externalizing of process, its momentary fixing is text gives students an initial exposure to seeing what their process is as a visual record of unseen decisions. Some observations are useful – others too obvious to warrant much attention, but the careful (sometimes tedious) steps involved in the project afford the opportunity for reflection. Semester-ending folios often collate final instances of project work, glorifying the end-point. By upending the expectation of producing finished, perfect work, paste-up in all of its shadow and cut line inexactitude reveals decisions of placement, redaction, and sequence, all while unifying the bound pages in a uniform black and white space. (See Fig. 3 + 5)

Conclusions and Projections

As a first semester experience, *Observations* cannot serve students on a trajectory towards reflective, sustainable process as an isolated event. Thus, process documentation as part of a larger curricular strategy is being integrated into each year via the core design studios at OCAD U. The beginning of the effort stems from the Graphic Design Program, but the ripples of its significance are already being noted in other Program areas such as Environmental and Industrial Design.
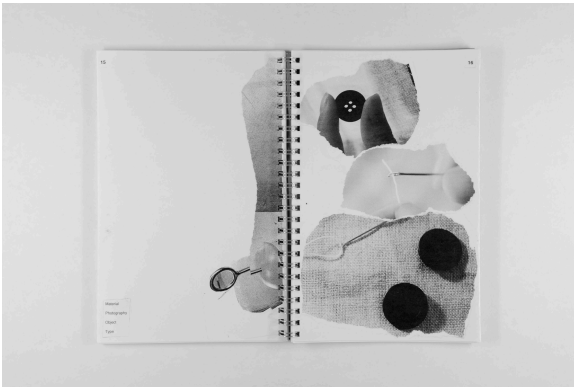
Fig. 4. Initial understandings of communicating sequences and series become evident in a rough unscripted collage – paste-up allows for the intuitive assemblage that initial experiences with digital tools often overpower with demands of technical skill.
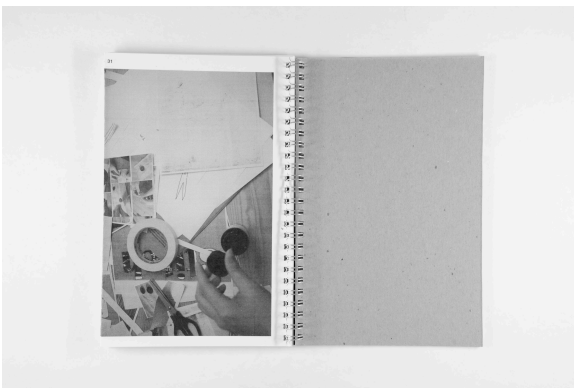

Fig. 5. Endings become beginnings as students also provide contextual images of the Observations process itself.

As a pedagogical tool, *Observations* affords students an initial toolset to begin reflecting on the way they make decisions and assign significance to them. The introduction of an ability to critically assess one's process and adapt to circumstance can indeed start as early as first semester. As required skills and knowledge expand, more considered methods of sustaining and preserving time for reflection of what it means to design seem a crucial counterpoint to the exigencies of eventual professional-practice.

Notes

[1] John Dewey, *Experience & Education* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1997), 42.

[2] John Dewey, *Experience & Education* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1997), 44.

[3] John Dewey, *Experience & Education* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1997), 69.

[4] Donald Schön, *The Reflective Practitioner* (New York: Basic Books, 1983), 98.

[5] Donald Schön, *The Reflective Practitioner* (New York: Basic Books, 1983), 90.

[6] Donald Schön, *The Reflective Practitioner* (New York: Basic Books, 1983), 81.

[7] Donald Schön, *The Reflective Practitioner* (New York: Basic Books, 1983), 81.