Visual communication: design studio education through working the process

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Abstract

Visual communication designers must possess the intellectual tools to perform creatively and effectively in addressing the complex visual construct and new media. This paper discusses the process of a study with university freshman developing dialogue and thinking in the visual design studio for the realisation of the creative process. In respect the study aims to unfold what is hypothesized as the design process at the root of design education in the department of visual communication design. The paper underlines communication and design thinking focusing on the design learning environment surrounded by the natural premise of connectedness with technology. The study begins by introducing the course material design and reveals teaching and learning strategies on the final project of the basic design course which sets the foundation for the design track in the curriculum. Student works are exemplified in terms of 3D explorations, photography, sketches. Text and self reports are employed as a projection of students thinking process including the view and comments of the instructors in the must course. The result of the study may offer insights for educators in developing teaching and learning approaches through working the process of design thinking, exploration and discovery.

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1. Introduction

In the age of information, within the field of communication, messages that have the creative, different, eye catching and esthetic(quality) edge creates a positive value in communications. Today, the borders between art and technology, information and entertainment are blurred, while the distribution, access and production of information is easier than ever. Visual imagery have “pervasive influence in, both positive and negative senses: they can inform, direct, influence, arouse, confuse and infuriate” (Heskett 2005, 55). Within this environment communication calls for design and seeks creative and impressive solutions in printed medium, moving image and interactive media. Visual communication designers must possess the intellectual tools to perform creatively and effectively in addressing the complex visual construct and new media. Visual communication designers of tomorrow need to think critically and act creatively in order to cope with the global forces. In the era where information is readily available and at our visual disposal the production of effective messages need to be designed. This paper engages itself with visual elements of communication and ordering of communication. The primary objective of this study is to draw the attention to the bottom line of visual design underlining basic design studio education at the core of a visual communication department in a university in Istanbul, Turkey. The introductory design course is presented as the basis of design track in the curriculum; a course where photographic camera is the only visible technology

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exercised. In the beginning the paper briefly introduces a program and curriculum in progress to set an overview. The positioning of technology framed as tool of design rests at the root of the paper which might be provocative at first considering the seamless connection of the department with technology. Dondis had reported on the visual component of expression and communication to be changing sharply with technology in early 1970’s. The importance of visual literacy for the negotiation of visual messages and the impact on communication (1974, x) has long been anticipated. Visual communication is integrated with technology more than ever however technology should not be overestimated in design education. Visual design education is more about how to use technology. The use of technology for the making of design is fostered by the focus on design process and creativity. The act of creativity is a series of stages of exploration (Cook 2008, 169). “Designing is about ideas: needing and finding ideas, examining and identifying their nature, and most important, illustrating and explaining them so they can be realized “ (Aspelund 2010, 5). This study puts technology on hold for the sake of concept development exercised in the final project of the basic design course which limits the use of digital technology. The study engages with the course which forces students to test and improve their skills in traditional technologies. The realization in the use of materials and design principles is anticipated later on. The paper discusses basic design studio experience and subscribes to the consideration that design process is the capital on visual communication supported by technology.

2. Visual Communication and Design

“If one of the purposes of communication design is to create a sense of identity in visual terms, the capacity of new technology to enhance mutual understanding between those who create images and those who receive them offers considerable potential for the future”(Heskt 2005,67).

Visual communication is an interdisciplinary field. The visual communication design education aims to develop in students the competency in design towards creating an effective visual language and communicating with it. Students are exposed to inter-disciplinary visual communication platforms adapting to the current developments in information technology and changing aesthetic values. The program included in this study offers a learning model to develop visual communication design skills in print, time-based and interactive media while promoting the management of the design process. The course program combines theory, technology and practice accommodating visual design thinking and problem solving. The focus of the department is on the exploration of design through a comprehensive analysis of the visual construct integrating visual arts and design through practice oriented workshops and seminars which help the students to understand the nature of visual message. Students create their personal portfolio and present their work in national and international platforms. The department offers technology based courses such as introduction to computer and information technology, drawing, computer for art and communication, introduction to animation, digital image processing, remediation and technocultures, digital video processing, introduction to multimedia, interactive arts and design and computer animation and modeling. ‘Basic design’, ‘drawing’ and ‘animation’ courses complement each other in the first year. ‘Typography’ complements ‘word and image’ course following the design track. ‘Animation’ course introduces the students basic principles of motion besides under structuring the ‘digital image processing’ and ‘digital video processing’ courses in the upper years. Following up on history of graphic design students are introduced to new media and interactivity in the ‘remediation and technocultures’ course where sound design is exercised. ‘Introduction to multimedia’ sets up ‘basics of web design’ and ‘interactive arts and design’. Finally the design track ends with the ‘graduation projects’ where technology and concept development are active forces of visual communication design.

2.1 Basic Design Studio: Core

When asked by the publisher of the book “Six chapters in design” a series of fifty works Milton Glaser offers a display of twenty five pieces accompanied by their sketches or preliminary drawings. Glaser remarks:

“in some cases there is a direct relationship between the sketch and finished work; in others an oblique one. Occasionally there is no seeming relationship at all. What becomes obvious is that the process often reveals more than the work itself” (1997, 129).
The celebrated graphic designer who created the most imitated “I love New York” device when “the collapse of the city as a functioning entity was widely predicted” (Heskett 2005, 59) advocates the approach that “design is a process of searching and seeking” (Meggs, 1997, 11). According to Glaser “the sketch or rehearsal reveals the thought process of the creator in a way that a finished work is unable to do” (129). Effective visual communication dwells on creativity. Glaser’s chapter in the book is a clear portrayal of thought processed and demonstrates the focus on design thinking and process for design making. In the chapter the dialogue with self as private drawings become public (Herbert, 1988). The potential of creative design is exercised in design studio environments. Students meeting with visual design problems need to gain understanding of design principles before taking their required field courses while experiencing the studio work atmosphere. Basic design is a studio course offered to the first year students of all the art and design programs worldwide. Students meeting with visual design problems need to gain understanding of design principles before taking their required field courses while experiencing the studio work atmosphere. “Design studio must not be a place of competition but a place of communication, interaction, share and contemplation“ (Yurekli 2007, 33).

2.1.1. Studio Content

The two-semester studio course designed specifically for visual communication design students aims to introduce design basics as they relate to the issues of visual communication and to mass media applications. Students are exposed to design elements and design principles. The specific objective of the course is two fold. Firstly, the students are provided with some practical design tools and skills, which they could associate with various theoretical issues studied in other courses. Secondly, the students are prepared to use, in the following years, high technology tools and equipment consciously, that is, to have control over those complicated media according to their own specific intentions. The first semester of the course focuses on visual problems related to design on a two-dimensional working field. The studio experience forms the core of the course. The critical discussions of the class-works and home-works couple with the visual aided lectures to provide an elementary framework for the evaluation of the relative communication effectiveness of visual design. Independent study, research, and two and three dimensional exercises are linked together with able tutorial assistance for the synthesis of the various aesthetic media elements assuring student success and growth.

Basic Design II course is the second part of the studio course focusing on visual problems related to design in the context of three dimensions. The aim is to further design skills towards creating an effective visual language and communicating with it. The second part of the course reinforces basics of design which will be employed in print, time-based and interactive media. Students who have already gained an understanding of basic design elements and design principles through black and two dimensional applications earlier in the first semester are further exposed to design skills working with color and texture in three dimensions. As a result of lectures, discussions, demonstration, in-class and take-home projects, group critiques and individual consultation students are expected to:

- Develop employment of design elements and of design principles.
- Develop basic understanding of visual organization of space and relative visual relationships.
- Understand visual composition dynamics and framing.
- Understand visual form in 2D and 3D.
- Exercise oral presentation skills on design.
- Develop critical visual thinking.
- Exercise visual design vocabulary.

Learning Outcomes

- develop a basic design portfolio in various formats
- employ technology as tools of design.
- exhibit effective visual messages
- gain experience in visual production and craftsmanship.
- get involved in the design process through visual thinking
2.2. The Final Project Experience

“What separates a master from the corps of talented designers? A personal creative vision, a unique approach to problem solving. And a distinctive lexicon of visual forms - these attributes lead to works whose authorship is immediately recognizable. Designs by a master permeate the information environment and reverberate as distinctive influence within culture” (Meggs 1997,7)

The final project of the basic design course (2010) was place-based like the previous ones exercised throughout the semester but this time covered the city space of Istanbul unlike the limitation to the neighbouring Beşiktaş region and had three weeks as the deadline. The three instructors running the course with training in architecture, painting and graphic design went after problem solving skills with the aim to foster critical thinking and creativity. According to Didem Wong who is the graphic designer running the course “basic design studio is such fresh in its education style and yet it is a class of pure discovery in which students experiment the many possibilities of design.” In advanced classes to be taken after basic design, students are expected to come up with finished products while their journey and process to finalization is still appreciated. Whereas in the basic design studio students are expected to fully take the very simple steps to be taken to complete the journey. Wong continues by adding that “mistakes, misunderstandings, incompleteness all become a part of their learning process and encourage students to research and experiment further, deeper and even beyond” (2011). As a result, without realizing students start to discuss and give critiques on each others’ projects and share ideas.

The final project (3D) presented an opportunity for basic design students to enhance their way of thinking and concept development during the design process and sharing further ideas in a studio environment through feedbacks and critiques. The basic design studio environment was intended to serve as an experiential step for their future design courses starting the design process to gain experience on the earlier stages of the thinking. Reading and receiving brief for design projects were to simulate a professional environment like in a design studio or an advertising agency. Understanding the problem and expectations on a given topic lead to creative analysis, alternative ways of solving a design problem before simply solving. Wong reports that “seeing, receiving, thinking, conceptualization, experimenting, discussing and execution are the steps of the process to be taken” in the basic design studio. The multidisciplinary perspective of the visual communication program has inevitable benefits from the basic design training to the point teaching and learning objectives benchmark the design education. The “culture capital” of the instructors articulate the delivery of the studio course besides the obvious operational dynamics. “Design-specific capital” (Strickfaden, Heylighen 2010) penetrates. Graphic design when compared to architecture is a discipline that requires students to take a closer look at the details and pay attention to the characteristics of each and every single element. As a result students are trained too focused and might miss the bigger scale. Looking at a bigger scale is not only related with the size, but with the origin of thinking and better seeing. Architectural thinking directs an eye to be able to see from and through everywhere in a greater scale. Gaining different perspectives, design students get well rounded in creative thinking. Graphic design training helps students to gain better craftsmanship by experimenting types of printed media and its materials. Craftsmanship has a strong value in improving visual presentation skills. The fine arts training on the other hand projected on the learning environment unfolding discussions on conceptual thinking informing the studio culture. According to the artist design educator Riza Kuruuzumcu exercising on design making nourished a concious act (2011).

The Istanbul construction project aimed

- To develop the ability to think critical and analytical
- To develop a balance between concept and visual form
- To think critically at all stages of design process and modify action
- To be able to differentiate between levels of thinking and visual language
- To exercise creativity and experiment with different materials
3. Student Learning

The student profile (2010/11) in the basic design studio called for further attention since it brought two kinds of student enrollment together. It should be noted that the challenging nature of the student body is stimulating for further analysis. The department went through a change in student acceptance resulting in enrollment through central entry examination per higher education accreditation board. The students who were successful in the preparatory school exam directly moved to the freshman year and met with the students who were enrolled with talent exam and spent a year in prep school resulting in a challenging mix of students. What is more the class included students minoring in advertising and cinema and television. Also some of the students were on full scholarship ranking well above class average. Nevertheless Riza Kuruuzumcu reports that it is only natural that students would experience the studio according to their choice of themes on the project, personal talents and backgrounds (2011). Respectively one of the students stated “the most important factor that connected me to the studio was the fact the theoretical issues were actually being put to work in the intractivity of the studio experience”. Gokhan Depo further added that

“ I was actually able to execute my ideas. And better yet where I had problems, I was able to move forward through the comments made by class mates and instructors offering different points of view. This was the best part about the final project...What is more it was great to see the process and development of my class-mates work and make projections to our own project ” (2011)

Several teaching and learning approaches were adopted. The Istanbul project to yield a three dimensional construction was supported through a series of lectures and reading. They were exposed to print, time-based and interactive media on the city space of Istanbul. The challenging group of students were to conceptualize their
thoughts and visually express their idea on the final project. The final project fostered the design process. Students were asked to come up with a concept or main idea and develop design accordingly (Turan&Atlaş 2003,15). Students were asked to explore Istanbul with photographic studies under six themes namely, unexpect Istanbul, the view project, compare and contrast, literal Istanbul, Istanbul photo journal, Istanbul and me.

The major challenge presented itself in the initiation of the process. The positive results of a study done exploring the relationship between the quality of sketches and the quality of text among architecture students were encouraging (Soygenis & Soygenis, Erktin, 2010). Respectively, the final project adopted writing as a “creative design tool” (2010, 292). Students explored in a series of quick diagrams and took notes. Students creative and critical thinking abilities were supported through their writing, diagramming and model making. Discussions were held regarding the making process regarding the themes.

Student works demonstrated that students were able to develop the ability to employ extraordinary material and brain storm. They were able to look at their work from different perspectives and put their conscious to work. The discovery of the extraordinary and the ordering of the visual form was fulfilling and deserved praise. What is more design making was encouraging and raised the motivation to make visual statements. It is important to note that students were able to be critical to their own work.

3.1 Process: Concept Development

“In fact the final project was the most enjoyable of all. The only limit was our own imagination. This was great. Also we were to use different materials. This was not mandatory but was coming from thinking what would serve my idea best. The project could very well have been about “me” rather than “Istanbul”. This is the way I looked at it. I was able to reflect my feelings and thoughts. The choice of material, form and color would reflect me. Same was valid for my classmates. I do not know may be it was very important for me; but this project added a lot to my development. The difference did not come from the choice of project. Rather it had to do with the effect of the project on me” (Gokhan Depo, 2011)
The Istanbul project accommodated students who have started the project with a concept and improved it through the process. “Creative visual thinking is about solving communication problems, conceptualizing, exploring and experimentation” (Landa 1998, 7). Gokhan’s project was one of the best examples of conceptual working process. He had very strong thoughts on the project just within the earlier stages. He wanted the project to represent his own Istanbul and focused on Istanbul’s seven hilled geography by displaying them as breasts. Breasts were decided to depict the city’s attractiveness and charm. He reported that the project not only got him involved in the design thinking but also enabled him to employ what he learnt from the previous exercises up to the final project. According to Gokhan Depo it was not enough just to think of breasts to work as visual concept to speak of the seven hills of Istanbul. He had to get engaged in the formulation of color, texture, issues of scale, negative and positive space relationships besides the proximity issue. The view project called for sharing of students’ memory of Istanbul. Esra Goksel did not like the rising buildings in Istanbul and found them distractive. Since all these buildings covered every piece of land popping nonstop here and there she covered her project with popcorns and other corns ready to pop any moment. Esra depicted highrises made of popcorns and unoccupied lands were planted with corn kernels as a means of nonstop constructing city ready to be exploded. Another student, Aslıhan Kaldı thought of Istanbul as a female character and used nesting dolls for her project. She wanted to articulate the fact that Istanbul is a city with full of surprises and it keeps changing once you are in it.

Some of the students on the other hand started the process with a halfway and rough concept and developed it parallel to the design during the process. In terms of using material and developing their concepts through class critiques Alizé and Gülçin Civelek took steps further. Alizé experimented with different materials from glass to acetate. She studied historic layers of Istanbul using Istanbul map visuals from past till today. Gülçin wanted to work on a project employing batteries but could not discover her already existed concept and tried very hard to explore a new direction until she realized that concept of energy worked with batteries best. Gülçin’s project was a visual description of Istanbul’s vibrant life-style, especially night life and the activiness. Gülçin used batteries of different color as an indication of liveliness. Rusted ones were to represent consumption of life in Istanbul. The construction included the two continents of Istanbul; Asia and Europe.
‘Istanbul and me’ theme called for the discussion of students identity (designer, artist, student, etc.) related to the city they are living in. They were asked to identify how they are interacting with the environment and everyday values of living in a big city. Emir was a bit too stuck with the idea of brain and insisted to keep it no matter what. He hardly got interested in changing direction during the critiques so he made little touch ups and add ons after all the views shared. He painted parts of the brain in color to point out how the city in itself is multicultural and loaded with people from different cultures (underground culture, etc).

‘Literal Istanbul’ called for literal elements from the natural and physical environment of Istanbul. With the visual crowd of the city, the silent messages were waiting to be discovered.
As Rudolf Arnheim has stated ” the creative process of designing, being an activity of the mind can not be directly observed” (Victor 1989, 74) but can be traced in the act of making similar to sketching. Deniz’s process was not visual, but verbal and was anyhow developed very well. He re-designed the city with everyday packagings we simply use then throw away. Consumed products and their packages as garbage were collected and presented in such a 3D structure that they were as if recycled to represent the crooked urbanization.

4. Concluding Remarks

The interdisciplinary visual communication design education calls for different problem solving skills. Subscribing to Tsunguang Wang’s position creativity is exercised through the core experience of design studio education (2010,129). Basic design studio education is structured to focus on design process and creativity exploring ideas through photographing, model making, sketching. Establishing parallel practices with Nancy Spanbroek’s architectural design studio experience it can be asserted that critical thinking process can translate into effective action supporting student learning despite student submitting a minimal finished project (2010,117). Studio learning benefits “observation, cognitive reasoning and/or communication” offering opportunities to be seized in the professional practice for thinking beyond (119). The seamless connection with technology should support the concept development. While the culture capital of instructors inform the studio experience the inclusion of struggling students to the interactive body of the studio needs negotiation. Self directed or independent learning are natural part of the studio experience. The study can be furthered following up on the student profile moving to the upperclass, the design specific capital survey of design educators and the design studio activity.

References


