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How graphic design conclusion project is taught at PUC-Rio, Brazil

Izabel Oliveira and Rita-Maria Couto
Pontifical Catholic University, Brazil

Abstract

This paper is based on a master’s degree dissertation, which presented the results of a two-year research study carried out to reach the apperception and to evaluate the pedagogy of the Conclusion Project – a term project within the graphic design programme, which is offered at the Arts and Design Department of the Pontifical Catholic University of Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. It briefly describes some aspects of design education in Brazil, the instruments and techniques used by the researcher to capture and gather data, the qualitative content analyses methodological approach used to analyse the data and uncover evidences, and the inferences that were made possible by categorising and analysing those data. The article presents the methodological approach used to teach the Conclusion Project, the pedagogic practice used to shape the dynamics of the classes, and an appraisal of this pedagogy, innovative in terms of Brazilian design education, by answering some questions proposed by Kramer to evaluate pedagogic initiatives. The findings from this fieldwork were supported by pedagogic theories. Suggestions for further studies were presented.

Keywords: Brazil, graphic design, conclusion project, pedagogic practice, teaching approach

Introduction – a framework for design education in Brazil

This article abridges the results of research carried out to reach the apperception and to evaluate the Conclusion Project, a term project that is part of an undergraduate graphic design programme, offered at the Arts and Design Department of the Pontifical Catholic University of Rio de Janeiro (PUC-Rio), in Brazil.

Since the creation of the Industrial Design School in 1962, the first one in the country, the backbone of most undergraduate design programmes in Brazil is formed by a sequence of term projects. By addressing the process of configuring objects or visual information systems, these projects bring together several branches of knowledge and skills acquired in other areas.

In 1987, the Brazilian Federal Education Council recommended that project-based activities be inserted in all the course semesters, with the projects load being equal to 50% of the curriculum course load. These recommendations have led to many discussions and debates by several Brazilian scholars in the design area. Many see the recommendations as giving excessive weight to the project-based activities (Couto, 1991, 1997, 1998; Bomfim 1994, 1996, 1999; Guedes, 1997; Denis, 1998; Leite, 1999).

The curricula for design courses in Brazil are currently being reviewed, after new official regulations were published in 1996. The new guidelines pave the way for improvements that, hopefully, will prove fertile and will result in changes in present views as well as in the willingness to break away from traditional ways of organising the teaching process. This opportunity was the main force that drove the research effort. In reviewing the curricula, one should consider some issues that are essential to design, such as: its interdisciplinary character; the interrelation between theory and practice; the difficulty of inserting different forms of knowledge into the project practice (Bomfim, 1997).

As an interdisciplinary activity requiring logical and scientific foundations, designing pursues ethical and political intentions, interacts with the environment and generates culture. The width of design’s field of activity is one of the reasons for its complexity, making it difficult to build a theory on
which stand out: operational and academic guidelines; the meaning of the Conclusion Project; students’ motivation, interest and autonomy; problem identification; definition of the target public; development of a theoretical background to support the term project; project’s viability requirements; evaluation criteria and project’s process recording.

The interpretation and inferences made possible by the record units and the system of categories led to a better understanding of the Conclusion Project dynamics. They also supported the appraisal of the pedagogic practice used to conduct this project-based activity, according to the guidelines suggested by Kramer (1997). Kramer upholds the idea that a ‘pedagogic proposal’ is an ongoing path, always opened to reconstructions. Her view is an opposition to that paradigmatic view which recommends that ‘pedagogic projects’ should give emphasis to the definition of an institutional profile in which whole and parts, stages and duties are both foreseen and defined beforehand (Moretto, 1997).

The theoretical background for the research also drew from the following thematic axes and authors: project and pedagogic proposal (Kramer, 1997; Moretto, 1997); teaching design in Brazil (Bonsiepe, 1975; Margolin, 1993; Bomfim, 1997, 1999; Whiteley, 1997; Guedes, 1997; Niemeyer, 1998; Couto, 1991, 1997, 1998); the teaching and learning process (Jobim, 1995; Konder, 1992; Cunha, 1994; Jobim, 1995; Freire, 1999; Perrenoud, 1999; Morin, 2000).

Capturing and gathering data

As a condensation of a master’s degree dissertation, this paper presents some aspects of a case study carried out to apperceive and evaluate Project VI, the Conclusion Project.

The research analyses 10 years of the ongoing pedagogic practice used to teach the Conclusion Project at PUC-Rio. The main purpose of the research was to investigate the strategies, methodologies and to appraise the process of this project-based activity (Oliveira, 2001).

The methodological approach used by Oliveira was qualitative content analysis, based on the paradigm of Bardin (1977) and Holsti (1969). The analysis was supported by bibliographic and exploratory research, including documents and notes taken during lectures and classroom activities. Interviews with teachers and students were also extensively used. The research lasted two years and covered 240 class hours. The work involved 200 students, and 40 teachers, 10 of them acting as tutors and 30 as advisors.

For the analysis of the Conclusion Project dynamics, Oliveira used a main body of documents composed by the transcriptions of 23 final evaluation sessions of students’ work that took place in July of 2000. From this material the researcher drew 196 record units. These record units captured statements of the main participants in the Conclusion Project – students and teachers – concerning various aspects of this project-based activity.

The analysis of the record units made possible the definition of 16 categories of analysis, among which stand out: operational and academic guidelines; the meaning of the Conclusion Project; students’ motivation, interest and autonomy; problem identification; definition of the target public; development of a theoretical background to support the term project; project’s viability requirements; evaluation criteria and project’s process recording.

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Conclusion Project methodological approach: a description

The design course offered by the Arts and Design Department of PUC-Rio was created in 1978, based on the curricular model common to all the design schools active in Brazil at that time.

From 1981 onwards, however, the Arts and Design Department began to implement a teaching model that reflected the Brazilian context, which was open to individual inquiries, and aimed at differentiated teaching for designers. The new model led, little by little, to the configuration of a teaching approach, nowadays called Partnership Design, which has been in use for about 20 years to teach project-based activities at undergraduate level in PUC-Rio.

According to this approach, the student, or group of students, is encouraged to choose, within a real
In accordance with the partnership design basic idea, the Conclusion Project values and stimulates the students’ involvement with community problems. The teachers emphasise the interdisciplinary character of design and its comprehensiveness, stressing the pertinence of focusing on subjects that make students stay tuned to the new demands of society. Students should not start their work from any preconceived problem situation. Students must elaborate their project proposals, defining their area of interest, defining the problem and objectives, and justifying the relevance of their proposal.

The project teaching is delivered in weekly four-hour long classes, most of this time being used in the following up of projects by tutors. In the middle and at the end of the school term, sessions for the evaluation of the students’ work are undertaken. At both mid-term and final evaluations, tutors and advisors are free to make any comments and suggestions they wish. Students prepare their oral presentations, organising their ideas so as to express themselves clearly and objectively.

Before the final evaluation, the students submit copies of reports describing the project’s process to the members of the evaluation committee.

The six classes of students share a common space, comprising three adjoining rooms, an important factor in the dynamics of the Conclusion Project, allowing free circulation of students and teachers as well as the spontaneous creation of discussion groups.

To establish the guidelines for the Conclusion Project, an updated version of a manual is issued every new school term. This manual groups all the documents concerning the organisation of this term project.

Evaluating Conclusion Project pedagogic practice

The systematic analysis of the pedagogic practice used to teach Conclusion Project in the design course at PUC-Rio disclosed some strong points as well as some possibilities for improvements.

The activities of faculty members and students were critically reviewed, yielding the main result of a better understanding, an apperception, of the principles that guide the Conclusion Project.

The main conclusions resulting from the research undertaken by Oliveira are presented below, in the...
As an ongoing proposal, the Conclusion Project is being planted, is taking root and spreading out, facing all kinds of problems. The strengthening of the interaction mechanisms and of the possibility to question and modify, as yet not quite clear, will eventually follow as a consequence of practice. It is worth remembering that in the process of building a proposal there is no single home stretch, but a constant arrival at new knowledge (Kramer, 1997).

The designer does not have to be the author of all parts of a multimedia project. How do we teach this to our students? (Evaluation Committee Member statement; Operational and Academic Guidelines Category [12 RU])

Are the purposes of the Conclusion Project's proposal clearly stated?

The proposal's objectives appear only indirectly in some guidelines on the choice of themes and project problems, as well as in the specification of evaluation criteria. Such objectives are not, however, clearly stated in any chapter of the manual. This oversight should be corrected in the manual’s next editions.

[The student] shows at the very beginning of the evaluation session the end result of the project, describing and justifying his options ... the quality of this presentation was poor. (Evaluation Committee Member statement; Evaluation Category [36 RU]).

Are the knowledge and theoretical foundations that constitute the basis of the Conclusion Project clearly stated?

The analysis of the categories revealed some current lines of thought represented by authors such as Morin, Bakhtin, Dewey, Pain, Bonsiepe, Couto and Bomfim, among others. However, the pedagogic foundations of the Conclusion Project are not formally stated.

Despite that omission, it is possible to see a link between design and the different areas of knowledge in the discourse of the participants involved with the proposal. Because of this, it is considered that the Conclusion Project has been consolidating an implicitly consistent theoretical basis over time. The dialogic and polyphonic model associated to the pedagogic practice makes the link between different fields of knowledge easier to achieve.

I started the project with an analogy, comparing urban tribes with digital typography ... I
tried to define these tribes, but it was very difficult. This search led me to the post-modernism. I changed my direction... I needed to understand the individual's behaviour... the human being is one or another, according to the situation... The typography is not also an exact, limited or neutral thing... Then, I ended going back to Bauhaus. (Student statement; Development of the Theoretical Background Category [39 RU])

**Suggestions for further studies**

Several opportunities for future work in the area of design teaching were identified, with an emphasis on the following: the continuous improvement of the Conclusion Project pedagogic practice, through the application of the content analysis methodology; the comparison of the Conclusion Project proposal with proposals from the other five term projects comprising the design programme at PUC-Rio; the comparison of the dynamics used at PUC-Rio with similar experiences taking place in other design courses.

**References**


The concept of Dewey (Cunha, 1994) for whom true experience is the one that takes place in the community by means of actions involving cooperation, applies directly to the Conclusion Project.

Are there permanent mechanisms for critically reporting and sharing experiences in the Conclusion Project?

The operation of this term project proposal plans for two meetings per school term between the coordinator and tutors to discuss the project’s proposals and evaluate the term project as a whole. In addition to this, a regular exchange of documents occurs between advisors and tutors reporting occurrences and making comments on the progress of the assignments.

She used weapons of citizen, designer, reporter... She piled up information, rescued things that were lost. It is not strange that she ended up making a newspaper. She worked like a ‘design report’, hearing everybody involved with the subject. (Evaluation Committee Member statement; Evaluation Category [36 RU])

The best moments in which to report and share experiences are the mid-term and final evaluations sessions, when participants interact and a great many of the dialogues take place. This exchange is very important because, as Bakhtin says, only the chain of verbal interaction can give the word the light of its significance.

‘A specific funk group was consulted during the study of alternatives for a publication directed to urban tribes... I have tried to do each page with the face of a funk. I presented to them... they said they did not want to read. I changed the layout... it became a fanzine face, a design presence... I showed again to then and they found it very cool. They asked me to do a poster... they wanted something with the face of a magazine... the size of the publication was chosen starting from chats with this funk group...’ (Student statement; Partnership Relation Category [10 RU]).

The concept of Dewey (Cunha, 1994) for whom true experience is the one that takes place in the community by means of actions involving cooperation, applies directly to the Conclusion Project.


