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The role of research in curriculum planning: a case study

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Abstract

In a paper given at the DATER 91 Conference, a research programme characterising the role of drawing in the graphic design process was described. Subsequently the implications of the study for the curriculum of design courses in the HE sector have been investigated.

By taking a taxonomy of drawing usage developed as part of the original study as a guide, projects with BA and MA Communication Media students have been evaluated and currently the revision of the drawing curriculum for design students on the First Year Studies Programme at the Glasgow School of Art is being addressed.

It is hoped that the First Year Studies Programme will also become the focus for research into drawing activity across the wide spectrum of art and design disciplines. To this end a Drawing Research Network is to be set up at Glasgow through which the work of researchers may be encouraged and enhanced.

As a method of both analysing and presenting the findings of a research programme characterising the role of drawing in the graphic design process, a taxonomy was developed. In the period since the first study was completed the taxonomy has been used by the researcher, essentially as an aide-mémoire for the data collected in the original extensive programme of analysis, but it has been found to be in many respects too complex for more general usage. Now a more simplified and generalised model is being designed so that it may form the basis of agreed terminology and provide a pattern of analysis to assist a course team in their development and evaluation of the First Year Studies drawing programme for the Glasgow School of Art.

The original taxonomy entitled ‘Taxonomy of the Uses of Drawing, Types of Drawing Produced, and the Drawing Abilities Required for the Graphic Design Process’ was in three sections. Section One described the use of drawing for managerial tasks, essentially those tasks involving consultation and organisation, conducted by senior designers and creative directors. Section Two described the use of drawing for executive tasks by which was meant the preparation of design solutions by members of the design team. In Section Three the use that graphic designers made of drawing for what were termed ‘Self development’ tasks was set out.

The taxonomy was presented in a tabular form and on the left hand side of the table the main phases of the design process were indicated and were divided into basic procedures. Then, in turn, procedures were divided into individual tasks. Movement down the table showed the broad sequence of events followed by graphic designers in developing design solutions. The design process was divided into a series of phases; the ‘Preparation Phase’, the ‘Main Creative Phase’, and the ‘Production Phase’. In the case of the ‘Preparation Phase’ for example, procedures would include ‘Accepting briefing from the client’, ‘Passing on briefing’ and ‘Planning programme of job’. The tasks described as being performed for each of these procedures indicated more detail. For example, for the procedure ‘Accepting briefing from the client’; ‘Recording information’; ‘Recording ideas’ and ‘Checking understanding’ were described.

Moving across the table, the ‘Use of drawing’, the ‘Type of drawing produced’ and the implied ‘Required drawing ability’ needed to produce such drawings were described for each of these individual tasks. For example, when accepting briefing it was found that for the task of ‘Recording information’, the use of drawing was ‘To record visual information’, the type of drawing produced would be a ‘Visual note’ and that the drawing ability required to produce that visual note would include the capacity to draw at ‘Speed’, the understanding of various ‘Visual conventions’, and ‘Recall of visual information’.

It should be noted that the term ‘task’ has been used to denote a piece of work; a specific undertaking to be carried out. The task represented the level of operation within designerly activity which was the main subject of scrutiny in the original study. Therefore the use of drawing involved in the performance of tasks represented the core of the taxonomy.

A complication occurred in the development of a systematic categorisation of the tasks of the design process arising from the finding that such tasks are
not necessarily conducted sequentially but will frequently be performed simultaneously during the progression of a procedure. For example, during a briefing session, designers were found to be querying various aspects of the job while making visual notes of the information received, and recording the first ideas prompted by the occasion through doodles and rapid scribbles. They may also be called upon to produce basic visuals or schematic descriptions of solution types to check for understanding with the client.

This phenomenon of ‘simultaneity’ or parallel processing was found to be very influential in terms of the designer’s use of drawing and in the development of the drawing abilities that graphic designers need. It became clear that not only is it necessary that designers are able to produce a wide range of drawing types but that they are able to combine these ‘strategically’ according to the circumstances of the particular design procedure in which they are involved. However, the limitations of the tabular form meant that it was not possible to show this simultaneity. Hence the tasks were presented in the order most commonly described by respondents in the original study.

One of the problems encountered in the original study was the allocation of specific names to particular types of drawing. It was clear that practising designers themselves have very little need to adopt specific terms for the various drawing types other than that occasioned by communicating among themselves. But for the purpose of the research and indeed for the curriculum developments planned, a broadly agreed terminology was deemed essential. A broad ranging approach was adopted in order to arrive finally at a systematic and consistent method of naming drawing types which, as far as possible, reflected the terminology used in the profession, but at the same time allowed for a greater differentiation between the types. Where possible, terms were identified from the scripts of the interviews conducted in the original study. In some instances, when designers were asked to think more carefully about terminology, many of them were able to contribute terms for either drawing activities or for drawing types, especially when an actual drawing activity or type could be used as a point of reference. Once a list of potential names had been established for all the distinct types of drawing identified in the study, this list was then checked with a number of designers from the organisation used as the case study. By this means, 25 distinct types of drawing were

Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>DRAWING ACTIVITY</th>
<th>TYPE OF DRAWING PRODUCED</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>To note information</td>
<td>Visual note</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To pass on information</td>
<td>Instruction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To produce a schematic representation</td>
<td>Schematic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To express three-dimensions</td>
<td>Projection</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To plan approach or production</td>
<td>Plan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To plan out the contents of a magazine or book</td>
<td>Imposition</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To plan out the contents of time-based media</td>
<td>Story board</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To draw from observation</td>
<td>Sketch</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To copy</td>
<td>Copy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To trace</td>
<td>Trace</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To doodle</td>
<td>Doodle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To scribble</td>
<td>Scribble</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To visualise</td>
<td>Visualisation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To indicate</td>
<td>Indication</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To lay out</td>
<td>Layout</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To outline the content of photographic material</td>
<td>Key-line [Outline]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To render</td>
<td>Rendering</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To demonstrate type of illustration</td>
<td>Trial illustration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To demonstrate type of lettering</td>
<td>Trial lettering</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To produce mock-up of relationship of elements</td>
<td>Dummy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To specify</td>
<td>Specification</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To demonstrate for purposes of commissioning</td>
<td>Demonstration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To draw up artwork</td>
<td>Draft</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To refine aspects of artwork</td>
<td>Refinement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To produce artwork creatively</td>
<td>Resolution</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
identified and named and are set out in Table 1.

Having categorised the different uses of drawing, and identified the different types of drawing produced, the final stage in the categorisation of the role of drawing in the graphic design process was to try to describe the corresponding drawing abilities required.

At an early stage in the research programme it was apparent that the drawing abilities of graphic designers included the capacity to appreciate and understand drawings and the capacity to conceptually and commission drawn images. Therefore, the need for, and the development of, such cognitive as well as practical drawing abilities was also considered.

Analysis of the issues for this part of the study relied far more on individual interpretation than other aspects but eventually 23 distinct abilities were determined and these are set out in Table 2.

In order to employ this list as the basis for describing the required drawing abilities in the form of a taxonomy, it was first necessary to select a succinct term representing the ‘essence’ of the ability given in Table 2. Table 3 sets out these terms. That is to say, for the sake of brevity and facilitating a tabular format, it was necessary to use short, succinct, but nevertheless explicit terms. For example the term ‘precision’ was used to describe the ability to draw accurately, ‘speed’ was used to describe the ability to draw quickly and ‘composition’ was used for the ability to organise and lay out drawn imagery.

In order to fulfil the desired aim to assist the course team in curriculum planning and evaluation, it will be necessary to not only simplify but to extend the taxonomy. Although it was found that graphic designers make a very wide ranging use of drawing, the First Year Studies programme is required to establish the drawing skills of a wide range of design and fine art students. Whereas it is hoped, that the structure devised for the original taxonomy will help to inform future analysis, it will be vital to find a means to investigate and record the intrinsic differences between drawing usage for specialist activity, as well as a means of providing a mechanism for identifying shared characteristics.

Table 2

1. Ability to control a range of specialist equipment
2. Ability to control a range of media
3. Ability to draw accurately
4. Ability to draw quickly
5. Ability to set out or lay out drawn imagery
6. Ability to bring together a synthesis of imagery
7. Ability to imitate the qualities of visual imagery
8. Ability to understand how drawn imagery has been constructed
9. Ability to observe accurately from life
10. Ability to assess the elements of visual styles and ‘fashions’
11. Ability to assess the elements of visual imagery on a cultural or historical basis
12. Ability to judge the appropriateness and quality of drawn images
13. Ability to conceive and depict three-dimensional forms
14. Ability to plan out sequences of actions or images
15. Ability to resolve ideas in a visual form
16. Ability to use drawing to instruct others
17. Ability to communicate visual ideas to others
18. Ability to conceptualise and commission potential images
19. Ability to recall and use conventions and drawing systems
20. Ability to memorise visual material
21. Ability to recall visual material
22. Ability to assess the appropriate use of drawing
23. Ability to use drawing strategically in the context of the graphic design process.
Table 3: Succinct terms employed to describe drawing ability in the taxonomy

1. *Technical control
2. Media control
3. Precision
4. Speed
5. Composition
6. Synthesis
7. Imitation
8. De-construction
9. Observation
10. Flair
11. Visual literacy
12. Judgement
13. Spatial
14. Planning
15. Visualisation
16. Instruction
17. Communication
18. Commissioning
19. Conventions
20. Visual memory
21. Recall
22. Appropriate use
23. Strategic use

*The numbers here correspond to those in the list of required drawing abilities in Table 2.

References