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Changing Perspectives: the Relationship Between Research, Writing and Visual Practice in MA Design Education

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This paper will look in more detail at these issues but also at the revisions that the critical context program at the MA Communication Design at Central Saint Martins College of Art and Design in London has undertaken this year to produce a more integrated approach. The aim was to structure the program in such a way that the students could better understand how design qualifies as a research method, how critical theory can advance their ability to ask questions with regard to design and finally to build a stronger connection between studio work and the dissertation.

1. Background and context

1.1 An MA in Communication Design at Central St Martins

The MA Communication Design course at Central Saint Martins College of Art & Design is a two-year full-time program with a final outcome of a body of visual work and a written dissertation ranging between 5,000 to 8,000 words. The course has four pathways or specialisations – graphic design, illustration, digital media and photography. The MA is unitized, with the two-year period divided into

three units, each with a specific outcome. The students undertake the first two units in the first year of their study, and the third unit is a period of self-initiated study with individual tutorials.

In the history of the course, the critical context component has always sat uneasily in relation to studio practice. While there have been attempts to integrate the two components of the course, either through flexible marking or submission dates, the critical context or 'written element' has always stood separately. Tutors who handle studio practice have never been involved with critical context and vice versa. However, there is some history of involving both studio and context tutors in the final assessment of the dissertation.

The course has recently undergone some modification with the primary intention of bringing the various components of the MA together in a more holistic model. There is an interest in initiating briefs that involve both studio and context. Changes include a more prolonged time period allowing context tutors to introduce students to aspects of research and writing that aid their design practice. The outcome has ceased to be merely a separated dissertation, distinct and removed from their practical work, but an outcome that is a body of work. As this modification was put into practice only in autumn 2007, this is the first year and the model is a work in progress.

While students in various sciences are exposed to the idea of research at a very early stage, design students who enroll on the MA are likely not to understand their work in terms of research before they enroll. The idea of extending context beyond one's own visual practice and maybe that of one's role models often seems foreign; and when it comes to choosing a research topic many design students appear overwhelmed. This is due in part to the fact that the course attracts a large international community and many students who have strong portfolios have not been exposed to concepts of analysis, critical thinking, or dialogue. For these students, research is a somewhat alien concept; and they do not understand how this can enrich their work. Additionally, a number of students have English as their second language or have not written a dissertation previously; and these are hurdles that need to be overcome and accounted

for while teaching. These premises present design education with a predicament: On one hand MA students are actively encouraged to view their design context in a broader sense and explore areas that are connected to their practice. On the other hand they are often focused on visual aspects and unsure as to how to present or deal with concepts that may have a verbal or written outcome.

Another factor that influences the situation is the role of research in design education. Though design research enjoys some tradition in British graduate and postgraduate design programs, there is very often a lack of integration between studio work and the dissertation up to the MA level. It is as if Frayling's antiquated trinity [1993] has been cemented into the fundamentals of British design education: the dissertation is where students do research *into* design, while the studio is the place to do research *for* design. Thus the part that is officially seen as research is very often a piece of critical theory, seen as slightly detached from the studio work and without further impact on the future career of the designer.

1.2 Critical Context Programme

The critical context program is the only route within the MA Communication Design course where students from different pathways come together. The aim of the program is to equip students with research skills, encourage critical thinking and analysis and impart some sense of a larger contemporary design context [2007]. This is done in different ways through the four facets of the program [Fig. 1 → 280]:

1. Critical thinking workshops conducted in the autumn by the team, which introduces the international community of students to research methods and critical thinking.
2. Lectures on media and cultural theory, which run through the autumn and spring terms.
3. Research seminars conducted in the spring.
4. A series of lectures by design and visual practitioners, and film screenings.

The program is managed by three tutors, all of whom teach part-time and have full-time creative practices. Each member of the team brings different specialisations, experiences and skills.

2. Changing the perspective/designerly ways of knowing

Most designers are used to working on a given brief. Accordingly the thinking, working and research that go with the brief is very much goal-oriented. As the aim is to create a more explorative research culture and a different way of thinking, three workshops were devised. These workshops were developed as an aid to help students contextualise their work, interests and ideas and then use these ideas as a starting point for a research project.

2.1 'Memories of the Future': the First Research Workshop

Students were asked to reflect on their aspirations as designers and represent a design manifesto by means of a found object. They were asked to give the object a caption that would communicate and contextualise their manifesto. During the workshop students were encouraged to consider their object as a part of a 'Memories of the Future' exhibition. They were asked to reflect on the manner in which they were displaying their chosen exhibit, about what they wanted to communicate and whether they were successful in their communication.

At the end of the workshop students were asked to write a short paragraph describing their choice of found object and how it represented their aspirations as a designer. They were also asked to comment on whether they thought they were successful in their communication.

Summation of the workshop and its final outcomes:

1. The workshop was useful in enabling the students to feel comfortable in talking about their work and in getting them to present outcomes that were not design/style based but more content-led.
2. Students described the 'found object' brief as 'liberating'. Given the freedom to choose a non-designed object, objects ranged from blocks of cement to more interactive objects such as a pot of tea and cakes.
3. Some students gave the brief a more active, performance-style interpretation. Others challenged the brief. Both interpretations showed an 'owning' of the brief which was very positive. One

graphic design student was inspired to create a website of his manifesto.

4. One drawback was that a number of students interpreted the brief in a very personal way that was unconnected to the larger design context. Tutors had to work hard to bring them out of themselves and to start talking about how their work related to the contemporary context.
5. The main reason that this brief was formulated was to introduce the student to connections between studio and context in a direct way with interconnecting briefs. However, as the briefs were conducted entirely separately, it was unclear as to its value in achieving this aim.

2.2 'Eight Influences': the Second Research Workshop

Students were asked to note down eight things that had the most influence on their design practice. Suggestions given included collaborations or the work of other creative practitioners, challenges/problems, mentors/role models, concepts, artefacts, cultural contexts and visual chronicles. They were supposed to write each influence on a separate Post-It note, also noting briefly what it was about that person or subject that influenced their work. As part of the workshop, students were asked to present to the group three to five influences on which they received feedback from the tutors and their peer group.

During the second part of the workshop, students were given an A2 sheet of paper and asked to create a map of their influences. Further connections were encouraged by the creation of more influences or laying out links and connections between the eight influences. The intention of this workshop was to encourage the design student to look above and beyond their personal selves and expressions. Yet at the same time, introduce them to the concept of research as a personally initiated directive.

Summation of the workshop and its final outcomes:

1. Student feedback indicated that they found this exercise useful, particularly because it forced them to analyse their practice in terms of distinct subject areas.

2. The task of asking students to note down what it was about the person/subject area that influenced the work was an important one. Presenting their influences allowed students to indicate their knowledge of the chosen subject area and its context (and thereby their natural ability for research).
3. Feedback from students indicated that having everyone present their influences in front of the group was a source of inspiration. Students began to see themselves as a research community brimming with ideas.
4. The mapping exercise was thought provoking. Students started to see connections and links between influences that they had not realised in their work. They also were encouraged to see their work as a starting point for an infinite number of new connections and it forced them to describe their sometimes extremely generalised influences into more specific terms.
5. Making connections between seemingly unrelated ideas provided students insight into new creative possibilities. Also, venturing outside of a single discipline or pathway inspired students.

2.3 'Making Connections': the Final Research Workshop

Students were given two texts (groups 1 & 2: texts by Roland Barthes and Vilem Flusser, Groups 3 & 4: texts by Desmond Morris and Georges Bataille) and asked to create a new piece of writing of at least 200 words that was based on connections they saw between the two texts. The brief gave students strong guidelines: a) your exploration must involve reading and analysing the texts (what ideas does the author refer to? is the narrative a metaphor for a larger concept? what key images are used? etc.) b) follow your own responses and act on your initiative (what, according to you, are the connections between the texts?) c) use research to make connections that are interesting and unusual and take you outside your comfort zone (what other work has the author produced that explores similar concepts? in what time period/culture was this text written? what influences are displayed in the text? what other texts/events/objects have in turn been inspired by it?)

Summation of the workshop and its final outcome:

1. Students found this exercise a challenge. A number of students were intimidated by the requirements of the brief (asking them to interrogate and make connections with texts and generate their own text). A number were unused to writing.
2. The more complex texts (such as Barthes) brought out more interesting responses. Some students used the complexity of the text to their advantage by researching the author's context and other work by him in order to understand the text better. Others searched for the original French text for the same reason.
3. Most student responses (in group 2) were conceptual and less artifact-based. There were very different (and valuable) responses from the group, which was encouraging.
4. With this brief, there was less of a designed/artifact-based response to the brief.

3. What If: 'When Thinking goes on Holiday'

3.1 Dissertation Seminars

At this point and with the help of the workshops students had mostly located their research interests based on their mind-maps and they had started to investigate their topics. They should have got very close to defining their research questions as well as the primary and secondary sources of their research. During the next phase, students would meet their supervisor in a seminar. These seminars take place every three weeks on average. The groups comprising approximately sixteen students contain a mix of all pathways. The idea being that the discussion should not be centred or dominated by a single particular subject area. During the seminar each student reflects on his recent progress, successes, problems and frustrations and discusses these issues with other students and the supervisor. The alternative would be to offer one-on-one tutorials. However, these have shown to support two tendencies: some students tend to push the responsibility for their research question and topic to the supervisor, and the supervisor with her/his greater experience and knowledge might unintentionally exert too much influence on the individual topic. The seminar, in contrast, forces the students to take responsibility and develop ownership of their topic.

3.2 The 'What-If' Brief

One of the aims of critical context on the MA Communication Design is to develop a stronger relationship between studio, theory and writing. While there is currently a strong element of writing about practice inherent to the program, it is important to make students understand that theory might also work as an inspiration for the visual practice. Accordingly the students were presented with a brief that asked them to carry their research question into the studio and thus to examine their topic on a more hands-on level. This brief operates on the basis of the question "what if?". Students were supposed to investigate conceptual possibilities arising from their research questions. Designers, used to design briefs to which their response is 'what should I do?' were pushed instead to ask 'what should I think?'

The following are a few examples of the varied and interesting briefs that students devised for themselves: one student whose research question centred on performance art as a vehicle to communicate scientific theory came up with the idea for a park with a trail that could teach its visitors about quantum theory. One photography student used an occult text, 'The Lesser Key of Solomon' to create avatars for a new videogame, which she modeled in clay, while a digital media student used campaign maps of the Vietnam War as a template to demonstrate changes and lines of influence in contemporary rock music from the period. An illustration student dealing with the concept of taboos in design, asked the question: What if I manipulated existing imagery by placing them in different contexts, changing colours and texts? Would this make the taboo image less or more offensive? The project using highly sensitive imagery generated thoughtful responses from the audience as it caused them to question the nature of taboos [Fig. 2 ↪ 279]. Another graphic design student, researching the impersonalisation and isolation created by advertising in populated public spaces, created a personal project which used a Philip Larkin poem on a train display screen as a way of making connections [Fig. 3 ↪ 279].

Summation and outcomes of the what-if brief:

1. The nature of the brief (in particular, the question 'what if...') forced some students to decide on their research topic. For

- others, it clarified their topic. Interestingly, there were some students for whom the brief initiated a total rethink of their research project. One illustration student found that in preparing for her 'what if' presentation on aspects of children's book design, she had taken her subject as far as it would usefully go; she consequently went on to research the depiction of the female breast in western art with extremely encouraging results.
2. Many students experienced new angles and new aspects of their initial research questions. The visual nature of the project provided them with a new perspective or a new way of looking at their research.
 3. Weaker students who were struggling with the dissertation were also weak when it came to the what-if presentation.
 4. The fact that the emphasis was as much on the process as on the outcome was not fully understood by some students.

Conclusions

In recent years many students experienced their dissertation as a slightly detached exercise in cultural theory, which was nevertheless helpful to develop their capacity for critical and investigative thinking. Thus it was the aim of these minor modifications to bring critical context and visual practice closer together. But the plan was not to redirect the focus away from writing about other people's work towards writing about one's own visual practice. The critical context at MA Communication Design aims at a third way: It is driven by the idea that theory and writing should be an essential part of the designer's toolbox allowing him a more conceptual approach towards design. This is because in an increasingly flexible and fast-moving media environment a postgraduate student should not focus on narrow expert knowledge but rather on a wider understanding of the designer's context and how his own field relates to other domains.

The designer who learns to devise his own briefs and to think conceptually will be better prepared to take over responsibility when it comes to jobs that ask for visionary concepts rather than for problem solving.

The respective amendments have proved to be a great step forwards in achieving the initial aim. For a lot of students both the idea- and connection-finding workshops proved a good starting point from which to develop their topic while the what-if brief was a valuable extension of the dissertation towards visual praxis. On the other hand there is not enough evidence so far to conclude that the new approach would particularly support those students that would normally have had problems in finding and developing a research topic. Also, however encouraging the outputs of this year are, the results have to be seen in the context of the fact that each year of MA students develops its own inherent dynamics. The next two years will show more clearly how the new approach affects and hopefully improves the students' work.



Fig. 3: Another response to the what-if brief. The coldness and efficiency of a train display screen is turned into a platform for poetic reflection. ↳ 276



Fig. 2: The what-if brief asked students to shift their research from a reflection *about* practice towards a reflection *through* practice. Here a highly provocative response that investigates the nature of visual taboos. ↳ 276

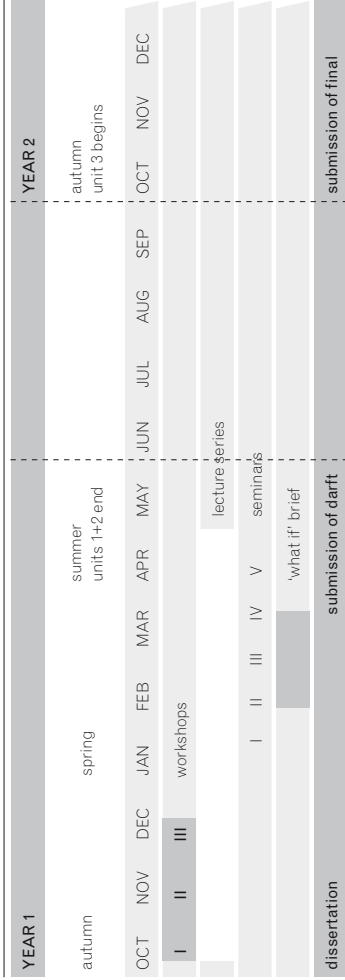


Fig. 1: A graphic time-line showing how the facets of the context program fit together. ↳ **271**

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