An Analysis of Traditional Graphic Design and MultiCommunication Arts Pedagogy

Terre Layng Rosner

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Abstract— Traditional visual communication and graphic design curricula at the university level may not adequately educate, train and/or prepare students to successfully work in the intended creative professions. This critical study found three suspected reasons for the problem: first, that higher education art studio and mass communication curricula are stalled in a historical pedagogy that no longer is viable. Second, that employee compensation for traditional graphic design graduates is typically lower than integrated, interdisciplinary, multimedia graduates and third, that current institutional structures are based on past practice constructed by higher education’s territorial resistance to change.

Keyword— Traditional Graphic Design (TGD), Multimedia Arts (MMA), MultiCom Arts (MCA), Produsers, Creative Professionals

Problem To Be Investigated

Purpose of the Study

Traditional visual communication and graphic design curricula at the university level perhaps may not adequately educate, train and/or prepare students to successfully work in the intended creative professions. This critical study found three suspected reasons for this problem: first, that higher education art studio and mass communication curricula are stalled in a historical pedagogy that no longer is viable. Second, that employee compensation for traditional graphic design graduates is typically lower than integrated, interdisciplinary, multimedia graduates and third, that current institutional structures are based on past practice constructed by higher education’s territorial resistance to change.

Justification of the Study

University and college traditional graphic design and mass communication curricula should be updated to accommodate and recognize the changes in the visual arts and media industries embracing concomitant creative professionals. Evidence of changes in pedagogical objectives, consistently higher salaries for integrated, interdisciplinary multimedia professionals, and higher education resistance to structural changes suggests that widespread educational program revisions are necessary.

Definition of Terms

The following are key phrases and terms operationally defined. Traditional Graphic Design (TGD) students would be those undergraduate students who participate in typical visual communication programs where they complete a college curriculum that primarily includes courses in static, print graphic design [1], [2], [3], [4], [5], [6], [7]. Similarly, Multimedia Arts (MMA) are those undergraduate students usually enrolled in primarily traditional mass communication programs where content in multimedia and online production is emphasized [6]. However, MultiCom Arts (MCA) graduates would be those undergraduate students who participate in a fully integrated program combining writing-across-the-media with photography, graphics, video and animation to produce artefacts for public distribution but also understand the ramifications and effects of post-modern mediated content on individuals and audiences [8], [6], [7]. Individuals who are both producers and users (consumers) of media particularly social media are identified as produsers [9]. Creative professionals are individuals who work in, or hire for, job positions that require skills in writing, graphic design, multimedia and animation creating artifacts for journalism, public relations, graphic design and advertising companies. [10], [11], [12], [13].

Overview of the Study

This study is a critical, epistemology of the pedagogical bridge suggesting didactic gaps in the coalescence of visual art and media art higher education. The last 25 years have seen
profound changes in the content of graphic arts courses in visual communication programs and media courses housed in mass communication programs. The search for an apposite balance between the didactic, pedagogical and curricular needs of higher education graduates in the creative professions has been somewhat lacking. Admittedly at some institutions one can find a fledgling presence of innovative, unique programs, like Syracuse University, which portend a point of hope for future, truly convergent options.

Furthermore, there is a perception that college graduates of traditional graphic design programs (TGD) designated for print collateral production and college graduates of multimedia arts (MCA) emerging integrated, interdisciplinary multimedia programs designated for new media production are equally viable in the job market. However average salaries may tell a different story [14]. Peter Lunenfeld [10] engages the combined expertise of graphic designers, multimedia artists and public relations specialists to establish a discourse leading to collaborative communication pieces. By addressing the role of integrated “multicom” arts techniques in our culture he discovers that his multimedia, interdisciplinary pamphlet project is fulfilled by MCA graduates not merely TGD graduates. Further he develops an argument for the creative “producer” who must be at the very least knowledgeable in many creative disciplines including but not limited to engineering, visual art, media, and communication [10]. Creative professionals appear to be engaging in many disciplinary skills concomitant with a prescient understanding of emerging online, social culture. With this undeniable emergence of produsers [9] living and working in the spaces of social media, educators should be particular diligent in revising and more importantly updating obsolete territorial structures maintained in higher education visual arts and mass communication programs.

Methodology

The methodology for this study is qualitative, descriptive research using a combination of grounded theory established by historic streams in art education, professional judgment coupled with quantitative salary data derived from existing professional and governmental surveys. The comparative ex post facto part of this study, where the difference between the groups has already happened, describes starting salaries of TGD and MCA graduates while hegemonic discussion is presented through the lenses of critical social theorists, Jürgen Habermas, Pierre Bourdieu and historian, Arthur Efland. This methodology is appropriate because it allows for a type of associational research describing conditions such as specific courses and programs, TGD and MCA average salaries, and higher educational curricular structures, which already exist and can be related to each other. The groups of graduates in TGD and MMA command average salaries that are already determined by the professional market.

Background, Related Literature & Discussion

Introduction

Traditional Graphic Design (TGD) and Multimedia Arts (MMA) college programs are typically categorized within visual art and/or communication disciplines [2], [3], [4], [6], [8]. Therefore, the studies and resources described reference that TGD and MMA originate from either Studio/Art Education and/or Communication databases. Given the described sources, the terms and phrases used that produced relevant results in the various academic search primers were: art schools, study and teaching, graphic designer, graphic artist, design, education, interdisciplinary, multimedia, art education, visual communication, mass communication, wages and salaries. Although the results of the search were somewhat unpredictable, the breadth of references used to develop this study was primarily inclusive and intentionally diverse in point of view. The author consulted sources from critical social theory to inform about how changes in our culture have driven a need for transformation in the discrete disciplinary structures typical in higher education institutions. The voice of commercial professionals in the media field are heard in this study as a path to explore what ontological changes are occurring in the industry employing creative individuals using, producing and distributing mediated messages to a public. As well, data compiled by vetted government surveys is accessed to complete a realistic review of how professionals in TGD and MMA ultimately may merge into MCA creatives.

The literature review takes a three-pronged organizational approach. The first group of resources will define, explain and describe TGD, MMA and potential MCA higher education. The second will provide salary and/or wage information in the creative profession for

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TGD and MMA graduates to provide a basis for disciplinary comparison. The last cluster will provide a foundation for a discursive analysis examining resistance to change resulting in a persistent curricular and therefore structural territoriality within visual art and mass communication silos.

**Review of Related Literature & Discussion**

Because graphic design as a profession has been well established for over 60 years, it is reliably defined as solving visual problems through design methods using graphic elements to produce print based media [1] [2], [3], [4], [5], [6], [7]. Assuming this definition, graphic design is discussed by visual communicator and author, Paul Martin Lester as “the art and craft of bringing organized structure to a group of diverse elements…usually is thought of with regard to the print medium” [7]. Berryman concludes that the “Bauhaus [is the] place, school, ideas [that] dealt with creative relationships of art and technology…[it is the] foundation of design education methodology” [7]. Graphic design authors and educators, addressing college or university programs categorized as visual communication or graphic design, Agard [1], Arnston [2] and Daniels [4] generally agree with Berryman [2] and Lester [7] concerning the basic definition of graphic design and promote this definition as a basis for design education. From the mass communication point of view, Therkelsen, Fiebich [15] and Harmon [5], writing about graphic arts decades apart, consistently define it as the development of creatively effective visual communication for print collateral. Therefore, this researcher suggests that TGD is a creative endeavor dealing primarily with print and still graphic problem solving excluding moving media such as would be involved in MMA [1] [2], [3], [4], [5], [6], [7], [11], [15].

On the other hand, Multimedia Arts (MMA) educational programs are not as clearly defined by existing research. Findings about these kinds of programs were not definitive and the researcher discovered that the term “multimedia” was not commonly used to describe the academic discipline where such skills could be learned. However, a group of resources did address the need for interdisciplinary, multimedia artists/designers/producers in the work that was being required of graduates in the profession. Referring to K-12 art education addressing interdisciplinary work, Davis concludes, “it is evident from our study that a consensus is developing around the adoption of design experience as strategies for curricular integration. Identified as a third type of knowledge in general education by British researchers in a study of curriculum design has enormous potential for bridging art and science in integrated curricula (Royal College of Art, 1976)” [8]. This study suggests that along with language arts and mathematics that a “third type of knowledge” (p. 13) is critical for the success and life enrichment of K-12 students. Layng and Layng Rosner, university professors teaching in mass communication and visual arts programs respectively, define visual communication as an integrated process involving the use of art, graphic design, multimedia, animation and journalism skills in order to produce the content necessary for distribution of a “transmedia campaign” [6].

Peter Lunenfeld defines a problem concerning visual communication professionals “there was a critical mass of people from the arts, academia and industry revved up and working on any number of projects, articles, artworks and entrepreneurial endeavors, but almost no discursive spaces for them to communicate across disciplinary and institutional grounds” [10]. His interdisciplinary projects addressed the issue of exposure in terms of multimedia campaigns for creative professionals working in the fields of theory, engineering, science and art.

Lunenfeld further establishes the idea that contemporary multimedia productions must be directed and completed by many creative professionals working together and understanding each other’s roles in the process. [10]. Agreeing with Lunenfeld, Davis, de Almeida and Eubanks conclude that individuals working in creative production must be versed in interdisciplinary connections such as art, rhetoric and research in order to be successful in the profession. [10], [8], [16], [17]. De Almeida suggests, “if graphic design is to be accepted as a rhetorical practice, then by implication, the design act is subjected to social, moral, and political ramifications…it suggests a degree of authorship, bearing responsibilities extending beyond professional sphere” [16]. In other words, graphic designers cannot separate their artistic endeavors from the rhetorical message their work suggests. Evidently, in past practice, traditional graphic designers were typically ignorant of the implications of their artwork.
Two additional authors, Cooke [18] through a 40-year longitudinal study and Rinder [19], through higher education administration, described instances where multimedia production is a burgeoning necessity for individuals to be successful in the creative professions categorized as visual communication. Cooke explains, “the information module structure – characteristic of news design in print, television, and the internet – demonstrates a point of visual convergence among media” [18]. Ironically, the media profession supports that visual convergence of art and design with mass communication has already occurred. Will higher education leaders listen to their professional counterparts and adapt by updating and rethinking their curriculum and accompanying structures?

Speaking didactically, in Contemporary Theories of Learning: Learning Theorists in Their Own Words, editor, Knud Illeris explains four types of learning derived from Jean Piaget’s theoretical notions: cumulative, assimilative, accommodative and transformative. Cumulative and assimilative learning are useful but the least transformative for society because they do not involve students’ learning new concepts outside of regular patterns. However, accommodative learning, which is transcendental and transformative learning could be accomplished by innovative programs [20]. Attendant programs like MCA could enable students to gain epistemological transcendence and ultimately transformation as described by Illeris. The S.I. Newhouse School of Public Communications, Department of Multimedia Photography and Design at Syracuse University attempts to fill the gap. The rationale provided by the Newhouse School is the beginnings of a concrete option in MCA.

“Students interested in visual communications are drawn to the graphic design program because of its emphasis on design, image, interactivity, motion graphics, and communications. Students can develop design skills for both print and multimedia environments, as they also develop communications writing skills, photography skills, and knowledge of communications law, ethics, and business” [21].

In this curriculum, “COM 117 Multimedia Storytelling” is an example of a course utilizing combination content between visual arts and mass communication. The course is described as “working in collaborative teams, students write, design and produce short fiction and non-fiction stories using digital media and the Internet. Emphasis on how story structures change with audience and delivery system” [21]. However, predictably the remaining courses in the program stick to old practices relegated to the particular silos traditionally categorized as graphic design content in a traditional mass communication programs. Similarly, the School of Art & Design, Department of Transmedia at Syracuse provides a glimmer of a true MCA program by offering an option in their discipline.

An “art video” choice is obtainable but after looking closely at the actual content courses, described with labels such as writing, video and “transmedia,” the program is a combination of interdisciplinary courses already existing in their well-established communication and art departments. Although, this is encouraging, because the attempt is made at interdisciplinarity between visual art and mass communication courses, it tends to maintain distinct TGD and MMA identities. Merely choosing a group of classes from more than one program and creating a cross disciplinary curriculum “cafeteria-style” does not fulfill the accommodative requirement of learning new concepts outside of regular patterns (or existing courses) and in fact may not tap into transformative learning at all [20].

Furthermore, Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU) offers a curriculum through the visual art school as Communication Arts. Because VCU’s art program is considered the best offered in the United States, it is surprising that graphic design study is addressed as a primarily traditional program. “Graphic Design students focus on typography, imaging, design form and communication, history of visual communication, printmaking, visual narrative, interaction, design technology and systems in design” [22]. In fairness, VCU offers integrated courses in animation, kinetics, web design and media arts but no mention is made of interdisciplinary work with mass communication domains.

Conversely, Lunenfeld’s Design Media Arts program at UCLA honors the concept of truly integrated teaching and learning. “We synthesize practice, history, and theory and hybridize technologies, discourses, and audiences. The results emerge in and on books, galleries, game consoles, installations, films, magazines, performances, public spaces, televisions, and websites. We strive to create socially and culturally relevant objects,
experiences, and spaces” [23]. This kind of curriculum recognizes that TGD courses are only one chapter of the story within the comprehensive novel of MCA. The necessity of truly integrated, interdisciplinary study is practiced in this program and it would be valuable to track graduates’ successes in various creative industries mentioned in this study.

The literature suggests that MMA graduates as defined in this study seem to be compensated at a higher average salary than TGD graduates [12], [13]. An annual study conducted by The Creative Group for Communication Arts magazine, a main trade source for the visual communication industry, shows the latest data listing salaries for “designers” earning $48,000 per year (up 5.5% from 2012) versus multimedia “motion graphics [multimedia] designer/animator” earning $63,000 per year (down 3.1% from 2012), indicating a significant salary advantage to those creative employees who are working with multimedia production over those working in print graphics. The authors of the study explain their methodology reporting, “73,132 unduplicated individuals…were invited to participate via e-mail. The data represented is based on 10,435 individuals who responded to the survey online” [13]. This is approximately a 14% return rate, which reflects an 86% nonresponse rate. Although this may be a high percentage of nonresponses, the researcher points out that even a small percentage still represents well over 10,000 individual salaries and therefore may indicate a legitimate trend.

Finally, the US Bureau of Labor Statistics Occupational Outlook Handbook presently lists “multimedia artists and animators” as making a higher median salary, approximately $61,370 per year, over traditional “graphic designers” earning approximately $44,150 per year [11]. In Media & Communication occupations, “PR specialists” who incorporate a mix of these skills are also earning significantly more than graphic designers at a median salary of $54,170 per year [14]. These indications in terms of compensation should be an ontological impetus for changes in higher education disciplinary structures.

The hegemonic structure of higher education programs in visual art has followed Arthur Efland’s “streams of influence” since WWII. Essentially the three streams defined by Efland in his seminal work, The History of Art Education, are 19th century idealism, reconstructionist 1970’s arts-in-education movements (Horace Mann’s idea that education is a force which transforms society) and presently scientific rationalist conservative ideology that influenced curriculum to emulate business models. [24]. The business model structure, which entails strict hierarchy limiting subject areas as distinct disciplines, has solidified higher education administrators’ resistance to change. It is a highly complex and extraordinarily difficult task to modify the traditional silos historically embraced by higher education institutions.

Discovering this particular issue in higher education, Stacey McKenna Salazar [25],

“describes several cultural phenomena that suggest an urgent need for research of college art pedagogy…[asking] what is the nature and purpose of an undergraduate art education…[she adds that] the traditional post-secondary structure of specialized knowledge within bounded disciplines has been criticized recently for failing to meet 21st century needs. (p. 67) She identifies three cultural phenomena:

1) The emerging importance of creativity;
2) The challenges and changes in American higher education;
3) The debate about content and delivery of undergraduate studio art education.” (p. 70)

Ironically, Salazar suggests in her article that K-12 art instructors tend to teach the same way that they were taught by their professors. A fact that further speaks to why discipline silos are so resistant to change in higher education. This research suggests that perhaps the next educational stream would involve a creativity convergence trend in art education, which involves the accommodative collaborative process of learning across disciplines retaining a focused base but transforming the rhetoric identities strictly defined as artist, designer, producer and writer.

Sturken and Cartwright explain the media in everyday life. They propose that the term mass media has lost its currency and perhaps needs revision to reflect present realities. They look at “the conditions within and across societies in a globalizing economy in which the distribution of visual technology is remarkably wide ranging but radically uneven” [26]. Therefore it is extremely important that contemporary visual and media artists understand and are able to produce accurate artifacts combining each other’s skills. A direct example of this necessity is described in their
explanation of the director Spike Lee’s film about Hurricane Katrina, “the rise of independent media has challenged the hegemonic control of media...for instance when media coverage of Hurricane Katrina in 2005 failed to fully address the racial and class dynamic of the governments’ response to the disaster...enhanced image reproducibility, flow, and technologies made it possible for Lee to generate a critical text dense with audiovisual evidence that twenty years ago it would have been impossible to obtain, particularly in under one year...the Web and digital editing were crucial factors in these changes.” (p. 260)

Pierre Bourdieu’s identification of “habitus” would apply aptly to the tendency of resistance to changes in structure for higher education educators, challenging territorial issues between programs and disciplines of study [27]. Generally, it is comfortable to stay within the confines of established borders. However, this often leads to at best, stagnancy and at worst, obsolescence. Haeffner questions the wisdom prevalent in “1970’s type ‘high theory’ dominance in higher education [that] has become institutionalized and therefore a brake on change...[this] dominance of theory has led to a downgrading of the importance of creativity” [28]. However, Jürgen Habermas’s ideas of “instrumental reason...sees hope in the communicative relationships binding humans together”. His ideas of “immanent critique” where art can create the exposure of contradictions embedded in a wider society therefore relates directly to the functions of mass communication: surveillance, correlation, cultural transmission and entertainment [27]. Therefore, shouldn’t visual arts and mass communication program developers consider breaking down institutionalized structures that would in turn lead to innovation and epistemological progress through didactic revisions leading to affiliated new and transformative pedagogies?

Conclusions

Perhaps the next educational stream would involve a creativity convergence trend in art education, which involves the accommodative collaborative process of learning across disciplines retaining a focused base but transforming the rhetoric identities strictly defined as artist, designer, producer, writer and viewer. Art can create the exposure of contradictions embedded in a wider society therefore it appears essential that it be a significant part of students studying media as well. It seems obvious that breaching institutionalized structures could lead to the advancement in practical and theoretical knowledge TGD and MMA undergraduate students require. The idea of “the birth of the spectator” parallels the phenomenon of produsers with artists and communicators driving the concepts of necessary convergence in concomitant disciplinary work supported by higher education surrounding art and mass communication curricula. The ostensible bridge between TGD and MMA is a nuanced and faceted discipline accommodated in MultiCom Arts (MCA).

REFERENCES


AUTHOR’S PROFILE

Terre Layng Rosner has been a faculty member at University of St. Francis in Joliet, IL since 1999 and took on the responsibilities of Chair from 2002 - 2012. Teaching includes: Speech, Visual & Media Literacy, Graphics, Photography, Visual Arts, WWW Design, Animation and Portfolio experiences. She has been a professional artist throughout her career and has exhibited in juried shows both nationally and regionally. Professor Layng Rosner co-authored a textbook, Media Design: The Practice of Communication Technologies, for Prentice Hall Publishers in 2004. Education: M.F.A 1986 at NIU, DeKalb, IL and currently working on a Ph.D. in Art & Design Education.

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