

AIGA Design Educators Conference

SCHOOLS OF THOUGHTS 2

POISED TOWARD THE FUTURE OF GRAPHIC DESIGN EDUCATION

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Worth a thousand words...

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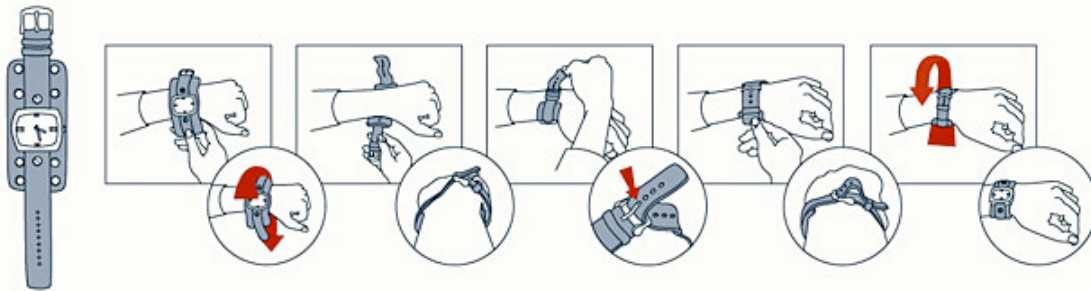
Current writings on design pedagogy go so far as to state that typography be considered the "language" or *raison d'etre* of design. To a design educator teaching both traditional and dynamic media this idea causes concern, as it limits the future of our craft. Strong typographic skills are an essential skill-set for every designer. But if we wish to consider the role of the modern designer as a "visual communication problem solver", we must realize that many design problems are better served by considering objects and experiences that are primarily non-textual.

Our culture continues to become more image-focused, our communications more sensory and experiential. New mediums encapsulate the old, carrying forward previous modes of communication while adding new creative possibilities for visual expression. Design applications must be evaluated upon how creatively and effectively they approach and solve a problem regardless of whether the resultant form is a book, poster, sequence, sound, movie, space, algorithm, interaction, or experience (to name just a few).

As design educators, how do we prepare our students to sensitively communicate within this wider palette of media

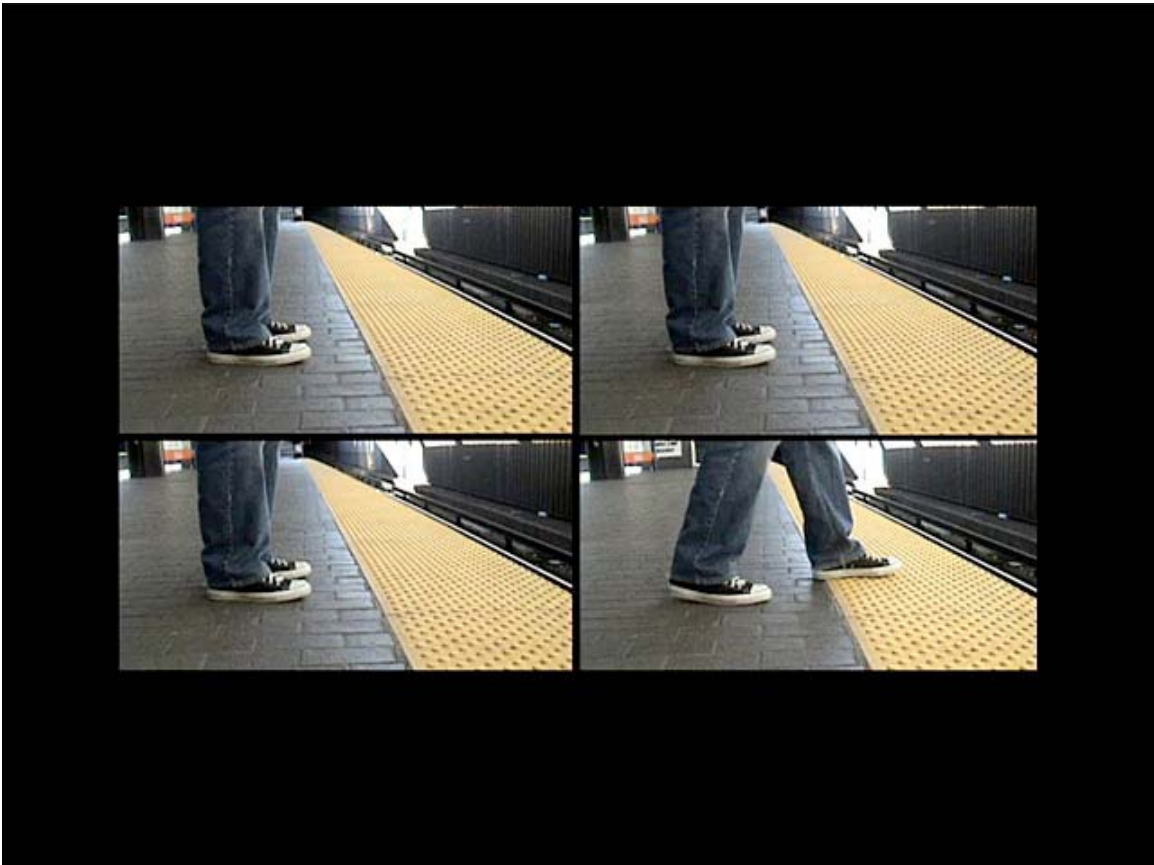
to an increasingly media-literate audience? The challenge is twofold. First, we must widen the scope of traditional design curriculum to include the theories, products, and processes of disciplines once held traditionally separate from "Graphic Design". Secondly, we must address the fact that students in typographically focused programs often find themselves limited in their "new media" experiments by their reliance on the written word. They require a language that is worth more than a thousand words.

When written language resides at the center of the designer's mindset, it affects the way images are considered and applied – not unlike someone who thinks in one language and speaks in another. Students rely on headlines and captions to get their designs to mean what they intend. Often, images function only to describe or illustrate a textual concept. Rarely are images used to their full potential, embodying the concepts themselves. When confronted by an assignment challenging them to communicate without captions, explanations, or instructions, students struggle at the loss of the verbs, nouns, and related grammar they fall back upon to communicate with precision. They are at a loss to construct and embed their projects with visual meaning for their audience to decipher.



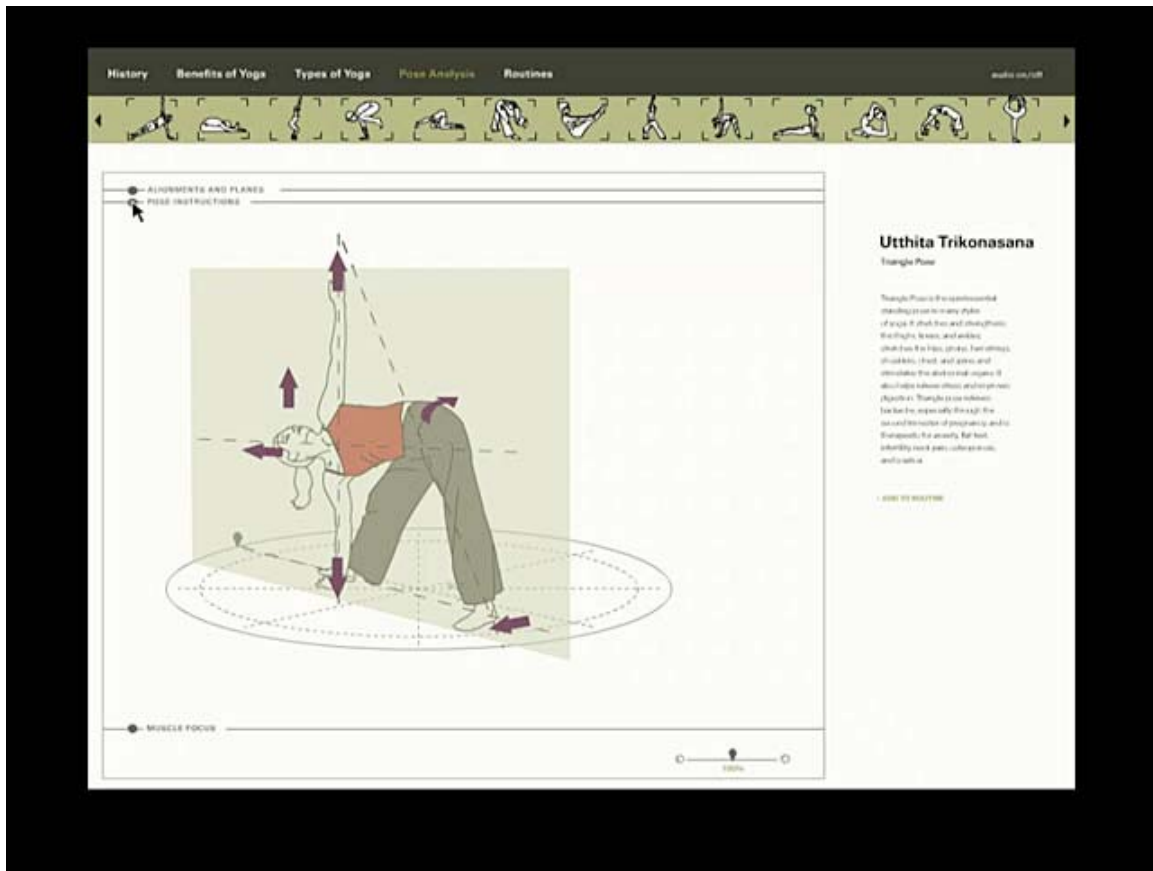
Textual and visual literacy must be brought into harmony within the creative process. The first challenge for any student struggling with non-textual communication is to awaken a knowledge that is implicit and embodied. The second challenge is to transform that knowledge into a visual vocabulary that can be used to communicate with intent. Most of us living in a post-industrialized culture are expert consumers of images. We have little difficulty decoding the signs and symbols placed before us. But the process is often unconscious – we are blind to the subtle manipulative forces that are working upon us. We often feel at a loss when we try to put those same forces into service for our own communicative ends.

Becoming articulate in this way is not so much about learning how to look at images, but understanding why things mean what they mean within our culture. Students must explore encoding and decoding of images via practical hands-on experimentation and discussion with classmates. Purposeful methods of image connotation (as catalogued by Roland Barthes, for example) and the communicative properties of photogenia are approachable through image-making assignments. Exploration of syntax and the consideration of how juxtaposition – image to image, image to text, image to sound – in sequence (via montage for example) allow students to build visual statements that can communicate complex ideas through their relationships over time.



Certainly, the examples noted above are not the only methods of exploring non-textual communication. Their intent is to simply illustrate methods of allowing students to come to their own personal understanding of these elements and interactions. The sensitivity students develop instills confidence in their use of imagery while challenging them to reconsider how they make meaning in all of their design.

The end result are visual communicators who are more balanced in their consideration of text and image. They share a growing awareness to how different media (including the written word) "massage" the messages sent through them. This awareness serves as a foundation upon which continued exploration into the synthesis of text, image, sound, motion, interaction and user experience can begin.



As design educators, our goal is to help students develop a diverse set of skills that will enable them to work within a design economy increasingly driven by information, interaction and experience, regardless of medium. In so doing, we have a responsibility to reevaluate the way our pedagogy presents image and text and reconsider the value of bringing typographic study and visual literacy into a more holistic balance. The “language” or *raison d’être* of graphic design can no longer be considered purely typographic, but instead should reflect the ways in which meaning is produced through the skillful manipulation and synthesis of our written, spoken and visual codes.

