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The Process of Design is Almost Like Writing an Essay¹

Susan Orr and Margo Blythman

Introduction

Traditionally, writing practitioners have viewed the discipline of art and design as a source of difficulty: they assume that art and design students will find writing more difficult than students from other disciplines. Yet, in our largely visual culture, it is worth exploring whether the assumed gap between the visual and writing has produced increasing difficulties for all students—and for those of us who work with writers. The research that we have carried out at an art and design college, The London Institute, persuades us that art and design students' approaches to writing are potentially *enriched* by their creativity and approaches to design. We suggest ways in which the art and design training could be exploited and used as a rich resource to produce strategies that work with all students.

For many art and design students, art is a curriculum choice that may well be connected to a rejection of writing, of the verbal; there is a desire to express themselves through another media. This may be true of other disciplines where writing is not the primary form of communication: Mitchell interviewed dance students and lecturers to identify their relationships with text. She found that dance, like art and design, is a “discipline where the primary activity apparently has nothing to do with writing” (Mitchell 86). But appearance, Mitchell found, is not truth. Likewise, within art and design, the role of writing is also questioned. There is a viewpoint that the artifact, the artist, or students communicate without the use of verbal language, using a visual language that is “wordless.” There is a lively debate about whether or not this so-called “visual language” could or should actually replace writing (e.g., Candlin).

Yet, the reality is that students studying in an art curriculum design *and* write. They are assessed via the textual and the visual. That is part of the problem of design students' development as writers; as in a dance school, art and design faculty may themselves have relationships with the written form that are complex and, in some cases, negative. In art and design, the focus is on the artifact: students access higher education on the strength of

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their portfolios. Faculty are prepared to take a risk with a student who has weak grades in other subjects if the portfolio is strong. This is not an unusual response by faculty who may have visually or verbally adept students who cannot write well, and who are passed on the strength of their talent or their ideas.

Comparisons: Writing and Design

Our research has been carried out with fashion students at The London Institute, the largest art and design college in Europe. We established what in the UK is called “study support” (known as writing centers or learning centers in the USA), which draws on USA writing center theory and works within a “Writing in the Disciplines” paradigm. Traditionally, staff working in study support units have seen the design part of the students’ experience as “other”; their focus has been only on the writing. We propose that this has actually served to concretize the dichotomy between writing and visual theories and between design and writing practices. We do our students a great disservice if we attempt to help them with their writing while ignoring the processes they use to approach creative design. Drawing on the ideas of Joan Mullin and Mike Sharples, we suggest that writing *is* design, and we challenge an oppositional model of design and writing that sets writing on one side and design on the other instead of seeing them as processes on a continuum that have many similarities. Positioning ourselves in this way enables us to use the discourse and practice of design, and familiar visual vocabulary, to develop student writing.

To underline the proposition that writing *is* design, we ask our reader to identify which quotation below describes the process of design and which quotation describes the process of writing:

[It is like] composing an epic poem, writing a concerto. (Papenek 17)

[It is] a conscious and creative communication with materials to achieve human effect. (Sharples 60)

It may surprise some to learn that the second quotation refers to writing, while the first has been used to describe the process of design. The two quotations are essentially interchangeable, suggesting that design and writing share common features, highlighting the shared images that resonate in writing and design research. For example, in design, the term “primary generator” refers to the central idea that drives the generative act (Lawson

44). This has as its parallel the thesis statement in writing process theory (Barnet 13). We suggest, as does Mullin, that employing such shared conceptual vocabulary can effectively be used in one-on-one work with writers.

Since designing and writing are both constrained processes, it is in the shared constraints that strategies most often can be used when visually oriented students enter a study support (writing) center. In the UK, it is only at primary school that pupils are invited to write about or design “anything,” and even in that scenario, pupils are constrained by what they know about the world, what materials they have available and how long they are given for the task. However, in the “real” worlds of employment and university, writing and design are set within certain parameters that serve as further constraints. To identify what these constraints may be, thinking aloud protocols have been developed that require students to describe their approaches to writing while writing. Although still contested as a research tactic, Flowers’ and Hayes’ research has opened to scholars how student writing is constrained by internal factors that can include the following:

- knowledge base held by student;
- student’s long term memory;
- student’s sense of audience.

In addition, external constraints may include the following:

- time allocated to the task;
- word count;
- brief specification;
- academic conventions within which assignment is set;
- tools for the job (access to IT, etc);
- student’s access to reference material. (Flowers and Hayes).

Independent research using similar protocol methodologies within design reveals that students’ designing is internally constrained by the

- knowledge base held by the student;
- student’s sense of client needs;

and externally constrained by the

- time allocated to the task;
- tools for the job (availability of CAD CAM);
- finances for materials;

- client or lecturer expectations. (see Sharples, Lawson)

While there are word differences between the two lists, they demonstrate that, conceptually, a writer or a designer may theoretically start with the so-called “blank page,” but in reality the blank page is framed by numerous constraints on the part of the writer or reader. Writing and design solutions are not limitless; the skill rests in how these constraints are juggled and managed, on the students’ access to materials/research, on their estimated time to completion of the task, even on the availability of tools/technology. All of these point to the material conditions of which writers/designers may not be aware—factors which a writing tutor finds herself not only needing to make explicit, but also by which she too may be constrained through her limited understanding of the connections between the two.

To add to the challenges set by these constraints, design and writing are both *expected to conform to and simultaneously challenge* conventions and constraints (a debate within the USA explored most recently in Nancy Grimm’s *Good Intentions*; see also Lillis). Design and writing products are both qualitatively judged. Postmodern perspectives argue that there is no such thing as *good design* any more than there is *good writing* per se. There is a wealth of literature on student’s right to their own voices (e.g., Stephen Park, Bruce Horner, and Min-Zhan Lu), similar to the argument students in design might forward: that they have a right to produce what they choose. Ultimately, however, “voices” are evaluated upon particular expectations and within particular constraints.

Within the academy, student writing is awarded a numerical grade, signaling that there is really only one way to write even as class commentary may claim that every writer’s voice is valued. Similar to writing, there are many ways to judge design: fitness for purpose, sense of audience, style, genre, originality are just a few of the criteria that may be employed to judge the effectiveness of a text. Designers may look at the impact of their designs on the peer group—our peer collaborations in class or in a center— (Greenberg, Lawson, Navinchandra, Sternberg), or they may look for commercial success—the teacher. Specific design solutions and writing products may widely be approved of, but there is no such thing as *universally* admired design or writing. While we may try to convey the constraints and expectations of tutors in terms of metaphors (e.g., Cross, Logan, and Russell), only a few scholars (e.g., Childers, Hobson, and Mullin) have looked at ways to use visual design and comparisons, to locate for our student writers an image by which they “see” their way through a paper.

Writing and design are simultaneously viewed as effortless, while for some they are the result of fantastic effort (Bereiter and Scardamalia 4-5). In both design and writing, there are dual conceptions that each is a craft that needs to be learned, but that some people do it naturally, without any teaching. Thus, the nature/nurture debate is implicit in the way writing and design are conceptualized in mainstream society. Are you born a writer, or do you learn writing? Is design a preordained talent, or a skill taught and developed over a period of time? Those design students who come, defeated, with their writing assignments to study support need to think of the effort their tasks demand. While they may not believe they can put effort into their writing, their inability to write doesn't necessarily mean they *can't* write. They need to be reminded of the years they've spent practicing their design skills that now make them feel their talent is effortless.

There are many other comparisons between the two modes of expression. For example, the role of creativity in writing and design is highly contested. How much do student designers/writers use the ideas of others and to what extent do they create new work? How do they use the ideas of others in a creative way? What is legitimate sourcing and what is plagiarism for both groups? These and other similarities described combine to suggest that research that compares design and writing will be illuminating for the teaching of writing, the teaching of design, and the teaching of our visually enculturated students.

Research Methodology

Our approach to this study was influenced by Freire (68-105) who argues that realities must be captured through the voices of the social actors. Similarly, Kemmis calls for the following:

a form of self-reflective enquiry undertaken by participants in social (including educational) situations in order to improve the rationality and justice of (a) their own social and educational practices, (b) their understanding of these practices, and (c) the situations in which these practices are carried out. (177)

Our methodology is, therefore, qualitative and, based on Geertz's "thick description" and Schon's "reflective practitioner," focuses on fashion students' perceptions of the processes of design and writing, with emphasis on the stories the students have to tell. Being unable to observe the actual processes of student writing and student designing, we sought

to record students' reflections about these processes while they were focusing on final year dissertation and design work.

The interview transcripts led us to focus on five areas:

- The role of peers;
- Conceptions of 3D and 2D;
- Personal relationship with text and design;
- Audience and relation to text;
- Understanding of process.

The Role of Peers

As we would hope of our student writers speaking of their texts, fashion students were animated when they talked about how other students supported their design process:

We just talk over, like, ideas and just general . . . kind of an idea forum.

The students emphasize collaboration and the gestalt inherent in several people looking at the same design problem, and all speak of their use of peer feedback to inform development and progress:

You just need someone to sort of say, "Why don't you twist this round and do this there and put that there"; you know . . . alternative suggestions.

Students also use their peers to encourage them and support them emotionally:

They help me quite a bit once you start designing. They say, "That's nice"; you get a pat on the back.

Friends . . . you get a lot of support from.

On a deadline we'd stay up together and work together and keep each other motivated.

I sit down and I might be with some friends. We'll go over the brief together.

We're a really good team in my class. We all chip in and say, "Yeah, do this and do that," so that's good.

I sit down in the class with the other students and ask them for their feedback and see what they can suggest.

They make you look at it [your design] in a different way.

Design peer support offers students the chance to reflect on their work via dialogue (Brockbank and McGill). By talking together about their projects, the students "internalize an agreed interpretation of the problem" (Ashton and Durling 12). While they are designing, they use each other for support, for inspiration, and to provide constructive feedback on progress made. They are designing within a "rich social context" (Scrivener and Vernon), for the environment of the school emphasizes that the experience of becoming a designer takes place in a group (Ashton and Durling).

When we look at how these same students describe how their peers support their *writing*, a very different picture emerges. Instead of talking to each other about the actual content of the writing, as they do with design, they focus on word length and other surface features of the text. They do not have a conversation about ideas:

My mum and my friends correct my grammar or my spellings.

I'd rather not [receive support from a peer] because you'd be sitting in the library and somebody would come up behind you and say, "How many rows have you written?" and they'd be "I've done 400 words" or "I've done three"—and I haven't even started.

In fact, collaboration in some cases is replaced with a competitiveness:

I think we are quite competitive over what we are writing about.

The essay: nobody has talked that much about it. Only about how much they have done rather than the content.

There was one fashion student who was an exception to this rule:

Then I would probably go to friends for support and say, "Help me, you know I need some support." Then they'd probably look at my

brainstorm and add things and say, “Expand on this and talk about that.”

It is worth noting, though, that this student did not offer to do this for other students, so the mutuality of the design support is not evidenced here.

3D versus 2D

The physicality of three-dimensional design was of central importance to the fashion students:

You’ve made the garment and it’s sitting on the stands and everyone is like saying how wonderful it’s turned out.

I like 2D . . . I much prefer 3D.

I can touch a garment, it moves, someone might wear it.

Seeing one of your ideas come to life, that is probably the most rewarding thing.

Students use their senses to understand and evaluate their work and the work of others:

I love the touch, feel, see, everything like that.

I have to handle things physically.

You get to the point where you have got the garment and it is really working . . . it is finished and it is hanging up.

I mean with me I have to see something 3D.

If I sort of draw on paper, it doesn’t mean anything to me.

You’ve got to get it so that other people can actually see what you are thinking.

In sharp contrast is how one student describes writing:

Writing? It doesn’t feel so nice. It’s not tactile, personal; [it’s] flat.

For this student, and others locked in writing as a deficit model, two-dimensional words are seen as having less value than a three-dimensional artifact. This is most clearly expressed by the following students:

Design is like cooking. Writing is like cooking but without the taste and the color.

[I prefer] designing because I love to create wonderful things. I like the color, . . . writing seems so black and white.

It [writing] is not so fulfilling as designing. It is more bland.

Echoed in the work on developing dance students' writing by Mitchell and others, dancers viewed their choreography as a creative, personal journey of development while they viewed writing as an "impersonal, formal exercise" (Mitchell et al, 87). Similarly, writing for the visual/spatial is flat, colorless, not connected in space.

Role of Audience—Relation to Text

Students describe the importance of the audience for their design: there is excitement expressed about getting their ideas out "on the stand." They want their designs to be enjoyed and experienced (or criticized) by others.

I need to know that someone else likes it.

People are really quite excited by my ideas.

In contrast, the writing product is seen as existing primarily for the lecturer, to satisfy the brief; it appears not to have an intrinsic value beyond this specific audience. Design is viewed as belonging to the student and originating directly from the student:

I feel like design is part of me;

whereas writing is seen as unconnected:

anybody could have typed it up; [it] is so impersonal. It doesn't feel as though it is mine.

Writing is totally separate from me.

Understanding of Process

Finally, we looked specifically at the students' articulation of the process of design and writing. The students are all aware that design is something that is specifically taught:

They [the lecturers] do tend to say that this is the format [for design]; they say this is how it is done. My design has got [sic] better and better.

For the designing and kind of research side I think I am quite up to date. I know what I'm doing and where I am going . . . when it comes to writing I don't.

They drummed it [the design process] into us really, "That's how it should be done."

Students may not always like the strict approach to design that is taught:

Everyone has to design in the same way; there's no freedom in it, that is what I don't agree with.

But they are aware that this discipline has improved their design:

[Yet] this has taught me how to lay things out.

There is no parallel when these students talk about their approach to writing. Not one student mentions that the writing process has been explicitly developed or taught:

The process? It's really hard for me because I've never done anything like this before, so every time I do it, it is different, or sometimes it's very muddled.

I haven't had enough practice at it.

In fact, several even say the following, prior to their dissertation (final project for those in the USA):

I haven't done any writing until this final year.

Actually, they have done several cultural studies essays in year one and two, but they obviously feel that this genre has not prepared them directly for the writing of the dissertation.

Implications for Practice

Students within art and design have developed approaches to design that we can harness to support writing development. For example, this means using the discourse of design to illustrate the writing act. Mullin's approach to visualizing theories of composition enabled her to draw together the visual and the verbal for a group of architectural students to whom she taught writing. Mullin used the students' developing architectural knowledge base as a means to illuminate writing genres. For example, she visited traditional and non-traditional buildings and drew parallels between these and forms of writing that employ or reject convention. She also used architectural features that had neatly formed parallels in writing: for example, buttressing a building and "buttressing" an argument. Thus, Mullin uses the very physicality of architecture to enable students to enter the "flatter" world of text.

We have further experimented with using writing genres that are particularly suited to art and design students' needs (see Thaiss, Fulwiler, and Moon). For example, it is not uncommon to work with students who do not want to commit words to paper unless they are fully formed. While design students may understand the creative thinking that precedes their designs, these students find it hard to brainstorm for a writing assignment. In this situation, we remind them about the role of the sketchbook in the design process. Sketchbooks offer a place where students can try out creative ideas, some of which will work and will be further developed. Other ideas will not progress and will be abandoned. Students who do not want to commit words to paper unless they are fully formed are reminded that they use their sketchbook to experiment with ideas and, in doing so, develop and enrich their ideas. Thus, they are encouraged to create textual sketchbooks (learning journals) where words can be experimented with and brainstorming can be carried out. In this way, a tutor uses the design process supports the act of writing. For art and design students, the concept of a text-based journal complements the visual language of the sketchbook.

Similarly, when we are teaching students about proofreading, and we want them to appreciate that they proof and self-edit for different aspects of the text at different stages of writing (i.e., thesis statement, content, structure, accuracy, spelling, etc.), we talk to them about creating a gar-

ment from a design. They would never check the detail of the buttonhole stitching when they make their toile (calico mock-up of what will be the finished garment); this detail is something that they attend to at a later stage of the design process.

When students would benefit from formulating and clarifying their ideas through dialogue with each other and with lecturers, we point out to them the ways that they use each other as a source of feedback and scrutiny in the design process, thus encouraging them to do the same for their writing assignments. We remind them about how they value the group crit (critique) when designing, and stress that students are a peer writing resource in the way that they are a peer design resource. It is a matter of shifting students' pre-conceived barriers between how they think about the creative process in design and how they think about that same process when writing.

Historically, writing has been on bamboo, fabric, leather, the body, clay, or stone (e.g., Tonfoni), and it used to be based on, and still is in some languages, pictorial representation. This can be important for art and design students, especially in WAC classes, who can be given opportunities to experiment with writing that is allowed to "get off the page." Assignments can be designed that give writing a dimensionality that will challenge the 2D writing versus 3D design split. This might take the form of a fashion design assignment in which students have to use a word, a text or a particular font within the design itself; similarly, an assignment can be set that requires an end product of words and design incorporated into one (challenging the notion that assignments are written *or* designed).

While writing center literature in the USA has pointed to the use of color with highlighter pens, this has largely been connected to working with students who are learning disabled (e.g., Bartosenski). When design students encounter difficulty referencing, they can mark up their own text with colored highlighters to code ideas that were theirs, separating them from ideas that they had read. Students then know which sections need formal referencing. While shape and color form a bridge to writing for some students, others can use spatial techniques: a student who was confident developing storyboards for his design was encouraged to lay out his dissertation structure by developing a dissertation storyboard.

Conclusion

Using the discourse and experience of students' design practices, we can support student writing effectively. The students clearly identify design as a social practice; but, as related to writing, such a model is new to the UK. Nonetheless, by building creatively on students' known visual and

spatial ways of engaging in the world, we can build better practices that link how they think about design to how they think about writing.

The key, as this study demonstrates, is to ask students about their creative preferences and build on them. Moreover, we contend that more research needs to be done about how we might employ the influence of visual media when teaching all of our students. Besides just the metaphors we apply to ourselves as tutors, and the metaphors we might use while speaking with writers, we may want to further investigate how the actual expectations and constraints of the visual texts around them may be used to help students understand writing expectations and constraints. The challenge for us in writing support is to help our students give writing texture, physicality, color, and presence by building a bridge to their visual and textual worlds.

Notes

- ¹ A fashion student's words describing the process of design

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