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The changing role of drawing with specific reference to the graphic design process

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The changing role of drawing with specific reference to the graphic design process

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Abstract

With increasing reliance on computer-aided systems to assist in the resolution and presentation of graphic design solutions, the need for graphic design students to acquire the ability to draw has been questioned. Indeed, within the graphic design profession the understanding of the role of drawing in the design process and the capacity to use drawing effectively has, in many respects, diminished.

However, the in-depth study on which this paper is based, has revealed that for graphic designers in every branch of the profession and at every level of seniority, drawing acts as an important procedural device, assisting in the performance of a wide range of tasks that fulfil both organizational and creative requirements.

Developments in technology may well have changed the use that designers make of drawing but they have not superseded it. Therefore it is important to analyse this change and review educational provision accordingly.

Introduction

The working lives of graphic designers have been subject to a variety of influences in recent years. The focus of attention has been concentrated on ensuring that changes in attitude towards marketing, design management and technological developments are integrated into professional practice and consequently, the maintenance of more fundamental skills has been somewhat neglected.

The impact of new technology, particularly the reliance on computer-aided systems to assist in the resolution and presentation of graphic design solutions, has led to the misapprehension, among certain members of the profession, that drawing skills in particular are no longer required. Ever watchful of professional attitudes, graphic design education has mirrored some of these changes and, to some extent, this neglect of the importance of drawing ability.

However, the importance of the role of drawing in the graphic design process is still recognised by many practitioners and educators alike. Concern has been expressed that the capacity to draw, especially to draw to support and enhance designerly practice, is being diminished (1, 2).

A research programme has been conducted (3), and further investigative work is underway, to characterise the use of drawing that graphic designers make, and to identify any changing use of drawing reflecting the changing conditions

that confront the profession. The main intention of the original study was to form a basis on which the use of drawing could be characterised and the required drawing abilities of graphic designers established, and thus begin the consideration of a theoretical approach from which educational practice may be considered. Some exploration was also made of the the existing provision for drawing tuition on BA Level Graphic Design courses. Therefore, although the study was essentially about designerly practice, it also looked at aspects of educational preparation for this practice. Subsequent work has involved an analysis of the ways in which certain practitioners draw when using a variety of devices ranging from computer-based systems to fax copiers.

The programme of investigation

During the study which was, of necessity, broad in scope, every effort was made to investigate all the major types of work and working practices within the graphic design profession. A conscious decision was made to limit the scope of the study to graphic designers with broadly-based experience. That is to say, the sample did not include certain specialists who could, taking the broadest definition of graphic design, be included in the profession, ie illustrators, photographers, calligraphers, typographers or art-workers were not included as such in the sample, although designers whose work extends in these directions were.

Therefore, the study concentrated on practitioners responsible for the management and conduct of design solutions, who were involved in all the phases of the graphic design process. Similarly, the educational aspects of the study were aimed at investigating areas of educational provision directed towards generalists (graphic design students) rather than specialists (advertising, typography, illustration students, etc).

In order to achieve a detailed and comprehensive picture of the role of drawing it was important to include analysis of all the tasks that designers perform which are in any way supported by drawing. It was also necessary to take a broad view of drawing usage, including the use made by designers of the drawings of both other designers and commissioned specialists in their work.

The research method adopted in the investigation of commercial practice was to combine the collection of designer's views about their drawing activities with observation of these activities and analysis of the drawings produced. Included were in-depth, structured interviews with 50 experienced designers supplemented by shorter, focused interviews with 20 junior designers, extensive periods of observation of those studio practices that involve drawing activity, and the collection and analysis of well over 200 designers' drawings produced in the preparation of design solutions for a wide range of jobs and representing the full range of design procedures from initial briefing to production.

A number of methods of data collection was also employed to investigate attitudes about the kind of drawing tuition that should be provided for graphic

design students. A section containing questions eliciting views about the development of drawing ability and the nature of drawing tuition was included in the script for the structured interviews with the practising graphic designers, and a postal questionnaire was sent to BA graphic design courses. In addition to this formal system of data collection, a series of focused interviews was conducted with individuals involved in various ways with either design education or with drawing tuition.

The use of drawing in the graphic design process

The findings from the study indicated that graphic designers need to develop the ability to use drawing to support a wide range of tasks. Drawing helps them to perform managerial tasks, achieve creative output and control production. It is also the key to making essential communications about designerly issues with a variety of people including clients and other members of the design team.

Graphic designers adapt the way they draw to meet the requirements of the particular context in which they are working. Indeed, it was found that designers in all the major orientations of the graphic design profession need to use drawing, albeit to different extents depending on the particular nature of the job on which they are engaged, on the type of organisation for which they work, on their role in the design team and on their individual predilections and ability. Although not all the designers in the study found drawing essential in every aspect of their work, all found it at least useful in some aspects and most respondents described it as essential for several key procedures.

The responsibilities of senior graphic designers can include the management of design projects and this may involve the direction of other members of the design team in ways that include the use of drawing. It was also observed that graphic designers use drawing to communicate with clients, with marketing personnel and account executives and with specialists responsible for aspects of production. Drawing can, in fact be seen as part of the language through which designers conduct various aspects of business, over and above its use in purely creative terms. Through the use of drawing, the design team can control the organisation and timing of a job and avoid ineffective and therefore time-wasting approaches to design solutions.

The use of drawing was also found to be essential to the way in which both the design team and individual designers develop creative solutions to design problems, the majority of respondents in the study described drawing as essential in both their own individual exploration of ideas and in sharing these ideas with others.

The essential qualities of graphic designers' drawings

The study revealed that the evaluative criteria for drawings change according to use. It is important that drawings set out relevant visual information,

described in a degree of detail appropriate to the stage in the decision-making process for which they are being used. For example designers need only broadly indicate form in a drawing for their own use but more resolution is required in drawings to be shown to non-designers. Further, it is also important that a drawing has been sufficiently cost-effective to produce, since achieving a greater degree of resolution and detail involves more time and therefore more costs.

Moreover, the kinds of drawings used to aid the analysis of the design problem and those used to evaluate design solutions differ both in form and in the evaluative criteria applied to them. In actual fact designers were reluctant to subject the drawings they produce when analysing design problems and searching for ideas to any kind of evaluation as this could have an inhibiting effect. However, drawings produced for evaluating and communicating design solutions were subject to critique. When producing or criticising this kind of drawing designers would consider such issues as 'will it help to sell an idea?', 'can it be read by others?'

Designers attitudes to the use of drawing

Although the findings of the study confirmed the importance of drawing to the professional lives of graphic designers, discussions with both graphic design practitioners and educators also revealed confusion about the role of drawing and, in some cases, a denial of its importance.

There were many indications that the use of drawing has not been subject to any real analysis by members of the profession. For example, it was clear that graphic designers have not developed systematic terminology to describe their drawing practices, or to describe the types of drawing they produce for many of the procedures of the graphic design process, particularly for those when the majority of creative thinking occurs. The term 'rough' is generally applied to describe a wide range of types of drawing without differentiation.

Moreover, a large proportion of respondents stated they had a rather confused attitude as to what constituted 'real' drawing, indicating that they had not, in their own minds, clarified the particular characteristics of designerly drawing usage. It was found that, to some extent, unexplored assumptions that drawing, or at least 'real' drawing, can only be the result of artistic production, influenced the attitudes of some members of both the main respondent groups in the study (ie designers and educators).

However, although the status of drawing in their professional life was uncertain for many designers, it was very interesting to observe an important new use developing during the period of the study. The use of a fax copier has facilitated the kind of rapid communication and close collaboration between client and designer that would have been unthought of some years ago, and in many of the examples analysed the language of the fax was drawn imagery.

The importance of drawing ability

The wide range of use that graphic designers make of drawing requires them to develop a correspondingly broad range of drawing abilities. These abilities range from very specific technical competencies to broadly-based intellectual skills. Not only was the importance of practical abilities confirmed in the study but, in addition, it was found that a high proportion of respondents thought that developing the cognitive abilities of judgement and understanding of the effectiveness of drawings was of considerable importance. The development of visual literacy, and of visual memory linked to the capacity to use drawing effectively, was also regarded as of considerable importance.

With the increasing use of computer-aided systems it may well become less essential that designers develop drafting skills with the attendant requirement of precision and control. However, the development of visual literacy and memory will still be of paramount importance and the practice of drawing is central to the development of these capacities. The need to toy with an idea must be supported in a totally flexible and spontaneous way, a way that computer-aided drawing systems have yet to provide. Indeed if systems are to be developed we need to understand our drawn 'languages' better if we are to emulate them more sympathetically. As both educators and designers we clearly need to use technology to enhance our established communication systems, not to stifle them. Surely, no matter how 'user friendly' and portable computer-aided systems become there will always be the need to simply pick up a pencil and draw to give form to an idea, or to convince a colleague - 'see here, this is the way to tackle it'.

References

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