

Leveraging Diversity in the Studio Classroom: Helping beginning design students draw on their own histories to develop unique approaches to making and learning

Author Saskia van Kampen, MDes, RGD

Assistant Professor in the Faculty of Design, OCAD University

Beginning design education should celebrate the diversity of the students in the classroom. It is essential that first-year graphic design students are not merely trained in design fundamentals but are also exposed to content and concept development that goes beyond responding to outcome-oriented assignment briefs or following conventions of Western design precedents. Diversity can be cultivated in studio courses by creating curriculum that embraces experiential and open-ended projects—projects where students learn by doing, sharing, and by discovering what a project outcome could be rather than being told what it should be.

This paper argues that to focus only on the fundamentals and precedents may limit the beginning design student to a finite, predictable, and culturally limited view of what design is. Such restricted curriculum also risks the erasure of what the students bring to the classroom—diverse perspectives and years of unique experiences. Fundamentals and precedents should be seen as a starting point in an education that has students and faculty questioning, pushing against, and possibly even rejecting the past. This approach to design education can stimulate a rich and rigorous environment of empirical research and self-reflection.

Curriculum that cultivates diverse approaches to assignments incites learning from and with both faculty and students—unlike top-down learning, which occurs through the traditional Western archetype of teacher as master. Each individual experiences situations, activities, and environments differently depending on their culture and background, and, if permissible, will utilize their individuality in the classroom and to inform their making. In order for this type of learning to occur I have developed curriculum that is grounded in experiential learning theory. Experiential learning theory in this paper is based on the work done by Alice Y. Kolb and David A. Kolb (2005) in their paper “Spaces: Enhancing Experiential Learning in Higher Education.” They explain experiential learning as being essential for students to be able to draw on their own backgrounds in that it allows students to develop their own creative voice instead of adopting the style of the professor—students are learning through developing their own creative processes. Kolb explains experiential learning as when experiences are had, understood, and are transformed into knowledge (Kolb, 1984, p. 41). In this type of learning environment the teacher becomes a facilitator of learning, at times learning right along with students, rather than simply being instructors. Essentially “Many students enter higher education conditioned by their previous educational experiences to be passive recipients of what they are taught. Making space for students to take control of and responsibility for their learning can greatly enhance their ability to learn from experience” (Kolb and Kolb, 2005, p. 209). They go on to state: “By developing their

effectiveness as learners, students can be empowered to take responsibility for their own learning by understanding how they learn best and the skills necessary to learn in regions that are uncomfortable for them” (Kolb and Kolb, 2005, p. 209).

This paper will explain an open-ended experiential project that I use in my first-year design process studio course that encourages students to draw on their own knowledge, on their past experiences, and on their cultural backgrounds to inform their making. I will share some of the tools that I use to support the beginning design student in taking on this type of project and will explain how the fundamentals of design are covered throughout the curriculum contextually.

An open-ended experiential project

Open-ended projects do not have a prescribed end result and students are tasked with finding their own outcome based on the research that they conduct. Because many first-year undergraduate students have never encountered this style of assignment before, I give students a subject, or a muse, for the duration of the assignment. The muse is usually an item that is seemingly mundane, but upon investigation reveals global, economic, political and/or social significance. This could include cotton, cocoa, coffee, sugar, salt, or even an apple (I have used all of these items in the past). Investigation into these kinds of subjects opens up many avenues that a student can choose to follow and thus students can locate an area that is of interest to them and their histories.

For the purpose of this paper I will use The Apple Project as my example. The Apple project was inspired by Ken Miki’s book *Apple* but I have changed the project significantly to be more open to students’ unique and individual interpretations.

The project is five weeks in length and is broken down into structured weekly stages. The first and second stage focuses on research. This is supported through a workshop done by library staff on information literacy. I have arranged for this due to my observations of how many first-year students are unprepared for the rigors of university research practices. Students are shown how research is as a way to access unexpected ideas and original perspectives. Through theoretical research students begin to see how a seemingly mundane object such as an apple has connections to religion, globalization, global warming, GMO’s, food waste, and so on, and so forth. Apples have also been used and can be used metaphorically. The research is broad and students tend to follow a path that is of interest to them. Students are also given the task of researching their muse empirically. To observe, explore, investigate, and document as well as to use it as a tool for making. Students are encouraged to reach beyond their preferred methods of making to explore techniques, to make messes, to not be afraid of failure, and to locate connections between both empirical and theoretical findings.

By the end of stage two students realize that the project is not about apples. It is about research and how the research process is essential for seeing and thinking differently—how research changes perspective and gives a new sense of what can be done.

The next couple of stages are for students to work on how to communicate their ideas visually, in other words concept development, iteration, and proof of concept. Essentially, students are being walked through a variety of creative processes to help them discover what works for them. Students either find the techniques I offer useful or not and will use the ones that help them in their future assignments and

dispose of those that are not useful to them. It is essential for faculty to allow students to develop their own processes and not impose processes onto students or suggest that any set of processes are finite. Wong and Siu support this notion in that students tend to stick to routine processes rather than work on developing a creative process. Wong and Siu state that “identifying the route to creative output is essential for teaching students to be creative. If teachers distinguish the creative design process from routine, they will be able to guide students along the creative thinking process” (Wong and Siu, 2012, p. 438). They go on to explain how looking at creative design processes gives students insight into how they work, think, and learn. In other words—metacognition.

In order to facilitate metacognition the experiential, open-ended project is broken down into weekly stages. Staging is a scaffolding technique that not only allows the beginning design student to track and reflect on their own processes but it also keeps them on track and focused. Further to this the staging provides faculty the opportunity to follow student progress and identify those students who are struggling. This is a key point as students will be moving through the project at varying speed, skill, and comprehension levels. Assignments should be structured to allow for these differences and provide alternatives for those who are ahead or for those who are behind.

For example, some beginning design students who are engaging in their first open-ended experiential assignment become creatively paralyzed as they find it overwhelming and stressful—usually they are quiet, do not participate, have little to discuss, or their work is too broad and lacking in focus. These students have done a lot of work and are trying really hard but for some reason cannot move forward or cannot find a suitable outcome or end point. I will speak with these students one-on-one to help get them inspired, to help them focus, or to locate topics that they could follow through with. If these students cannot find a topic then they need to be given an outcome—not only because these students need to create a designed piece for grading purposes, but also because they need to feel a sense of accomplishment after the effort they put in. The option that I give these students is to produce a rigorously designed process book documenting their journey throughout the assignment. These books give students an opportunity to flex their graphic design muscles as the book requires organization, composition, and typographic skill to produce.

On the other end of the spectrum are those students who get so involved in the assignment it becomes monolithic in scope—I have had students gravitate towards a project that could become a thesis project. These students need to be encouraged but at the same time reined in. I have them talk to the larger idea when presenting but concentrate on a smaller aspect that fits within the timeframe of the assignment.

By creating a nimble assignment students are able to work at their own level instead of having to endure an assignment that they find too remedial or too complex. From classroom observations most students tend to create outcomes that challenge themselves and that expand their notion of what design is.

Another tool that I use in these conceptualization stages of the project are classroom brainstorming sessions. I create a circle out of the desks and I join the students in a roundtable discussion. Students describe their concepts and their classmates provide feedback, suggestions, or critique. Those who are struggling can see the opportunities that their peers have located and may become inspired and the

discussion can often help them see the potential in their own ideas and/or help them get over whatever was standing in their way creatively. By joining the students in the circle the discussion becomes less hierarchical—students are speaking to each other, not speaking to each other through the faculty. These discussions are essential for the sharing of cultural narratives. Peter Jarvis states that it is “through interaction and sharing that we develop our own selves. In precisely the same way, culture is shared. It is through interaction that we experience other people... But it is not just the person whom we experience; in the interaction we share our narratives and even listen to each other’s discourse. The content of the narrative or discourse is also experiences...” (Jarvis, 2006, p. 85). It is through these discussions that student are exposed to other perspectives, other experiences, other world views, and other cultures.

The last stage has students paying close attention to the details and refinements and to finalize their chosen outcome.

Design fundamentals

Experiential and open-ended projects are a way for faculty to curb their own subjectivity and biases in that students are asked to call on their own experiences, backgrounds, and cultures and to pursue topics that are of interest to themselves, not prescribed by an instructor.

Some may argue that this style of teaching does not provide the beginning design student with the foundation that they need to develop into a skilled designer. This is not the case if faculty teaching experiential learning projects inject skill-based learning into the projects that the students are working on. Just because the project is open-ended and asks the students to be more autonomous in their learning does not mean that faculty are not present and actively engaged in providing students with applied knowledge. For example, if several students are working on book design faculty might want to demonstrate the importance of structure in multi-page documents to the class. Faculty can also conduct in-class exercises to introduce basic concepts such as alignment, hierarchy, rhythm, etc... Thus students are learning not only lessons that apply to their own project but also lessons that apply to the projects of their peers. In this way students are learning the fundamentals within a specific context—applied. Rather than separating them out into traditional exercises that have students engage with the elements and principles of design with no contextual relationships.

Another issue of note is that traditional design exercises are rooted in Modernist ideals and tend to become dogmatic in nature. Avoiding Modernist approaches to design pedagogy might help avoid, as Löytönen explains, “the act of continuing the colonization, harmonization, or standardization of higher education” (Löytönen, 2017, p. 232). Some of the more thrilling and influential design has come from those with no traditional training (David Carson) or by those who flout Modernist ideals (Stephan Sagmeister). By allowing students to locate their own creative voice, by providing them with a safe space to make mistakes, students can learn from and with each other, calling on past experiences and cultural backgrounds to come forward.

Conclusion

Beginning-design education should expose students to the fundamentals of design but it should also celebrate the diversity of the students in the classroom by embracing content and concept development that allows for students to pursue personal interests and to learn from and with each other.

Some of the assignments that I deliver are open-ended so that students must define their own topic as well as the outcome of the project for themselves. This type of curriculum deters students from following conventions of Western design, allows students to work on subject matter that is of interest to them, and gives students an opportunity to draw on their own experiences when working on their assignments.

To quote Jarvis once again:

Human learning is the combination of processes whereby the whole person —body (genetic, physical and biological) and mind (knowledge, skills, attitudes, values, emotions, beliefs and senses): experiences a social situation, the perceived content of which is then transformed cognitively, emotively or practically (or through a combination) and integrated into the person's individual biography resulting in a changed (or more experienced) person (Jarvis, 2006, p. 13).

What Jarvis is saying is that learning and creativity are gleaned through far more than simple knowledge transfer. I would also argue that the responsibility of faculty is not simply about teaching fundamentals and preparing students for a career, it is about self-reflection and helping students develop as human beings. Fasnacht (2002), pushes this concept to include environment—refinement of the concept of creativity indicates that it is a process that may be developed and influenced by the environment and is recognized by the product produced. She expands on this by describing the need for an environment that is nurturing and motivational. This is also stated by Kokot and Colman when they speak about teaching and nurturing creative children:

Teachers must be helped to realize that it is not what is taught, but how it is taught that will determine the degree of joyful learning in the creative classroom. We need to facilitate and direct the confidence and energy of these children into meaningful interactions with learning material. This means that we must refrain from trying to superimpose our views and beliefs on the children but rather act as an "interface" between them and schoolwork to help them find the way that they may best express their discoveries (Kokot and Colman, 1997, p. 224).

Here we can see how the creation of safer spaces means that we do not inject our own views and biases into curriculum. Although this quote is in reference to elementary school children I believe that this remains the case into undergraduate school as well. The classroom should be an area where students share and reflect on their culture, backgrounds, and perspectives in order to encourage creative learning and to help them develop into members of society.

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