

## 03 Letterpress: Looking Backward to Look Forward

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### ABSTRACT

This paper explores the value of retaining letterpress workshops within art and design schools, not merely as a tool to understand our past, but as a means to critically reflect upon our future.

The benefits of teaching letterpress to graphic design students as a way of improving their understanding of typography are well documented. There is an argument for preserving 'craft' subjects including letterpress within the curriculum, as they foster immersive learning. The letterpress process is a significant teaching tool that complements, and can act in conjunction with, computer-based design education. This paper seeks to build upon these debates, examining the intersection between the practice and theory of an otherwise technologically outdated process. The paper focuses upon 6x6: Collaborative Letterpress Project as a case study. The project brings together six leading UK Higher Education Institutions with active letterpress workshops. It encourages the sharing of best practice within a specialist subject area, through the creation of a collaborative publication where students and staff are linking their practice with critical and reflective writing in relation to the medium. Traditionally, workshop areas have been concerned with the acquisition of a skill, often taught through rote learning or technical demonstration. By positioning students at the centre of the process they have been encouraged to form their own perspective on the discipline. Through the examination of evolving letterpress paradigms, it is possible to question why we do something; as opposed to how it is done.

to work its way through the system. The consistent body of letterpress subject knowledge, which was formerly instilled in the technical staff through training, could not be relied upon. The participants' understanding and skills varied greatly but there was a collective enthusiasm for collaborative work. The fundamental shift in a generation of teaching staffs' experience and by inference their perception of the value of letterpress, coupled with the staff and student's knowledge of digital type has radically altered student's experience of the workshop spaces and their relationship to typographic design.

The roots of letterpresses repurposing stretch back to the 1960's, a decade in which the UK Art Schools shifted political cultural and academic culture. In 1959 decisions were made to develop a Diploma in Art and Design nationally as recommended by the Coldstream Report (HMSO, 1960). A National Diploma in Design (NDD) was introduced in the 1960's. Sixteen colleges were selected to teach the new award in Graphic Design. A number of the participating colleges, Brighton, CSM, Camberwell, LCC (formerly LCP) and Glasgow School of Art began to teach students working for the new award. During this period Graphic Design students were being taught in the same institutions as compositors and printing apprentices but on completely separate courses. In 1983, the invention of the Macintosh computer prompted a decade of turmoil within the print industry when the leaden army of type was largely replaced by digital composition throughout the western world. Despite attempts by the powerful print unions, guilds and confederations of printers, the industry had irreversibly changed. The division of the print trade which identified clear specialist areas of production for the industrial scale production of language — compositor, proof reader, sub editor, stone man, make ready, printer etc — was largely usurped by digital composition in which the writer effectively composed digital text and the designers/typesetter styled the page and lithography rather than letterpress became the means of production.

The radical change in type composition from letterpress to digital and the move away from relief printing to lithographic production prompted many art colleges in the UK to dispose of their letterpress equipment, believing it to be redundant. Fortunately, the value of retaining workshop areas within design schools has been identified on a national level by The Council for Higher Education in Art & Design (CHEAD) which has undertaken research into 'minority specialist subjects', which encompass, "subjects that are concerned with the teaching and learning of core skills, materials and processes; specifically this covers subjects that are concerned with non-digital issues, and with the physicality of processes/materials" (CHEAD, 2008). These have been identified through case studies and research that include workshop areas such as: ceramics, metalwork, textiles, bookbinding and letterpress. Ian Farren, Educator,

but until now, there has been no mechanism for collectively reviewing and sharing findings. The project follows a participatory action research model (Krimmerman, 2001), with students involved at all stages and playing an integral and equal part in the design and execution of the research.

*The project was designed to make links between existing educational workshops and to serve as a mechanism for exploring how the process is being used.*

## THE PROJECT AIMS & OBJECTIVES

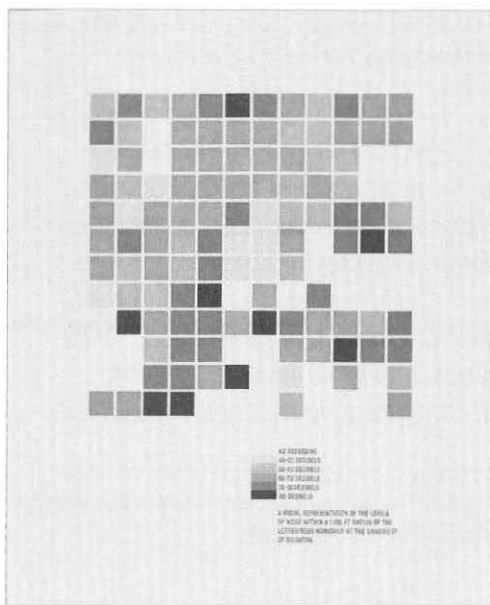
At the beginning of the project and through consultation with the collaborating colleges, we identified and refined a set of aims:

- 1 To link colleges with letterpress workshops and celebrate shared immersive research and practice through common projects.
- 2 To strengthen and enlarge existing letterpress networks and to support the development of research and practice enriching the pedagogic experience for students and staff.
- 3 To promote critical debate within the discipline of typography, letterpress practice and teaching and in so doing, inform the broader discipline of graphic design.
- 4 To document and record the range of equipment, typefaces and practices within the workshops.
- 5 To encourage and stimulate research into the historical development of student's typographic education through letterpress within different Art and Design Schools.
- 6 To encourage and promote the dissemination of knowledge acquired through research and practice.

These broad aims were distilled into the following objectives:

- 1 Select a group of colleges with Letterpress workshops
- 2 Invite the collaborating colleges to select three students and three members of staff technical and academic to work on a common brief.
- 3 Write an open brief as a starting point which would encourage a diverse range of approaches to the research and practice. Invite collaborators to submit a reflective essay on the issues raised within their research and its relation to practice.
- 4 Set production parameters for the brief in terms of paper stock, format, size, imposition, extent and binding. Establish a series

workshop; found forms and image plates. Although there are common thematic threads within the work, i.e. history, geography, language and found forms, these have been approached in personal and idiosyncratic ways.



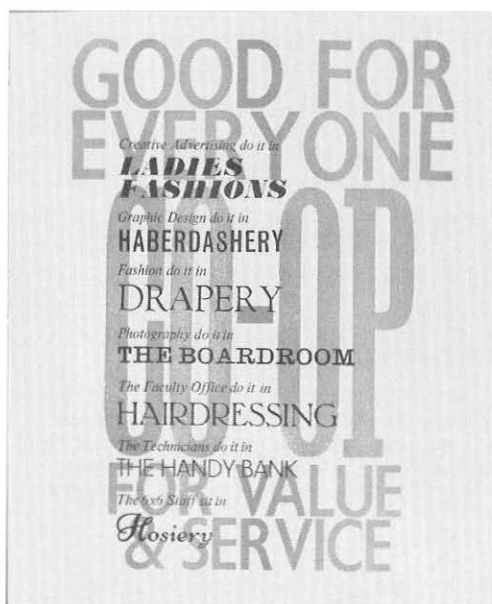
**FIGURE 1** Barnaby Stepney, BA (Hons) Graphic Design Student, University of Brighton. A visual representation of the levels of noise within a 1200ft radius of the letterpress workshop at the University of Brighton. Border patterns, intended for decoration, have been appropriated within a five-colour registration to convey information. The 36pt grid structure, an integral element of both typography and mapping, makes use of analytical thinking resting heavily upon the principles of information design. Stepney has made a direct connection between volume and tone, and grid position and geographic location.

*The context of each individual college influences the nature of the work produced, whereas previously the overarching desire was to strive for standardization.*

For example, the London College of Communication's (formerly London College of Printing) history as a trade school is made visible through the disciplined ethos of the pieces produced within the workshop — emphasis has been placed upon typography and information. In contrast, Lincoln's work stems from an expressive tradition.

The project has clearly outlined each institution's different approach to the process. Each set of six prints are clearly defined by the constraints of the workshop. The selection of typefaces available and

For Lincoln School of Art, this historical understanding is informed by the staff's own experiences as students, noting that "As the academic side of the team involved in this project, we are of an age where the experience of going to Art School was very different from that of a University. Art Schools had a core business of reading and drawing. Art Schools were very physical experiences. They all had workshops; ceramics, sculpture, glass, photography... and print rooms. These were full of processes such as etching, stone based lithography, screen-printing, and of course, letterpress" (Tullet & Wood, 2012). Unlike Camberwell, Lincoln College of Art has operated from many buildings within the city and the original letterpress workshop no longer remains. The workshop is a collection of type and equipment that has been gathered by Graphic Design Lecturers Barrie Tullet and Philippa Wood, and is situated in the studio for student use. This isochronal approach has in turn informed the visual language of the work, as "even though we have to work more in the spirit of Werkman than Warde, we have begun to know the nuances of our press and find work-arounds for the lack of chases, leading, furniture, composing stones and all the things we took for granted when we were students." (2012).



**FIGURE 3** Barrie Tullett and Philippa Wood, Senior Lecturers, BA (Hons) Graphic Design, Lincoln School of Art. The letterpress workshop at Lincoln has been reinstated by Tullett and Wood, having previously been lost through a series of college relocations. The press is currently occupied within the Graphic Design studio within the old Co-operative Department Store. The piece combines an eclectic mix of wood and metal typefaces, listing the departments within the larger store and how they are currently used.

embraces technological change and proves that there really is a place for traditional skill in the ever-changing contemporary design industry." John speaks of his training as a compositor, attending college as an apprentice, and the division of his day into different departments whereby "we did 'design' in the evenings". (2012). This echoes the experiences of Anthony Froshaug, typographer and educator, who taught at many London colleges and was denied access to the Central School (now Central Saint Martins) workshop both as a student and tutor, not having undertaken any formal training. Educational institutions reflected the division in industry, whereby design was a separate discipline from print production and each were taught as discrete courses. Such was the formal demarcation between the areas of design and production that "any engagement for the student of design with typography was always at a remove." (Baines and Dixon, 2012). The division between print and design was replicated at Brighton where there was a clear geographic divide between vocational typographic training for the print trade on one side of the building, and the education of designers on the other. The distance was defined not merely by academic and philosophic approach, training or education, but reinforced by the physical space between workshop and studio.

## THE EDUCATION OF THE DESIGNER

The technical teaching of letterpress composition was phased out at all participating colleges by the early 1980's. It is in these educational workshop spaces that the project is rooted, as opposed to commercial printers. It is important to draw a distinction between the two, as the primary purpose of the workshops differ fundamentally. This project aims to foster an environment of learning. Until the advent of the Mac, commercial letterpress workshops functioned as a means to produce artifacts. There is evidence that in addition to serving as a training environment, the letterpress workshops within institutions were used to produce in-house print jobs for the college, creating printed ephemera such as tickets, certificates, magazines, catalogues and promotional material.

: *If the letterpress workshops are no longer relevant*  
: *in the training of apprentices or used for production,*  
: *is it pertinent to ask, What is their primary function?*

This is the principal question the 6x6 Project attempts to investigate. There are many reasons for preserving the workshops within each school, but in each case it has been an active choice to keep letterpress equipment, despite the movement and reconfiguration of premises. At the tipping point when colleges were forced to consider

Today, the workshops are used predominantly by Graphic Design and Illustration students. The mode of teaching delivery varies from institution to institution, but the majority of colleges have an induction process to the workshop area that is delivered by technical staff. This enables students to work independently with access to specialist support. There are no discrete undergraduate letterpress courses in the UK. Students in the participating colleges are encouraged to explore design briefs through a range of media which may include: interaction, film, publication, print and print processes including letterpress. The adoption of letterpress as a medium by students is therefore primarily through self-selection.

## THE WORKSHOP EXPERIENCE

Many of the essays recognize the need for the spaces to serve as an engine for critical dialogue rather than as a mausoleum of typographic history. Steve Rigley at Glasgow School of Art acknowledges the enlightened thinking in relation to workshop spaces. The School is currently undergoing redevelopment, which will see the letterpress workshop moved to a more prominent place within the building, with transparent walls throwing light on the black art of printing. Ridley notes, "whilst being an absolute necessity, rows of Macs can feel sterile in their uniformity. Studios and workshops may act as a counter to this impersonal environment providing a more concrete or located sense of identity, a strong driver in the competitive world of student recruitment." (Rigley, 2012).



**FIGURE 6** Steve Rigley, Senior Lecturer, BA (Hons) Visual Communication, Glasgow School of Art. The piece reflects the change of location of the 'Caseroom' within Glasgow School of Art, which at the time of writing is currently housed in temporary accommodation, 'Skypark', on an industrial estate near the Clyde before its return to a new building on its previous site on Renfrew Street opposite the Macintosh building. The keys reflect the movement of the Caseroom and provide an example of found material raised to type height.

Letterpress remains the only media in which they are made visible during the process of composition and the creation of a forme.

While some students tackled complex typographic spacing issues, others chose to re-appropriate material within the workshop to undertake a broader range of relief printing. They explored the possibilities of printing from the spacing material and found matter, including image blocks. Students who are familiar with a range of digital, print and film technologies find inventive ways to generate material and integrate it within a letterpress form; for example, using laser cutting as a means of creating new image or type blocks and making printing surfaces from digital files. The eclectic incorporation of new technologies within the letterpress process constitutes new territory. Many students approach the design process iteratively as opposed to the linear training of the apprentice, demonstrating how the workshop has opened up to become an experimental space which enhances design thinking and makes profound and new printed matter. These findings within the project reflect the broader appeal of the media and are perhaps indicative of a renewed interest and revival of letterpress nationally.

There is a greater freedom and experimentation in the manner students design and prepare material for print now that the refined conventions of letterpress composition no longer remain. This is at odds with the previous generation of compositors where men, like their machines, were trained to be a configuration of interchangeable parts. Whilst recognising the new design freedoms within letterpress practice for the sake of a publication, it was necessary to conform to a template. This was one of the constraints that all participants had to work within to ensure the publication was produced from multiple presses with common margins. The printing process was organised differently at each college; in some workshops the students were entirely responsible for printing their own work and physically making every print, whilst at other colleges the technician took responsibility for the print run.

## **THE DESIGNER AS AUTHOR**

The project brief asked staff and students to design and produce an edition of 200 copies of each page. This placed many students in the unusual position of taking responsibility for both the design and production of an artifact. This appealed to Georgia from Brighton who commented, "The speed of the process is annoying but a large print run is achievable for a nominal cost." The designer who produces and publishes a short run, limited edition, or print pages for a collaborative production in response to an open-ended brief, takes on the role of author and maker. This is a freedom rarely afforded to staff



## THE VIEW AHEAD

The 6x6: Collaborative Letterpress Project has provided the opportunity for staff and students to reflect upon the nature of letterpress within their own institutions, and consider its role in the future. The involvement of students as joint researchers has been inspirational, with many driving forward with new ideas and ways of executing work. The participating staff teams collectively share the thoughts voiced at Central Saint Martins, "We as tutors have spoken of our vision for how letterpress enhances current design curricula; to teach is to be open to learn. It will be interesting to learn from the students themselves, how they envision the possibilities of the composing room beyond our perspectives, beyond teaching, beyond even print." (Baines and Dixon, 2012). These 'possibilities' have been explored and demonstrated in the work produced, with students stretching the capabilities of the process through integrating digital technologies. The workshop is an environment which fosters immersive learning and enables staff and students to work together on an equal footing.

## THE END MATTER

Reflecting on our initial objectives of the project, we have realized all of them, but perhaps not as we had anticipated: finding Letterpress workshops, inviting colleges to select participating students and staff to work on a common brief and supporting essay that reflect on issues raised within their research and practice, set production parameters and deadlines, make use of immersive research methodology and collaborative approaches, and finally to collect, edit, collate, design and disseminate a collaborative research publication through exhibition and conference.

In relation to the broader aims, there remains work to be done. We would like to establish links with all colleges with letterpress facilities in the UK and are seeking to establish relationships with educational institutions internationally. This process of extending the network will produce a comprehensive overview of letterpress within design education. The sample project has stimulated practice, research and critical enquiry, which has generated debate within the broader discipline of typography. We have begun to document and record the range of equipment and typefaces within the workshops but recognize that this is a significant undertaking that requires many further visits, and constitutes a significant body of additional research. This work would complement our intention to develop a more extensive history of letterpress within UK trade, art and design schools. Due to the nature of the process and suitability of the presses for mass production within the art schools, the current publication is a limited edition. However, it is planned that some of the findings may be disseminated through conferences and digital platforms.

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

*Alexander Cooper* graduated from London College of Printing in 2003 with a BA (Hons) in Typo/Graphic Design. He has run the letterpress workshop at what is now London College of Communication for the past ten years, teaching students from across the School of Design and external groups including University of Delaware, North Carolina State University, Eastern Michigan University, Art Center College, RMIT and Kingston University. His practice-based research focuses on the interaction between content and process, through pushing the boundaries of letterpress whilst respecting its traditions. He has worked, exhibited and spoken about his work internationally, including ALGA (USA), College Arts Association (USA), Plantin Moretus Museum (Antwerp) and Archivio di Sacchi (Milan). Recent projects include the 6x6: Collaborative Letterpress Project, a student and staff participatory letterpress publication involving six colleges with active letterpress workshops.

*Rose Gridneff* graduated from London College of Communication in 2005 with a BA (Honours) in Book Arts. She runs the second year of the BA Graphic Design at the University of Brighton. Rose completed her MA in Design Writing & Criticism in 2010, focusing on alternative propositions for design education. She is particularly interested in the role of letterpress and craft within education, and is currently working on a collaborative project that brings together six universities with letterpress workshops to share practice and research. Gridneff and Cooper have worked collaboratively under the name of Workshop since 2009. Creating primarily self-initiated work, they have exhibited in the UK, USA, Denmark and Holland and lecture internationally. They work out of their workshop in London, which they regularly open to students and professionals from around the world.

*Andrew Haslam* graduated from the Royal College of Art in 1987. Since then he has run his own studio in London creating science, history and geography books for children. He has published 28 children's books. Recognition for his work includes the American Institute of Physics Award for Science writing, the Geographic Association Gold medal for most significant contribution to geography and the American Readers' Digest Creative Children's Media Award for best series. For 12 years he has combined his studio work with teaching graphic design and typography, first at the University of Brighton and then at Central Saint Martins. He was Head of Typography at the London College of Printing before becoming Course Director of MA Communication Design at Central Saint Martins, Head of Visual Communication at the University of Brighton Faculty of Arts, and now Course Director of Graphic Design and Associate Head of School at University Kingston London.

