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Statement of philosophy

Teaching

In all the courses I have given at Rhode Island School of Design, Virginia Commonwealth University, and, currently, at San Jose State University, my teaching philosophy has always been to broaden the sometimes narrow confines of design curriculums, which typically favor the more formal aspects of the discipline.

Foundation

In foundation classes, I stress the importance of looking at nature as a source of elegant visual solutions to problems as well as a guide to the generative processes underlying those solutions. I emphasize that an essential aspect of design is the combined work of the mind, the eye, and the hand. Thus my students draw letterforms by hand, mix colors by hand and apply them with the brush, thus becoming connected intimately and directly to their work.

Subject matter

In undergraduate design classes I point out the superior importance of content over form, and the ways in which meaningful design will result from meaningful subject matter. I encourage students to learn as much as possible about the topic at hand in order to give better and more appropriate form to the presentation of the topic.

Boundaries

In graduate seminars and studios on criticism, color theory, and semiotics, I encourage students to step-out of the traditional boundaries of design to look not just at relevant art but also at relevant literature and science to gain a broader context for their design work, and thus add true interdisciplinary meaning to their projects.

Complexity

In the classes I have been teaching at San Jose State, I challenge students to accept the complexity of the materials and the text at hand not as a barrier but as an ally to their design efforts. I show that a page which includes lots of text, photos, sources, credits, and various other verbal elements, is often a page that already suggests its own design by virtue of the constraints dictated by that very complexity.

Sometimes more can be more, as is proved by any well-designed map, with its wealth and variety of detailed information. A good page layout like a good map, keeps a delicate balance between the clarity of the particular details and the underlying connectedness of the details to the whole.

Noise

"...any disposition of printing material which, whatever the intention,
has the effect of coming between author and reader is wrong."

This rather dogmatic statement, made by Stanley Morison in 1930 and specifically directed at the design of books, might sound rather anachronistic seventy-five years later, yet I believe that there is truth at its core. While adjustments to Morison's doctrine are often necessary, its basic assumption should be taken as a starting point. His principle is advisable in graphic design in general, but it is imperative in information design where we are often faced with (wrong) visual presentations in which the level of "noise" obscures the relevant information that's intended to be transferred, and the designer often is stuck intrusively between the author and the reader instead of facilitating their communion.

Color

Color, possibly the most misused and misunderstood component in information design has been conceived as having an intrinsic capacity to bring order and clarity to the difficult task of presenting complex data. In fact, the opposite is true: "Color cannot be properly used, at least by itself, when a precise ordering criterion is required. And the treatment of information is often a problem of order." (Silvestrini, 1981) Colors, unlike value (brightness) for example, do not have an intrinsic order. Thus, attempts to organize information according solely to color schemes often fail due to our inability to"keep in memory" more than a handful of colors, despite our ability to distinguish between thousands of them. Color coded floors, color coded departments become more and more baffling as the number of colors in the set increases.

Data integrity

My informational design experience has included production of graphic-standards manuals and exhibits for science museums, for government agencies, visitor centers. In addition I have developed websites that focused both on front-end html and back-end database integration. In all these projects, I have consistently avoided preconceived notions of "style" at the expense of preserving the integrity of the data. The designer's understanding of the data in these types of projects obviously should come before the data can be presented interpretively, and therefore no amount of graphic manipulation can in itself solve the data problem at hand unless the data itself has been first properly understood. Only then we can proceed to the specifics of "formatting the data" with appropriate graphic marks.

Ambiguity and Choice

Contrary to much misplaced confidence in the "intrinsic" character of graphical elements when dealing with communication and the transfer of information, graphical elements can

seldom provide in themselves a fool-proof recipe for good design. It's only when such elements (e.g. image components like position, dimension, shape, value, color, texture, and direction - J. Bertin, 1967) are used in the proper relationship to one another that they can render the presentation of the data meaningful and significant. For example, the use of the color red to place emphasis on a particular word or set of words within a larger printed text may be considered appropriate if the intent is to make the word stand out as an independent element, say as a cross-reference term. But the use of red may be inappropriate if the word simply indicates emphasis or acknowledges a special type of word, like a foreign term. In such cases the selective function of color could be achieved more economically with italics (direction) or bold type (value). In this example it's clear that less is indeed sometimes more, but here the "less" applies not to the data itself (the word), but to the types of physical marks (the typography) one chooses to utilize to render that word visible, readable, and unambiguous.

P. T.