VISUALISING ACADEMIA: HOW TO MAKE ACADEMIA ATTRACTIVE (A TEACHING CASE STUDY HIGHLIGHTING THE VISUAL ESSAY AS A CREATIVE MEANS OF TEACHING ACADEMIC PRACTICE)

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ABSTRACT

The central focus of this paper is concerned with the visual essay case study, as a means of teaching academic practice to students, whilst sustaining a design culture within design education.

Visualising academia reflects a different approach to the production and demonstration of critical and theoretical work, whereby students produce and present a visual essay as opposed to a traditional written format. It maintains the core values of academic practice, where the content is validated and contextualised, following standard academic means. However visual essays also offer students with a means of representing their work in a structured visual format and articulate this using various forms of multi-media.

There are a wide ranging number of reasons why this work is important. Firstly, the visual essay was developed because some students within Art and Design get frustrated with academic tasks. What they want to do is design. By having such variety and scope provides students with the opportunity to develop and enhance a variety of skills; not simply their writing abilities.

The Art and Design subject area has the highest number of dyslexic students, so, the visual essay offers curriculum and educational practice which is more inclusive to a wide variety of learners' needs. It is not simply the production of the visual essay which offers these opportunities for academic learning, as students are asked to present these to a student audience. Having these peer-review opportunities during the presentation of the Visual essay widens students' awareness and understanding of academic essays further and encouraging debate and discussion.

Keywords: Visual essay, change, engagement

1   INTRODUCTION

This research has evolved, rather than been designed. The idea was developed over a period of several years 2005-2007 within informal conversations between the author, a colleague, students from a Design Management (BA Hons) course, a group from the Furniture and Product Design under graduate programme and a small number of independent students, all emanating from (B.A. hons. & BSc.) programmes from levels

one and two at Nottingham Trent University. The conversations revolved around the production of the traditional essay. The idea or notion of a visual essay was jointly discussed, as everyone involved studied or researched within the visual / design world. The collective agreement was to try something different. There were numerous reasons why a visual essay was beneficial, some of these concerned the students who were not keen on producing essays through to the higher qualified under graduates wanted to do something different.

The essay was defined for the students, by simplifying the constituent parts of the text. A consensus was agreed with the students which focused upon the introduction, alternative viewpoints and a conclusion. The inclusion of images had to reflect an aesthetic balance of some description. The style of writing was defined as in the third person, except that in the introduction and conclusion there was an allowance for some first person usage, to indicate a 'personal ownership' and the development of their voice.

2   THE FACTS CONCERNING THE PRODUCTION OF AN ESSAY FOR SOME STUDENTS

To support the suggestion that there was a need for a different approach to academic study HESA statistics were obtained to establish the facts concerning the number of students in receipt of the Disabled Students Allowance DSA studying for their first full time degree qualification. The figures represent the year 2004/05 which were published during 2006. It is surprising to discover that the figures were so high for the creative art & design. Of the 35 categories and levels, ranging from 01 A-levels / Highers through to Foundation courses 29 of the highest scores are dominated by the creative art & design category, of the 18 subjects the highest average of 7% was attributed to the creative art & design domain. However, on a local level, the numbers of students being referred or requiring one to one tuition is also substantial; the following tables were obtained from the Dyslexia unit at Nottingham Trent University.

Table 1 Requests for Support referrals support at Nottingham Trent University Dyslexia support unit. The high number of 84 requests for one to one support equates to 34% of students at Nottingham Trent University.

Dyslexia Support referrals 2006/07

Count of Banner ID	
Franchise by Subcontract	2
Nottingham Business School	104
Nottingham Law School	51
School of Animal, Rural and Environmental Sciences	36
School of Art & Design	276
School of Arts and Humanities	83
School of Biomedical and Natural Sciences	75
School of Computing & Informatics	31
School of Education	83
School of Social Sciences	111
School of the Built Environment	151
#N/A	45
Grand Total	1048

To support the assertion that there is a need for a different approach to academic study the following tables were obtained from the Dyslexia unit at Nottingham Trent University. Table 2 reflects the Dyslexia Support referrals for 2007/07. If the figure of 34% one to one support is coupled to the 25% (276 students) referrals, there is an obvious need to re-visit and re-consider the development and the format of the essay as a fundamental pre-requisite of an under graduate programme.

Table 2 One to one tuition required at Nottingham Trent University to the Dyslexia support unit.

Dyslexia Support 1:1 2006-07	
Number of Students	
Nottingham Business School	18
Nottingham Law School	7
School of Animal, Rural and Environmental Sciences	22
School of Art & Design	84
School of Arts and Humanities	18
School of Biomedical and Natural Sciences	11
School of Computing & Informatics	7
School of Education	19
School of Social Sciences	39
School of the Built Environment	24
#N/A	5
Grand Total	254

Visual culture as an academic discipline has been established, this is represented by at least two journals representing the subject, these are; The Journal of Visual Culture and Visual Culture in Britain. Visual culture represents many disciples from point through to lens media. Visual culture – in part – has been defined as 'the dominant cognitive and representational form of modernity' [9]. Concern has been expressed by Rose [13] about the scopic regime, essentially this refers to what is seen and how it is made. The visual essay isn't constructed to measure the phenomenon as defined by Jenks (1995:1, 2) that observing and knowing are the same. The visual essay is concerned with engagement and the production of work by the student design students are ultimately designers, they will be practising. It is important to ensure that they think intellectually about design. This is suggested as a key part of the education of the designer Stolterman (1994) states that designers' guidelines and aesthetics are an essential part of their knowledge. He emphasizes that designers are guided by aesthetics.

2.1 The first visual essay

The first brief was for the BA (Hons.) Design Management for the Creative Industries: Level 1 DMCI 15 images and 15 words. *Individual Visual essay

The students were asked to produce a visual essay within a power-point presentation which exhibited 15 images, each supported by 15 words that focused upon one of the following topics: Religious, political or popular icons, a visual essay on design innovators, the use of the human form in advertising and the re - positioning of a brand. The students were asked to try and maintain a balance between the text and the image

throughout the essay. Three 30-minute group tutorials were allocated to the students in the development of their work.

"When his first iMac appeared with its distinctive curves and translucent candy colours, it became an advertiser's dream" BBC News Online http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/technology/2959278.stm [accessed December 2004]

Figure 1 Example screenshot of a visual essay.

The image, within the context of the visual essay has a different meaning – in some cases – because some of the students had attended Foundation courses prior to enrolling on an under graduate course. The image could be an illustration, or represent an object which has been re-contextualized.

The character of the essay is different from a traditional written text. The authors had to consider the text, graphics, the image plus how they relate to each other in a linear and non-linear way. It has been suggested that production within computing is similar to the relationship between the 'potter and a vase' [11]. This may suggest a similar relationship to the student who is constructing the visual essay.

To define the exact content and composition of every image within the visual essay would be difficult to do. Therefore, simple and universal principles of design were considered. Alignment meant that the component parts of a composition are aligned to the centre, if the design is a two-page spread [14]. Extending the compositional analysis further; it is assumed that the student is also generally aware of the Gutenberg diagram which defines the movement of the eye when reading. The alignment and Gutenberg diagram were combined by some students in a 'designed' way, others produced the work by experimentation, combined with the Picture Superiority Effect [12] a balanced visual essay was produced. Furthermore, the students also managed to produce visual essays which reflected a designed symmetry of forms, [8]. It has been suggested that interactivity is the first sense that engages your mind [1]. In some respects the act of the reader reading hasn't changed, only the medium which carries the information as stated by [2]'designers may provide the language and the syntax, but users find their own voice within the framework when relating to interactive media'

2.2 The second Visual Essay, students choose the topics

This was undertaken by both BA hons Design Management for the Creative Industries and the Furniture and Product Design level 2 students. The students were asked to produce an essay of 2,500 words accompanied by 50 images.

3 FEEDBACK

A number of final year and ex-students were contacted for their responses to the visual essay, they were asked to comment upon the value of the visual essay to them, in their context. The importance of critical reflection is endorsed within design; it has been described as 'evolving from awareness, while normative discourses are established' by

[3]. The following quotes originate from a Design Management graduate and the following four statements emanate from final year students studying Furniture and Product Design.

Design Management student 1, is currently employed as a client services executive

'*Doing visual essays helps to develop your ability to consider and refine compositions clearly while not detracting from the text. They also help you to make your writing more concise to fit within word limits. Basically they make you think more about the essay as a visual medium ensuring that text and image reflect the point as a whole linking the two rather than just pasting text on an irrelevant image and creating a confusing image that would never pass in a corporate environment*'. (Feb2008.)

Furniture & Product Design Student 1 is currently a final year undergraduate

'*It was the first time that I had ever really considered the* implications *of 'design' from a social context. To understand and consider the ways in which your work will ultimately affect others (both positively and negatively) is so important, because one day, it really will*'. (Feb 2008.)

Furniture & Product Student 2 again, is a current final year undergraduate (Feb 2008.)'The visual essay gave us the opportunity to explore a different method of presentation; instead of selling an idea it allowed us to convey our understanding of a chosen topic. The research into emotive design has given me the opportunity to broaden my knowledge on a topic that I was already enthusiastic about, opening my eyes to my personal values and undoubtedly shaping me (*as a*) designer'.

Furniture & Product Student 3 is also a final year undergraduate,

'An interesting way to demonstrate a form of writing. Why as designers should we be limited to the traditional form of text, when we can show this in more playful ways, to write an essay can be formal and dull, when presenting an essay can show all our enthusiasm. Student 4 the final year undergraduate (Feb 2008.) responded 'The visual essay we produced not only helped me focus on a possible area to base my dissertation on, but also gave me the ideal opportunity to develop both my research and presentation skills. The experience was very beneficial as it can expose certain weaknesses that need to be addressed'.

Finally, Dyslexia Support Specialist Sally Freeman responded to the work,(2008)

'For students who struggle not only with the actual task of academic writing, but just the sheer thought of it, the visual essay is immediately empowering. The student can recognise the relevance to their visual practice and it enables them to develop a new confidence in their written expression. It stimulates a new creativity and helps them to realise their potential'.

4 CONCLUSION

The decision-making in the design of the visual essay is more complex than the traditional process of producing an essay. The visual essay considers text, it includes images and the combination of these two. The visual essay is iterative in character, it is important to remember this, as the task of producing the work conforms to Hick's law – also known as Hyman Law – 'The time it takes to make decisions increases as the number of alternatives increases', [6] [7].

It has been shown that the visual essay has been successful for a number of reasons, it is suggested that the problem of essay writing was re-contextualized for the students, and that the students were interested in the experimental design aspect of the projects, fact that some fears have been allayed. 'Design learning in itself is a design process it should

be a creative self creating process where future designers are given the opportunity to develop their own ideas (Stolterman 1994: 458).

Naturally, they maintained a bias towards being descriptive rather than analytical. However, when they began working they realized that the task was more difficult than they thought it would be. Interestingly, the difficulty was something that they enjoyed, it was an opinion which was expressed from those who were not keen to produce essays, those who had no difficulty in writing essays' and those students defined as dyslexic. Art, design, psychology, teaching practice and the concept of learning are some of the variables which were needed to be considered for this research.

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