[**Eye Magazine**](http://www.eyemagazine.com/)

[](http://www.eyemagazine.com/magazine/issue-94)

**Strategy is never enough**

[Catherine Dixon](http://www.eyemagazine.com/profile/author/catherine-dixon)  
Education

In these information-saturated, cash-strapped times, David Pye’s concept of ‘workmanship’ has much to teach us

A key idea in the progressive design agenda is a renewed emphasis on ‘thinking’. Critics such as Steven Heller have said in the past that design is ‘woefully lacking’ in thinking; the consequence is a deeply vacuous practice. In 2003, Heller argued in *Print* magazine that, ‘Many students are competent designers, and some are better than that, but they must be equally good as thinkers. They must be able to research, analyse, critique and write.’ For the authors of *Design Things* (2011), writing under the collective pseudonym A. Telier, the underlying reason for design students’ lack of understanding is the narrow focus of the existing design curriculum, which, they argue, should embrace the behavioural sciences, technology and business. Designers and teachers Dunne and Raby have argued: ‘Design that asks carefully crafted questions and makes us think is just as important as design that solves problems or finds answers.’

Of course we need analytical and critical practitioners and should strive to emphasise the importance of contextual and strategic understanding in design practice. Yet, in calling for an emphasis on design as ‘thinking’, current discourse seems less interested in expanding on a practice and more in replacing it. While the AIGA’s Julie Anixter is prepared to declare that ‘today, designer and strategist are synonymous’, I am not yet ready to jettison the ‘making’ in design.

My own perspective is that of a typographer. I believe that the visual organisation of text and the management of accessibility to information are of fundamental importance, demanding a balance  
of what Michael Twyman refers to as ‘serious thinking about typographic problems in conceptual terms’ with a detailed knowledge of typography as ‘making with words’ (see ‘Typography without words’ in *Visible Language* vol.XV no.1, 1981).

Yet typography suffers from a modern invisibility, and it can be seen as arcane in these information-saturated times – the result of an undervaluing of skills. While the design world is busy answering the call of IDEO’s Tim Brown to engage in the bigger picture of socially innovative design, the smaller picture of managing the minutiae of typographic spacing can get a little lost – not least within an educational agenda. More troubling is the assumption that, just because students know what fonts are and use computers, they will understand how typography works. Effortless typography is far from effortless, but it is difficult to value what you cannot appreciate. Laura Potter – who prefers to be called a ‘maker’ – states in her essay ‘By hand and brain’ that ‘consumers need to understand an object’s context of production, its embedded skills and knowledge and the quality of the materials … so that they can develop an understanding of how and why similar things may be differently valued.’

Although from another discipline, the ideas of woodworker David Pye (1914-93), expressed in his 1968 book *The Nature and Art of Workmanship*, are helpful in articulating the nature of skilled practices. Pye wrote: ‘Design is what, for practical purposes, can be conveyed in words and by drawing: workmanship is what, for practical purposes, can not.’ The predictable ‘workmanship of certainty’ is contrasted with what Pye identifies as an open-ended approach to execution, expressed by the idea of the ‘workmanship of risk’, where the idea or design is transformed through the process of making. This does not stop with the idea but (as Norman Potter argued in *What is a designer*) continues through to the ‘fashioning of the means to carry it out.’

How often, though, is the ‘idea’ in design elevated over that of the execution? Even when the execution is taken into consideration, it is frequently relegated to the status of unnecessary taste-controlling finesse. Also, innovation is often valued highly at the expense of tradition, and the contemporary curriculum favours ‘generalism’ over specialism. The broad transferability of ‘design thinking’ is attractive to educational establishments as the boundaries between art and design disciplines blur.

Graphic designer Stuart Bailey, in an influential essay (‘Towards a critical faculty’, Parsons School of Design, The New School, NY 2006-07), asked whether ‘students ought to be pushed … towards developing a general reflexive critical faculty rather than discipline-specific skills.’ Nearly a decade later, craft writer Stephen Knott concurred, writing in the RCA-funded *Specialism* that, ‘A lack of specialism can be mediated by negotiation with those who possess the skills or the willingness to learn new skills. There is a wealth of … YouTube videos out there explaining process.’

**Emphasis on making**  
Collaboration can be positive and YouTube has its place, but an understanding of process is about more than outsourcing making. According to *Design Things*, making is a form of ‘situated doing’, and the knowledge that is constructed and transformed in an activity is open-ended, inventive and improvisational. Such qualities seem to be directly a result of the social, material and experiential context of making, and add to the case for a greater emphasis on making in design education as a means of enhancing design thinking more generally. Yet calls to retain the breadth and diversity that specialism brings (in the face of a consumer-led monoculture) struggle with the logic of ‘the bottom line’. The education of the non-specialist thinker costs less than that of a practitioner.

Perhaps the greatest challenges to the values of ‘workmanship’ and of specialism lie in the ‘dematerialisation’ of design itself. Questioning a shift towards the immaterial and conceptual in design, designer and programmer Petr van Blokland asked where such thinking came from, ‘that design can be made entirely by thinking in their heads?’

Paul Stiff posed a challenge to designers in his essay ‘Stop sitting around and start reading’ (Eye 11, 1993). In this article he quoted a 1968 document on typographic teaching that observed that there are many ‘unspectacular’ areas of design that play an important part in our lives and which ‘are either not designed at all or are designed badly’. Stiff cited items such as reports, forms, specifications, timetables and user manuals. All these are still relevant, if not in print, then online. Designing such things well requires technical know-how of a micro-typo-detailing kind. It does not change the world from the top down. If managed with sensitivity it can engage with the world from the bottom up, document by document.

Just before Easter, I attended TypoLabs, a type conference in Berlin exploring the design potential for variable font technology. Even within the world of type design this was a pretty niche event, yet with potentially far-reaching outcomes. The assembled designers and programmers speculated on the possibilities for advanced text composition within the new expanded digital parameters, with type designer John Hudson (see *Eye* 90) drawing particular attention to the benefits of tools with which to typeset Arabic – tools which allow for the inherent calligraphic qualities that have thus far eluded this dynamic script in print and onscreen.

That Arabic typesetting may for the first time actually render the Arabic script with sensitivity and accuracy and potentially (via future tools) accessible to many is undoubtedly a ‘bigger-picture’ change, not least for many millions of Arabic readers. Yet such change is no thanks to the generalists, or the design strategists. Rather this is a moment to celebrate the benefits to us all of the shared knowledge-building of specialist makers.

In typography, workmanship facilitates design, rather than the other way around. Ideas and design rely on what we know and, most importantly, what we discover through doing, not least via materials and techniques. To separate design from making is a false distinction.

*Catherine Dixon, designer, educator, London*

First published in *Eye* no. 94 vol. 24, 2017