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Event review of ‘De-Brief: Interrogating the Graphic Design Brief’ at University of Salford, 9th September 2015

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Abstract

Event review of ‘De-Brief: Interrogating the Graphic Design Brief’, the inaugural symposium of the Graphic Design Educators’ Network, a new subject association, held at University of Salford on 9th September 2015.

Keywords

graphic design, subject associations, networks, the brief, Graphic Design Educators’ Network

Before the frenzied start of the new academic year, 80 or so graphic design lecturers met at the University of Salford for the inaugural meeting of the Graphic Design Educators’ Network (GDEN). This initiative was started by a group of ten graphic design lecturers from different universities across the UK, with the aim of inciting discourse about our practices, and was initiated by this one-day symposium entitled ‘De-brief: Interrogating the Graphic Design Brief’.



Figure 1: Photo by Paul Bailey, Graphic Design Educators’ Network (GDEN), Wednesday 9 September 2015, University of Salford.

This symposium presented the opportunity to explore the breadth of graphic design courses currently being run in the UK and consider how the subject is taught around the country. It interrogated 'The Brief' as both the start of a graphic design project and the beginning of the GDEN's formation. The aim of the GDEN is to provide a platform for the teaching community to discuss and share the methods and approaches used in teaching practice.

The first keynote speaker was Professor David Crow, Pro-Vice Chancellor of Manchester School of Art. His job entails explaining to senior colleagues what the subject is and how it fits into the university sector. He showed charts that indicated the huge popularity of undergraduate design courses as well as the large impact that the creative and digital industries have within the job sector, however, despite this influence design subjects are still minor in terms of the funding that they bring into universities through established academic research channels. Crow argued that design subjects must work hard to improve their research outputs, in-line with those produced by more traditional subjects, in order to gain academic weight within universities. He also urged us to consider our relationship with 'industry' as despite thousands of graphic designers graduating each year, the Design Council recently outlined that the 'industry is crying out for well-trained, work-ready designers' (Crow, 2015).

The keynote speaker at the afternoon session was Jonathan Baldwin, Associate Head of the School of Art and Design at the University of South Wales. He urged the community to de-clutter course curriculums. Baldwin suggested that focusing on the 'end point' and having a clear vision about where students are heading, would clarify the route ahead. In order to explore this, he unpacked a core issue shared by design curriculums: the often opposing ideas connected to 'thinking' and 'making'. These two areas are intertwined in such a way that neither should exist without the other. To encourage us to 'do less' in design courses, he proposed that universities and industry need to be comfortable with the idea that students learn different things at different times, especially after graduation, as even when a subject is not taught, it does not mean that it will not be learned. Students need cultural understanding and social context and to these ends, design courses should investigate interdisciplinary projects with other subjects, outside the art school.

The day also incorporated a variety of workshops on topics such as, 'The Brief: Co-authorship and Collaborations'; 'Undead: Myths of the Live Brief'; and 'Briefing for Digital'. I attended a session led by Lucy Brown a Senior Lecturer in Graphic Design and Illustration at the Faculty of Arts and Creative Technologies at Staffordshire University. In line with the workshop title, 'Non-linear Exploration of the Brief', Brown explained how she communicates the subject of graphic design to her newly-arrived first year students. Having found that they often turn to Google when given a problem to solve, and in an effort to explain the creative process, Brown takes them out of the studio and into the Lake District, where students use their senses to create their research. This approach serves as a means through which the students learn about the importance of their own discoveries and observations: attributes that will define them as unique designers.

During the course of the day, conversations with various speakers and other delegates indicated our shared understanding about the subject of graphic design and what this discipline as a university subject is about. It is an evolving and exciting academic subject that creates content, solves problems and understands how to convey messages. The question that remains unresolved is connected to perception of the subject: how do we let the outside world know that what we can offer goes beyond using Photoshop or making other people's

ideas look pretty? In other words, why (as communication experts) are we not better able to communicate our subject? Teachers and lecturers in graphic design need to ensure that the rest of the university sector understands our research strengths, how we work and what we can potentially offer. We need to define new ways of creating design work, as research. This re-definition might occur through the creation of artifacts in parallel with academic papers or by undertaking research collaborations with other disciplines that demonstrate the expertise and scope of our practice.

What became clear during this first meeting of the GDEN is that there is a need to continue fostering relationships with industry and take responsibility for explaining what they get and how we perceive their role in this exchange. More difference within courses could address skill shortages in certain areas. Of course graduates do not know every technique nor does their degree equate to years of work experience, but we – the educators – have a responsibility to open their eyes to a way of continuous learning that they can use for the rest of their lives and help them to discover ways of working and thinking that will enable them to collaborate with others and solve problems.

The GDEN established itself as a supportive place to discuss these ongoing and developing issues within our subject. During the day more questions were raised than answered, but the shared common ground and sense of a supportive community network will provide a strong foundation for further discussion about how to improve perception of our subject. By undertaking collaborations, we as educators and practitioners will be able to demonstrate the value of our practice, what graphic design can offer to a team and how communication is essential through every stage of a project and not a tag-on at the end. Collaborative design-thinking can solve problems beyond how things look on a page.

References

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Biography

Emily Wood is Stage 1 leader for BA (Hons) Graphic Design at Central St Martins. She also teaches on the Design and Interaction pathway of the same course, and is the co-founder of REG Design. She is interested in how graphic design can help to improve the places and the ways in which we live.