‘Navigating the bubble’: Exploring student experiences of design writing

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Abstract

Undergraduate design students at London College of Communication were interviewed about the relationship between their writing practice and their design practice. Gardner’s theory of multiple intelligences (1983) framed the study. This article takes the position that polarizing the relationship between linguistic (textual) and bodily kinaesthetic (visual) forms of intelligence itself becomes a barrier to arts students’ epistemological development. The well-rehearsed art school rhetoric of ‘I’m a visual person not a writer’ can become a self-fulfilling prophecy, disabling the potential to learn through writing. The research explored student perceptions and experiences of design writing, with data surfacing themes of anxiety, identity, artefact, articulation, process and value. Suggestions about how to support students to write about design praxis are presented for consideration.

Keywords

design writing; design praxis; pedagogy; academic writing; articulation; dissertation alternatives

Context

The substantial weighting of the dissertation within the final year of an undergraduate degree can prove challenging for many art and design students, forcing them to engage in modes of research and production contrary to their mainstream visual practices and methodologies (Wood 1999). However, the large body of research conducted via the Writing PAD project (2002–present), along with many previous articles published in this journal, document a growing shift away from the traditional Coldstream-inherited dichotomy between studio and theory (for a critique of the origins of this polarity, see Lockheart 2018). Increasing numbers of art and design degrees are rejecting standalone written components in favour of merging visual strategies and techniques with writing practice to create ‘hybrid forms of expressing knowledge and understanding’ (McCannon 2011: 131).

The case study

One course to adopt this 'challenge […] to give writing the texture, physicality and colour of the artifact' (Orr and Blythman 2002: 6) was the BA (Hons) Design for Graphic Communication (DGC) course (a top-up year to a Foundation Degree of the same name) at London College of Communication (LCC), part of the University of the Arts London (UAL). In the original 2009 validation, the course team, inspired in large part by the Writing PAD project work, rejected the traditional third-year dissertation model, opting instead to design an alternative written unit that would better fit the vocational philosophy of a FdA Top-Up course. The resulting assignment brief for the 'Industrial and Theoretical Contexts' (ITC) unit asked students to produce a 4500-word design research report on 'an aspect of current industry practice that interests you and feeds into both your studio practice and professional ambitions' (*ITC Assignment Brief* 2014–15). The outcome had a requirement to be visually designed in a format closely aligned to the subject, and the unit was taught by studio tutors. With an emphasis on experiential learning, students engaged in highly interactive workshops, where they worked together to ideate, plan, research, write, co-write, edit and design their reports. Each student was required to e-mail 500 words of new text to their tutor for formative feedback once a fortnight throughout the term. One-to-one tutorials were rare, with most discussion taking place in small groups within the shared, open setting of the studio. Tutors facilitated workshops where students used techniques from editorial design, such as cut-and-paste exercises, writing into and rearranging each other's content and tone of voice experiments in order to improve the quality of their writing.

As the ITC unit progressed through the years, anecdotal feedback from students and graduates indicated that it was becoming a highly valued component of the final year. This small-scale research project set out to unpack student experiences of design writing on the ITC unit in order to ascertain what was working and to see if lessons could be learned that could be applied in the earlier years of the course.

Research questions

The project aimed to investigate student perceptions and experiences of design writing in general; examine student experiences of the ITC unit, with particular focus on writing processes; and explore its value. At the point of carrying out the study, the research questions were:

1. How do students perceive and value design writing?
2. What barriers do students encounter with design writing?
3. What is the relationship between students' writing practice and design practice?

4. What is the value of the ITC unit?

Theoretical framework

Gardner's theory (1983) of multiple intelligences framed the study. The Writing PAD literature comprehensively illustrates issues that art and design students have with writing – for example, its separation from core studio practice, lack of confidence and the prevalence of dyslexia amongst learners of these subjects (Edwards 2005). Indeed, in a trigger paper for the Writing PAD project, John Wood states that, 'the culture of design education reflects an uneasy liaison between the medieval monastic (Book) and the crafts guilds ("design studio") traditions' (1999: 1). This article takes the view that polarizing the relationship between linguistic (textual) and bodily kinaesthetic (visual) forms of intelligence (Gardner 1983) itself becomes a barrier to students' epistemological development. The well-rehearsed art school rhetoric of 'I'm a visual person not a writer' becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy, effectively disabling the potential to learn through writing.

Wood, Bruner and Ross's scaffolding theory (1976) and Vygotsky's instructional concept of apprenticeship (1978) work in tandem to offer pragmatic solutions to this challenge. The ITC scheme of work was based on iterative writing workshops that led the learner from one stage of development to the next, without being faced head on with the challenge of a lengthy writing task. Additionally, learners performed collaborative writing exercises in order to operate more effectively in their zone of proximal development, working with more knowledgeable others to improve their own practice (Vygotsky 1978).

Methodology

In order to gain a holistic view of the ITC unit, the empirical research took the form of an in-depth case study (Stake 1995) utilizing mixed methods to gather data. The author was at the time a part-time tutor on the course and therefore was an insider researcher (Hockey 1993).

The research began with a review of literature around the pedagogy of writing in creative practice. This theoretical work was complemented by an examination of the written artefacts of the unit: its descriptor, assignment brief, scheme of work and other teaching materials. The desk-based research was augmented by primary research, designed to capture student and graduate descriptions of their experiences and perspectives on the unit, as well as tutor opinions. These multiple research strands were

designed to more fully understand the unit's strengths and weaknesses in order to analyse what was happening and why.
The main primary research method employed was semi-structured group interviews in order to elicit individual perspectives on the value and challenges of writing in graphic design education, as well as opinions of the unit itself. These were undertaken with both students and teaching staff. Sample sizes were 49 per cent of the total population of 39 students and 100 per cent of the teaching team (four tutors, including the author as participant researcher). The single staff group interview was conducted at a midpoint in the unit. The students were interviewed in two separate groups twice, once as they commenced the ITC unit to examine preconceptions and understandings of design writing, and at a midpoint to see how they felt about the unit as it progressed.

Following the announcement of degree results and course degree show, an online questionnaire was distributed to the new graduates. This questionnaire was designed to gather responses about the value of the ITC unit in hindsight. Nine responses were received, representing approximately 25 per cent of the full cohort.

An additional online questionnaire was distributed to a purposive sample of seven course graduates who had undertaken the unit the year before, with the aim of exploring any lasting value in professional contexts. The sample was selected on the basis of their status as working graduates who had interesting stories to tell about the role that their ITC reports have played in their careers. Five responses were received.

Ethical permissions were sought (and granted) from all research participants. All quotations were anonymized and are attributed using the following format: s1 = student 1, t1 = tutor 1, etc.

Following Stake's case study analytical approach (1995: 71–90), data sets were coded, analysed thematically and triangulated. The three main themes are set out below, illustrated by key quotes that illustrate the conceptualization.

Theme 1: Writing as artefact/writing as process

In the first interview (which occurred just after the outset of the ITC project), students were asked to give their understanding of the term 'design writing'. Most struggled to articulate a detailed definition. In all three stage-one interviews (student and staff), discussion began with regurgitating the words in a different order using simple prepositions to link terms, for example, 'writing about design' (s1) or 'writing for design, writing for designers' (s12). Other students offered short definitions, such as 'expressing

opinions about various aspects of design' (s2), 'writing in a critical way about current practice' (s6), 'the theory behind design' (s8). Whilst these could be considered technically accurate, their brevity could indicate an ambiguity about what design writing *is* and a possible resultant concern about answering the question incorrectly. Previous research acknowledges ambiguity as a defining feature of the art and design curriculum (Austerlitz et al. 2008), and it is possible that, for some design students, the written aspects of their course are more ambiguous than the visual.

Very few students offered a fuller answer to the question, and nobody offered any examples (although perhaps this is because they were not asked to). Of the longer answers, one offered an alternative perspective:

> I think it has to do with reflecting maybe. […] I, as a graphic designer, always write. I have to, otherwise I get lost. I write in a diagram, it doesn't need to be say, an essay or a report. And I write for myself. I don't care if anyone understands, I don't care if I make assumptions – I write. Otherwise, many times I had so many ideas and I felt lost. Writing helps identify what am I talking about.
>
> (s14)

This student situated writing at the centre of his practice, as an integral, fluid process that helped him construct meaning and realize his ideas. Another student viewed the purpose of writing as 'a better way to generate discussion or knowledge' (s4), acknowledging the value gained by the act of putting words down on the page. This conceptualization of writing as part of the design process was at odds with the following student view that was elicited via a question about the relationship between writing practice and design practice, where writing was positioned as truth:

> In the studio the designer is primarily an empiricist. And in design writing the designer is primarily a rationalist. In the studio you do things, and that's using your senses. And if you're writing you're using intuitive propositions or deduction to understand what's true.
>
> (s1)

This idea that studio practice is active – a space where you 'do things', as opposed to a passive space, where nothing is made, only discussed (writing not being considered a tangible outcome) – is echoed in another response: 'it's supposed to be backing up what you do in the studio with your writing. You write to back up what you did' (s2). For these students, writing is seen as the justification for design, rather than part of the design – a separate artefact rather than an alternate mode of thinking. One tutor observed that students write plentiful amounts in informal places:

> When you look through a lot of students' notebooks and sketchbooks there is so much writing in them anyway. They do a lot of their thinking through notes. So it may not be academic sentences or referenced paragraphs or things, but they do a lot of thinking through writing.
>
> (t1)

This notion of writing having an intrinsic value, as a reflective channel to understanding, as opposed to being about end results and fixed outcomes, was something that figured highly in tutor discussion about the nature of design writing. One tutor even defined it as 'writing to understand design' (t2), and another hoped that 'maybe the slow process of design writing, it's slower than making design, may help them learn, think about how they think about design' (t1). At the outset of the ITC unit, the definition of design writing with tutors lay firmly on the purpose of the writing process being learning, rather than the production of written outcomes, as it was for the majority of the students.

One tutor identified a parallel between the students' and tutors' zones of proximal development (Vygotsky 1978) in terms of the students developing writing skills and the tutors developing teaching skills through working together on the unit:

> ITC, because it's delivered by people who are teaching in the studio, who are delivering all the other units, we're perhaps working a little out of our comfort zone with one or two of the units. We might be stronger at the writing or stronger at the practical. We're in it with the students in some respects.
>
> (t1)

This suggests that conceptualizing writing as lying outside of core design practice, or at least as uncertain territory, is deeply ingrained in the mindset of both the learning and teaching communities. No wonder then its role is blurred. Writing PAD's Survey of Practices identified that '[t]utors are coinciding more in terms of studio-theory-support: taking on the writing development side of "Context" themselves. […] Such teaching practice requires flexibility, being open to changes and not overly prescribing' (2005: 22). In this study, it appeared there was something bonding about the tutors co-occupying a learning space, developing their teaching practice alongside the students' development of writing practice.

Theme 2: Barriers to writing

Given these perceived uncertain purposes of writing, it was perhaps inevitable that students would air concerns and difficulties when asked how they felt about writing.

Students were asked how they felt about their experiences of design writing, both on and prior to the ITC unit. The following represents a fairly typical answer:

> The writing we did during our [previous] course was way more difficult. From our writing we get something because we learn something. But some of this writing wasn't worth doing, because some of the information we learnt will not be useful for us and the writing amount was massive. So except this ITC writing, where we're writing about the topics, which are our personal interests so we know what we will get from it, and we have some expectations from it already. But the other academical writings […] some of them were completely pointless. It was a waste of time and there seems to be a disconnect with the main body of the course. Completely.
>
> (s15)

Academic writing is described by this student as excess and waste, as 'massive' … too much of a disconnected thing. The 'point' of writing academically is fundamentally questioned, raising the spectre of the exchange value of writing as artefact, which might be situated within the wider context of the commodification of higher education. This depth of negative feeling about the written elements of the students' prior course is echoed in the next quote, but is balanced with a more nuanced understanding of the intrinsic value of being challenged with complex ideas and tasks:

> I have to say something in defence of the [previous] writing. I hate it, I hate it, I hated it. The anxiety, the not knowing what they wanted. But now, now I'm in the third year doing this project, I have the impression that I'm really understanding the power of being in that bubble, of not understanding anything. What do I do? How do I do it? I'm not doing anything, I'm spending hours in front of the computer and in books, and I finish and I have nothing. But you have. You've been in that bubble and you've navigated the bubble. I think as a training for being in the bubble, essays are good, and that empowers you as a designer, somewhere down the line. You will make use of that effort.
>
> (s14)

The buoyancy conveyed by this image of the bubble, with its associate impermanent nature, amplifies the previous student's point about disconnection. To be disconnected is to be uncertain. The bubble suggests a precarious spatial imaginary, where one's intellectual moorings have come loose. This difference from the epistemic solidity of what went before is identified from a new and mutable perspective. Uncertainty about what has been learnt is also present in this reflection:

> Just a few weeks ago I took out my old essays, just look at the structure, so to see if I could maybe structure it [ITC] the same way I did my last report. And see what I could learn from it. But I couldn't pick out what I had learned, you know, I couldn't see it. If it

> was design, then maybe I could say oh well it was this layout, this text worked really well. […] But when I looked at the essays they all looked the same to me. The only thing I could see was that the last one I did, I kind of picked an interest to choose to write about. Whereas the previous ones I didn't. So I don't know if that had an effect on it. Because I enjoyed writing the last one.
>
> (s13)

The student had reached a position at the end of his two-year FdA course where he enjoyed his final written assignment (and got an A grade); he could see that the fact that he had selected his own topic and had enjoyed the writing process was important but was unsure why. It is possible that the control over the subject matter gave him a sense of ownership and chimed with his sense of identity. Another student said this was the most positive aspect of the ITC unit for him:

> This ITC writing is really well-designed because we choose our subject, then we write about our personal interest and this writing can bring something to our practice as a designer. The other writings, they seemed like we had to write something because we had to. The part of our studies was academical as well, so we had to write something. It was mostly useless.
>
> (s15)

This self-selection of topic centres the personal within the professional modality of developing a writing practice:

> [E]mphasis is placed in the student's subjective starting point, an experience or an artefact for example, and then on moving away to a place of distance and reflection, a more objective place of research and positioning within a context, with subsequent feeding back into the studio practice.
>
> (Writing PAD 2005: 9)

The benefits of this 'subjective starting point' cannot be overestimated in helping students develop confidence in writing. The familiarity of an area of personal interest can act as a comfort blanket when moved into the uncertain terrain of developing an unfamiliar practice. Students talked about feeling 'daunted' (s11), describing writing as 'a fear I had always had' (s13) and being 'apprehensive. We need something visually stimulating, as we're designers we like to see something. […] Whereas with writing, we don't get that same feeling when doing it. So it feels a lot harder whilst creating' (s10). It is clear from these statements that trepidation about writing runs deep in the veins of the design student body. One tutor asserted that the requirement of the ITC report (the unit's final submission) to be visually designed 'engages them more, like it tricks them into doing some good writing' (t1). The self-selected focus of study and the more

familiar process of visually editing the writing using their graphic design skills work together to reinforce their emerging identity as designers.
It was noticeable from the data that students with lower average grades repeatedly referred to themselves as designers, despite the fact that the majority of them were not yet working professionally. The designer identity was used to rationalize a dislike and, therefore, weakness in writing, with one student suggesting that the personality of a designer is incompatible with writing: 'I think there's a lot of stubbornness in designers as well. Someone saying to you, you've got to write a 4000 word essay […] what? No! I just want to design a poster. Maybe that holds back some of the writing' (s12). Perhaps the vocational nature of the course had been so successful at getting students to align themselves with the design industry; it had been to the detriment of their study skills, resulting in them making excuses for not engaging in writing.

Conversely, stronger students more consistently described themselves as students. In the following example, a student expresses concern around potential readers' opinions about their insecure position as students critiquing professional practice:

> I think it's a bit scary too, because we are young and we are afraid of saying stuff. That people might think you're not very knowledgeable. Because there is already loads of people writing so we are taking this position of writing and critiquing a practice, so I don't feel very comfortable writing because of it.
>
> (s4)

This was a real risk for this particular student, as he was at that point establishing a successful design practice with his partner, and they were publishing their work in an established design magazine. This worry that their attempts at design writing might be viewed as presumptuous by professional design practitioners is perhaps symptomatic of their status as third-year students, poised on the threshold between university and work. Neither a fully graduated member of the academy nor a professional. Neither a designer nor a writer. Another student affirmed this liminality, 'feeling like an inexperienced writer' (s10). It is clear from the data that the students identify themselves more easily as designers than design writers, but some find themselves on slippery territory with the former definition also. In their work on academic literacies, Lea and Street assert that '[a] student's personal identity […] may be challenged by the forms of writing required in the different disciplines' (2000: 35). This dissonant relationship between the dual positions of designer and writer was expressed by this student:

> In the studio you have to be present as yourself. When you're writing about design it's more like you're examining the discourse around the discourse around the discourse of what you're doing. You can be an observer, you can be any perspective you like, but in the studio you're you, you have to be you. There's a difference there. Who shows up to the writing and who shows up studio?
>
> (s1)

This notion of a separate writerly self, and of writing as representation of self, is also evident in this explanation of purpose:

> In my case I'm writing this thing addressing young graphic designers, but I have two purposes. One is to show the world who I am. But it would be actually great if the young student graphic designers would actually read it, make use of it for their own research or something.
>
> (s14)

The free choice of topic helped students locate a place for themselves within the wider context of the design industry. One tutor suggested that the ITC unit allowed them 'to discover the area that they are interested in' (t1). He went on to say that 'the whole third year is about asking about what you're interested in. I think that it sounds like quite a flippant question but it's a really difficult one for them to answer' (t1). This was affirmed by another tutor: 'yeah, because it requires them to think about why they do what they do. And that's daunting for any of us to do' (t2). Finding the rationale for what you do might also be understood as seeking the value in your practices. But what did the students see as the value of this design writing?

Theme 3: The value of design writing

All participants were asked about the relationship between students' design writing and design practice. It was clear that prior to commencing the ITC unit, the two modes of writing and designing had been considered as separate entities by most students. The question of whether or not the two should be separate was raised several times. The following student suggested that forcing a link between the two encourages a depth of thinking beyond focusing on surface visual considerations:

> I don't know if the practice and the writing should be separate. I think they are together cos I think they are useful. For even people who don't write, they probably read, and if they don't do that […] they are just giving like their aesthetic.
>
> (s4)

The pragmatic benefits of theorizing design practice were seen as vital to engaging students, one of whom expressed the importance of the report having tangible use in

the non-academic world, 'I really want to make it the best I can so that other people actually want to read it, and it's going to be useful. So that people in graphic design would actually read it and find it useful' (s11). This was picked up by a tutor who provided the rationale for formatting the assignment as a report:

> The report isn't just proving how clever you are or how academically minded you are, a report is something useful. Something that a company would use to inform them about something, or something that's quite journalistic. In a pragmatic way, hopefully they will find themselves in a situation where they've got to explain their design process to a client or a studio partner or somebody that they have to convince, not through just the work because the work will be there, but through their thoughts, ideas, their argument.
>
> (t1)

The report's utility as entrée into the design industry was clear to many participants. Another tutor identified the link to industry as the requirement for primary research as well as secondary:

> One other reason why it's linking at the minute is because they're required to do primary research. A lot of them see that as an interview opportunity or making contacts, or opening discussion. I think that's where it's not in this abstract, distant, academic context, it's more present, it's more real.
>
> (t2)

The core value of the ITC report lay in its ability to bridge gaps. It forged links between theory and practice, university and industry, and helped students transition into becoming design practitioners, as eloquently expressed by the following tutor:

> Something in teaching that I'm finding myself saying, a lot more is this term, is articulation. And I think that coming from delivering a writing module with students because this understanding of how to position your work, how to discuss it or to represent it, this idea of being articulate with both the writing and the doing is really important. That term keeps coming up, I find myself running into both in the delivery. I think that must be an implication of dealing with ITC.
>
> (t2)

If articulation is considered as both a verb – 'the action of putting into words an idea or feeling' – and a noun – 'the state of being jointed' (*Oxford English Dictionary* 2020) – it works as a metaphor for the ITC unit. Through the making of design praxis, students learn how to process the systematic, functional, representational nature of graphic design differently. In a twist on a common design crit pedagogic plea to 'show, don't tell', these students learnt how to tell, as well as how to show. As one student summed

up, ‘it’s basically understanding how the graphic design industry fits within the real world, why it’s there in the first place and what our role is’ (s3).

Conclusions and considerations

The overall impact of the ITC unit was to support students to articulate their thinking around design in ways that would help them connect between design study and the design profession. If design writing is ascribed the value of articulation, then synthesizing the findings from this small-scale research project can similarly be viewed as an act of seeking to articulate value. The intention is to draw together what has been learned and consider any consequences for design pedagogy. In order that the findings may remain open to interpretation, these considerations have been framed as questions. In this way it is hoped that they might stimulate further research and/or teaching experiments.

The data reinforced prior studies – many of which have appeared in this journal – that design students perceive the long-form, linear essay writing of traditional theoretical dissertations as at worst divorced from, at best as an addendum to, their central practice of graphic design. The brevity of the participants’ definitions of design writing might be a function of the attributes required to become a professional designer. Designers are trained to visually consider less as more, focusing upon the edit, with its associated values of clarity and translatability. The popularity of the ITC assignment mode being a visually designed report supports this. What would happen if brevity was considered a criterion for design writing? How might different types of short-form writing assignments scaffold towards final-year long-form writing assessment? Indeed, do final-year writing assignments need to be long form?

Design students experience feelings of trepidation around writing, in general, and academic writing, in particular. This anxiety can dint their confidence and disempower their agency as learners. That said, the ambiguity created within the ‘bubble’ of grappling with theory and academic writing forces engagement with conceptual uncertainty. How can floating in an atmosphere created by the (often confusing) ideas of others be harnessed to anchor students’ own thinking? If students are taught to tune into the affect caused by navigating uncertainty in writing, how might this enhanced reflexivity be usefully applied to other areas of design practice?

Design is a systematic and mediated way of gathering and conveying feeling, a spatialized form of linear thinking. Design shows and writing tells. This research demonstrates merit in a pedagogic approach that treats the act of design writing like

any other design practice. Something to be sketched out, broken down, examined and built up, tried, tested, experimented upon, shared, edited and laid out. A creative activity that makes itself up as it goes along. If design writing feels too opaque, too much like making it up, how can pedagogy creatively play into this? How can conventional linear forms of academic writing be rendered visually and spatially? How might design students be encouraged to reinterpret theory diagrammatically?

In order to counter a student's tendency to mentally separate writing practice from the written artefact, it is useful to promote engagement with different forms of written text that will stimulate thinking about possibilities for designing new writing practices. These might be poetic, journalistic, visual, filmic, spatial, sonic, etc., and can be used as the basis for detailed deconstruction and reconstruction of meaning and form. How can students be encouraged to develop practices of close reading that focus in on the micro-details of writing? How can typography and editorial layout exercises be adapted to draw attention to how textual devices such as tone, pace, structure, vocabulary, grammar and syntax shape thinking?

As a means of escaping the idea that only certain types of professional writing are 'worth doing', and that academic writing is somehow superfluous to design – exterior, excessive, extraneous – it is worth equipping students to explore their epistemological positions. By introducing them to different ideas of knowledge production, they can be encouraged to explore their value and belief systems and the ways in which these influence how they produce knowledge for themselves (as learners) and for others (as designers). How might the philosophical dimensions of epistemology, ontology and axiology be taught in disciplinary-specific ways? And how might these enable ontological change in design students as they begin to create their identities as nascent professional graphic designers? How can making design writing pedagogy transparent help design students to make themselves up?

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