

Abandoning History

delivering historical and critical studies to practice-based students

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Abstract

Students beginning degrees in graphic design and illustration at the University of Brighton in 2002-2004 believed that the purpose of historical and critical studies (H&CS) was largely 'to look at the best examples of design and illustration', 'be inspired by the best designers and illustrators' and 'learn from the past'.

It was clear that the expectation was for a 20-week series of slide shows and the top-down formation of a canon of 'good' or 'great' design and illustration. Enthusiasm was not particularly high, and experiences of HCS on foundation courses had not helped matters.

Since 2001, the Brighton HCS course has been moving away from the 'typical' curriculum in order to avoid 'chronology, "hero" biography and anecdotes' (Triggs 1995) and the apparent obsession with canon, hierarchy and 'distinction' (Bourdieu 1986) that appears to stem from a relocation of the discipline from design-as-communication to design-as-art (Baldwin and Roberts 2005).

Anecdotal evidence from courses around the UK and in other countries suggests that H&CS, in its various guises, is viewed as an 'extra', the part of the course that makes a degree a degree, but which has no practical benefit to students' careers. Consequently, absence from H&CS courses is generally high and often tacitly sanctioned by studio staff.

However, the change of approach at Brighton – away from history as names, dates and slides and towards history-as-effect – appears to have resulted in a change of attitude among students, increased attendance, and an improvement in their self-initiated integration between theory and practice.

In this paper the H&CS team explain the strategies that led to these results, and speculate on what work would need to be undertaken to turn observed and anecdotal results into a repeatable model for future years.

Among the strategies utilised are:

- 'History-less' history
- Emphasising the role of the audience over that of the designer
- Questioning the idea of 'good' design and illustration and promoting 'vernacular' visual language as worthy of study, understanding, and respect
- Reducing the reading list to just one book - one that has nothing to do with design or history...
- Avoiding naming designers or giving dates
- Using provocation to initiate discussion outside class
- Developing a social culture for learning and tutor-less seminars
- Making use of web-based forums for debate
- Discussing issues of design pedagogy, institutional styles, and the formation of taste.

This experience raises several important questions: is history important, or is its presence on practice-based courses a hangover from the past that has so far gone unquestioned? Does a focus on heroes and models of good design lead to imitation and stagnation and ignore 'real' design? Can abandoning ideas of canon lead simultaneously to an academic programme that, by focusing on heteronomous rather than autonomous design, has a greater vocational application, while providing a more 'liberal' education that suits the growing number of students who do not intend to work as designers and thus require a more academic programme? And, importantly for the design history community, does 'abandoning' history actually strengthen the subject within practice-based courses?

Introduction

The title 'Abandoning History' refers to two aspects of design history as taught to graphic design students: the idea of history itself, and the history of 'design history' within the broader 'graphic design' curriculum. In this paper we outline arguments against continuing with the traditional delivery of design history and propose alternatives to the traditionally accepted course content. These suggestions are made in order to improve student learning. We take the view here that it is up to us to adapt to our students' needs rather than the other way around.

With that in mind it should be pointed out that this paper sets out to be controversial in order to spark a debate. After outlining the factors leading to the main issues in the delivery of H&CS on graphic design courses, we describe several approaches taken at Brighton to overcome them. The paper concludes with a list of proposals for the development of historical and critical studies within graphic design.

Context

Historical and Critical Studies at the University of Brighton is taught in twenty 2.5-hour sessions to mixed groups of BA(Hons) Graphic Design and BA(Hons) Illustration students, numbering around 70-80 students per year group. In level 3 there is no H&CS course, but students undertake a 5-7,000 word research project (dissertation) in the autumn term.

Staffing is arranged separately from the BA course team and two tutors are employed on part-time hourly contracts issued termly, totalling 100 hours each or around a 0.2 full-time equivalent per tutor. There is currently no formal connection between the studio course and historical and critical studies although both staff maintain some level of contact with the main course team outside their responsibilities. Although not expected or paid to, H&CS staff encourage students to contact them via email and often make themselves available during the week for discussions and advice.

The H&CS unit accounts for around 15-20% of the students' overall grade, but timetable allocation only totals 50 hours over each year, or approximately 4% of the total learning time.

Students are mainly white and from middle-class, often affluent, backgrounds, with a large proportion of students whose parents or grandparents are practicing designers/illustrators/artists.

A small number of students are international from both Asia and Europe. English speaking skills vary but understanding of taught sessions is high, and with few exceptions international students are well integrated into the student body and make a positive contribution to academic and pastoral aspects of the course. For half the year two USA exchange students join the group and two home students are absent in a reciprocal exchange.

Note: many of the critical comments made in this paper are extrapolations based on observations and experience at several HE institutions and discussions with staff elsewhere. Only the case studies in this paper relate specifically to Brighton and no criticism of our colleagues or students should be inferred.

Part One: Causes and effects of the current situation

The history of design history on practice-based courses

The teaching and study of design history within art and design programmes is one of the results of the National Advisory Council on Art Education in the 1960s¹. Among its aims was making art and design education a legitimate academic activity, to which ends an historical perspective was introduced. This necessitated the employment or 'buying in' of specialists from art history disciplines, leading to a particular style of delivery: "Art historians taught in the only way that art historians knew how to teach; they switched off the lights, turned on the slide projector, showed slides of art and design objects, discussed and evaluated them and asked (art and design) students to write essays – according to the scholarly conventions of academia" (Raein 2005). This use of techniques and staff from one discipline to teach students from another has largely continued unchanged to this day, with the main difference being that design history has been allied with, or transformed into, cultural and media studies. Either way, the staffing/delivery model identified by Raein continues. H&CS is thus characterised by:

- A traditional view of history as a sequence of important events, people and artefacts, what EH Carr refers to as the "great man" view of history (Carr 1990).
- Emphasis on absolute readings and analyses of artefacts
- Use of part-time staff from non-practice-based disciplines
- Expectations that students should meet the requirements of design history rather than design practice
- A significant distance (philosophical and physical) from the 'main' course
- Assumptions on the part of the 'client' (the studio-based course) that students will receive a traditional survey course of key figures and movements
- A client-service relationship between the studio-based course and 'theory'
- Notions of 'good' and 'bad' design
- Courses often taught by part-time staff employed on an ad hoc basis and therefore lacking in continuity, or by staff from cognate but philosophically and pedagogically different disciplines or art/design history or cultural/media studies.
- Delivered on 'non-studio' days leading to a perception that H&CS is unrelated to practice and that 'theory days' are also potential days off
- Curriculum and assessment of H&CS are often not linked to studio-based work and vice versa.

¹ This is more commonly referred to as 'The Coldstream Report'

Effects of a traditional approach to history

Students see history as a timeline

The most obvious effect of the traditional approach to history is that students see it as a timeline, and design is seen as a sequence in which X begat Y and Y begat Z. This has pedagogical implications in that the realisation that assessment requires a fact-based regurgitation of received knowledge leads students to ignore discussions of the situations surrounding a design's creation and reception and to focus instead on simple facts such as who designed it and when. This 'surface learning' approach is discussed in greater detail below (see *Aligning outcomes with the curriculum*)

This 'hero worship' – the idea that there are a few great designers who should be studied and revered unquestioningly – arguably instils an unrealistic view of the profession. This is something that is not helped by media representations of the industry, or by the industry itself, which tends to promote the idea of a few key 'artists' in an attempt to gain both social and academic legitimacy (Baldwin and Roberts 2005). This is most commonly seen in the earliest stages of a student's development in the adoption of a 'favourite' designer ready for the inevitable interview question. When asked about this, Brighton students admitted they were advised by tutors on their foundation courses to choose 'favourites' based on the institution to which they were applying, and then to read up on that person. The problem with a lot of the designers chosen by students is that they are far from representative of the design profession, usually focussing on prestigious projects rather than what we might call everyday graphic design: frozen food packaging, TV listings magazines, point of sale material. It is a sad fact that students would rather listen to a 'famous' designer than one who works in-house for a supermarket, and that this attitude is often compounded by the approach taken by institutions which celebrate 'famous' alumni (who represent a tiny proportion of their graduates and of the industry in general) while brushing the others under the carpet.

Yet which has the greater effect, not on *design* or *designers* but on society? It is this question that forms the basis of our approach to the study of history (see *Abandoning Canon* below).

A further effect of this hero worship is that it leads to uncritical evaluation of 'great' works – because something is in the canon it is assumed to be 'good', and critiques tend to focus on justifying this, a process identified and explained in sociological accounts of the formation of taste (Bourdieu 1986).

The end result is that students coming to us from foundation diplomas that adopt the traditional approach to art and design history often expect H&CS at university to consist of slide shows and guidance on matters of taste and criticism, citing a central purpose of H&CS as a means of showing them who to be 'inspired' by. Design is seen as being about the 'artist' and his (usually always 'his') output rather than about the factors leading to a design or the effects that it had on its audience or society as a whole.

Effects of the Separation of H&CS and practice

Conceptions of H&CS among students

It would be easy to assume that separating H&CS from the main body of the course leads to a conclusion among students that it is of little importance and largely irrelevant. However, there is growing evidence at Brighton that the separation is strongly resented by many students who feel frustrated at the lack of integration between theory and practice – something that is echoed by course managers but appears difficult to overcome without investment in time and money.

This shift in attitude among students notwithstanding, it is worth looking at how students conceive of the role and position of H&CS. The first session of H&CS at Brighton asks students, two weeks into their time at university, the question ‘what is historical and critical studies?’ Typical responses range from simply ‘theory’, to ‘how design works’. A large number of responses revolve around ‘teaching us how to be critical’ and ‘learning about who the best designers were’.

Asked why they thought they were ‘made’ to study H&CS, responses included ‘to make the course a degree’ and ‘to make us more employable’. However, it is also notable that responses in 2004 demonstrated a marked shift from previous years in that most students said they were looking forward to H&CS (this question was asked after it was clear to students they could be honest in their answers). Reasons for this may be that students in other years had told them it was interesting, or that their experience of H&CS on their foundation diplomas was a good one, and probably because the number of students with A-levels is increasing as a result of the Curriculum 2000 reforms². Another observation is important here: over the past three years (and noted in other institutions over a longer timescale) the proportion of first year students who have no ambition to be designers has increased to the point that in 2005 this group of students outnumbered those who viewed their course in purely vocational terms (‘I’m on this course because I want to be a designer’) by a significant margin³.

Categorising student conceptions

It is difficult to pull meaningful interpretations out of the responses of students, and we like most of our colleagues are wary of only hearing the ones that help us make our point – a particular danger in an overtly anecdotal survey such as this one. However, recent research (Pritchard, Heatly et al. 2005) offers a useful set of categories with which to view these responses more objectively. Although the

² Curriculum 2000 was a major overhaul of the 16+ curriculum (<http://www.lsda.org.uk/curriculum2000/>) which saw students taking foundation diplomas and national diplomas also studying one or more AS levels and progressing to A-level study. Experience at one FE college showed that initially most art and design students appeared to opt for photography A level, but a show of hands at Brighton found a large number opting recently for psychology, sociology and history. This would appear to be having an impact on approaches to H&CS. It is important not to generalise too much as the socio-economic background of the students recruited at Brighton is significantly different from that at the FE college – another area for potential study.

³ This figure varies wildly: among the 2005 cohort only one student out of nearly 80 made this claim. What does appear to be true, however, is that the figure always increases dramatically by the time students are entering the third year. Experience suggests this is repeated nationwide and is another area that demands further research.

research specifically looks at dissertations in art, design and media courses, it seems reasonable to extrapolate the findings to historical and critical studies in general⁴.

The research derives four hierarchical categories of student conception with the highest (category A) being students who see an almost unquestionable link between 'theory' and practice – to such an extent that the interrelationship is difficult to articulate.

The next category sees a clear relationship, and finds theory interesting, but sees no integration. We would suggest that this is the fault of the curriculum, which often allows for no integration between the two aspects, resulting in the predominance of category B responses.

Category C students see a value for theory, but only in terms of adding academic legitimacy ('it makes the course a proper degree' being a typical response to our question, distinguishing it from a 'cutting, sticking, gluing, painting sort of degree' as one of Pritchard *et al*'s respondents put it) or to employability (as another of Pritchard *et al*'s respondents put it: 'instead of saying oh you make dresses don't you? Oh it's a fashion designer we think, and with the honours, the dissertation, she can read and write as well ... that little extra academic cherry on the top of the cake').

The lowest order of response (Category D) sees theory as a distraction from practice, failing to see any value in it whatsoever, and criticising the amount of time spent on it that could be spent on practical work. An excellent example of this attitude can be found in an opinion article in *The Times Higher Educational Supplement* (Dymock 2005) in which a journalism student insists that understanding the context of her chosen profession is of no use to her actually practicing it⁵. An important question arises from this: why do students who see no value in H&CS sign up for degrees? This is not so much a criticism of the students, but of the system that either signs them up to courses they are likely to be immensely dissatisfied with, or that fails to provide alternatives. Category D students may excel in other areas, but are likely to present themselves to H&CS staff as 'poor' or 'bad' students, and suffer accordingly. Accepting students on to a course they are likely to fail, or at least be disaffected with, seems somewhat irresponsible and it would be interesting to look at how graphic design courses are marketed and whether H&CS is seen as important enough to be a consideration in offering a place. Indeed, it is noticeable that few, if any, courses involve H&CS staff in the selection process.

Effect on H&CS staff

It would be fair to say that few H&CS staff we have spoken with informally at various institutions appear enthusiastic about their task, for a variety of reasons. This has an obvious effect on student

⁴ A problem with using this research here (and one acknowledged by the authors of the original paper) is the lack of distinction between the process of research, and the product (i.e. the dissertation itself). This is an important distinction as it is likely that the dissertation as an object – up to 10,000 words in this case – will skew many students' attitudes towards the part of the course that requires it. We will return to this issue later as it is an important one.

⁵ Although Dymock does not mention specifics it might be presumed that the 'unnecessary' aspects include such things as the history of journalism, the effect that journalists have on society, and the ethical and legal responsibilities that are incumbent upon journalists. Hardly 'essential', then. We return to these broad categories of 'context' later in discussions of the 'STEEP' curriculum model.

attitudes, leading to a 'chicken and egg' situation. But the impression that students are attending their sessions because they have been told to, or because they have to, rather than because they want to, leads to an understandable ambivalence among H&CS staff who, it has to be remembered, are often delivering the course as an 'aside' to their 'real' teaching and research⁶.

Common complaints from H&CS staff who are employed in this way are that students are undemanding, intellectually challenged and frequently absent or late. However, the argument put forward in this paper is that it is largely the fault not of the students but of the approach taken to teaching and assessing the subject, and its place within the degree course as a whole.

There are, however, real problems that have a serious effect on H&CS staff. External examiners, for example, appear to take little or no interest in H&CS. In three institutions, one of us noted with concern that H&CS and the third year dissertations were either never sent to examiners or never looked at when offered. Feeling that your work is not considered important enough to be looked at by the examiner is a blow to morale, not to mention the obvious question of maintenance of standards.

Matters of employment are a concern too. A survey of advertisements for H&CS posts in *The Times Higher Educational Supplement* and *The Guardian* showed that most were for fractional posts (often impractical 0.4 or 0.5) and often on fixed-term contracts of no more than a year. A large number of courses seem to recruit H&CS staff on termly hourly-paid contracts. This has obvious implications in that potential staff with an academic career in mind will be put off applying for jobs that are not full-time and have no obvious progression route; and those on temporary contracts will not have the time (or inclination) to develop the courses they teach. The end result is high turnover in staff with serious implications for course quality and student learning with a constantly changing roster of lecturers and a curriculum without any form of continuity (and frequently reported repeating of content). It also fails to serve the discipline of H&CS as a legitimate part of design education if it is not taken seriously enough to warrant investment in curriculum development and research.

Part Two: Solutions?

For the traditional approach to history

The approach taken at Brighton over the last three years has been, as the title of this paper suggests, to 'abandon history', at least in terms of the traditional delivery of the H&CS component and the timeline- and hero-based curriculum. We call this, for want of a better phrase, 'history-less' history.

This is of course nothing new, and can be traced to the Marxist view of history advocated by European cultural studies traditions. Other arguments aside, there is a great deal of logic in this approach, especially where graphic design is concerned, in that history-less history refocuses discussion of design and designers on the processes of production, reproduction and consumption (or

⁶ Again, this anecdotal evidence would benefit from fuller investigation.

client, context and audience) which should have a greater relevance to students from a practice-based discipline.

For the separation

The key to ensuring that H&CS is not perceived as separate from the course is not, as others argue, simply to ensure the two are taught by the same staff (see *Issues with the integrated curriculum*) but that what is taught is seen to be directly relevant to students' practice. This is not 'dumbing down', but rather 'dumbing up': showing how something is relevant first is more likely to lead students into a broader and more intellectually focused study of their subject and beyond; deliberately making the subject 'challenging' from the start results in disaffection which serves neither the students, nor the subject.

In order to achieve this, the most effective sessions appeared to be ones that started off apparently unrelated and general but that quickly moved into showing how a concept related specifically to students' lives and ultimately practice. In turn the sessions end by allowing students to see how their practice as designers has an effect on people's lives: students see that not only is a topic relevant to their practice but that it is also interesting in its own right. This concept is illustrated in the diagram below:

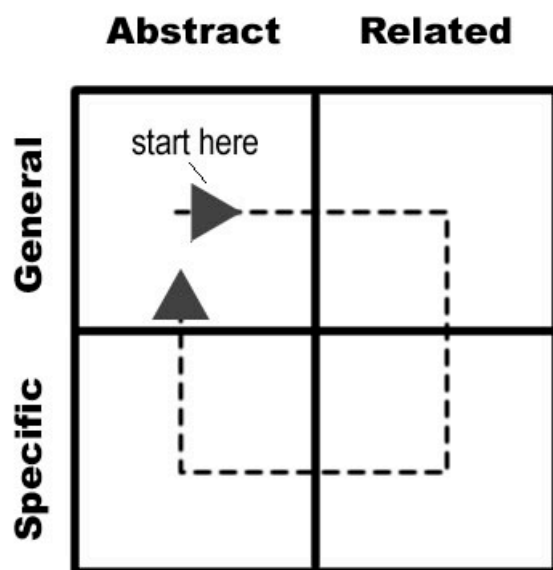


Figure 1: An approach to introducing concepts to practice-oriented students (original source unknown)

An example of this approach can be seen in the treatment afforded to the mainstay of many H&CS courses: the book list.

The one-book book list

Observations made by one of the present authors at the start of their teaching career were that most courses had long and impressive-looking book lists, but that these books were never mentioned in teaching. Some students diligently bought these books at the start of the year and quickly resented the lack of guidance on what to read and when. Others simply never bothered to look at any of the books for the simple reason that they did not know where to start. It was clear, in this case, that the list had been written at the time of the course validation in order to achieve some form of academic legitimacy. In another case at a different institution, it appeared that the book list was simply a list of 'coffee table books' that were intended to 'inspire' students and had been devised (according to a colleague involved in the process) as a form of competition between staff to see who had the better or most eclectic taste.

On appointment to the H&CS course at Brighton this same author achieved a long-held ambition by scrapping the existing book list (complete with 'histories' of art, design and photography) and replacing it with just one title: *The Tipping Point* (Gladwell 2002). This book has very little to do with graphic design. It does, however, contain a series of well-sourced anecdotes about trends, body language, sociology and psychology that have a direct link to graphic design. Most importantly it is both easy and interesting to read and it begs to be talked about. (Asked about whether they did just this, the vast majority of students admitted that not only had they talked about the book to a variety of family and friends, but had either lent their copy out several times, or bought copies as gifts).

The consequences of this strategy were several: students got talking about subjects obliquely related to H&CS; they found themselves applying the information in the book to their practice; students discovered that reading could be interesting rather than a chore; they were keen to put the ideas in the book to the test; finally, students asked for more books to read.

It is this latter point that proved most interesting in terms of defending what one colleague at another institution condemned as "inexcusable dumbing down": when questioned at the end of the first year of the experiment, students had read more books from the original reading list (despite not having it) than had done in previous years when the list was given at the start of the year. It would appear that encouraging a 'pull' attitude to reading rather than a 'push' attitude is key to developing students' willingness to read about and around their subject.

So with students actively talking about topics raised in lectures and in books they were reading, attitudes to writing also appeared to improve as students found they had something to write about, and a range of opinions to discuss. This year the book list is slightly longer, including a dictionary of key terms and concepts and a study skills guide, and the course bibliography (a different beast from the reading list) is around two-dozen books in length; but essentially the only book they have been asked to read is the Gladwell.

Abandoning Canon

The idea that studying design history is about 'learning from the past', 'who the good designers are', 'learning how to criticise other people's work' and 'learning what to say about things' is clear from student comments at the start of the course. This demonstrates a clearly surface approach to the study of design history, something that neither traditionalists or (for want of a less value-laden word) 'progressives' would desire.

In the 2004/05 academic year it became clear half way through the H&CS course that a small number of students were growing dissatisfied with what they described as a lack of 'things to look at' or 'examples of other designers' work'.⁷ Although this comment was loudly rounded on by the rest of the group it was clear that we had failed to persuade some students of the merits of our approach and, looking back, had failed to explain ourselves clearly, beyond a brief comment in the first session.

In response to this, we introduced two sessions in place of planned ones on retail environments and culture jamming (these are now in the second year) looking instead at conceptions of 'good design/bad design' in one session and the concept of the canon in another.

The 'good design/bad design' session is the closest we came to a traditional design history lecture in that it consisted of a slide show. But the designs shown were not 'great' design but everyday objects such as shampoo bottles, cereal boxes, endless variations on the Milton Glazer New York campaign selling everything from washing machines to chips, and some particularly tacky own brand grocery packaging. The idea was to show firstly that there is a difference between aesthetic judgements and effectiveness, but that effectiveness is arguably the key judgement – and an objective one – about graphic design; and to show that visual language works on the basis of clichés – easily recognisable shapes and colours that allow busy shoppers to know they are in the shampoo section or the baked bean section, but that are traditionally criticised in educational environments and critiques of commercial design. To reinforce the point that 'good' design is not necessarily 'effective' design we showed the example of a Buxton water label which was art directed by Ian Logan and which is undoubtedly an aesthetically successful piece. But the redesign was a disaster as customers were put off by its austere black and white imagery. With sales falling, Buxton apparently returned to the clichéd but familiar blue and green symbols of hills, dales and mountains that adorn so many other brands of water. According to students this was the first time they had ever been challenged to see that 'bad' design could be 'good'. But, as one third year student asked in her dissertation that year, why can't designers produce aesthetically good but effective design all the time? I put this question to first year students who began to realise that the romantic notion of a graphic designer as being someone who spends a long time on their work, crafting away until a beautiful and innovative piece of design has been produced, is somewhat at odds with the reality of being a designer in a busy

⁷ Interestingly it appeared that this criticism was strongest among illustration students in the mixed group.

commercial environment juggling multiple projects at the same time, and facing deadlines of (if lucky) a day or two at most⁸.

The second lecture built on this by introducing the idea of the canon (most students had never heard the term). They were asked to individually list their favourite films, CDs and books. Then in groups they had to come to a consensus about a list for each category. Finally we took the top choice from each group and wrote up a class list on a board, declaring it to be a definitive 'best of' list for the three categories. Predictably, the students objected to this method and, when asked to provide an alternative, suggested that groups of experts should be asked to draw up such lists. But, it was pointed out in return, experts often disagree, and lists produced in that manner often differ from 'popular' polls of favourites such as the pop charts and gallery visitor numbers. This led in to a potted history of attempts to define the best artists, and the methods employed. It became clear very quickly that some of the artists listed in early canons were unknown now, while many of today's 'stars' were ignored in past times.

The notion of a reliable canon thus effectively debunked we turned, in a follow-up seminar, to the work of Pierre Bourdieu and the concepts of distinction, the pursuit of exclusive knowledge by academics, the pursuit of social capital by artists, and the acquisition of cultural capital in our youth⁹. All these areas appeared to be linked to the notion of canon and aesthetic judgements of design in that several students began, for the first time in their lives, to question their notions of taste. Some, for example, recognised that they had effectively been told that particular designers were 'good' but had not formed that opinion themselves. Others realised their place on the course depended on them having acquired the right cultural capital in preparing for their interview by predicting which designers they should admit to being inspired by. And others admitted that the concept of a canon appeared to be a means by which they judged other people (especially in areas such as choice of films or music styles) and which, in art and design education, seemed to favour students from well-off and geographically well-placed backgrounds.

As mentioned earlier, the result of this was something of a revelation as the cohort began to question their upbringing and education, and to identify what they thought of as good design using a different set of criteria. The effect of design, rather than its affect, became – for many of them at least – their overriding concern. We had, in short, convinced them of the merits of the Marxist view of history rather than the 'great man' view.

The themed curriculum

Another approach taken at Brighton was to attempt to tie seemingly unrelated aspects of the course together in to themes. An analysis of the 2002/03 course showed that three themes appeared to

⁸ An interesting outcome of this is that some students claimed that while the point had been taken on board, they would now consciously produce two types of graphic design: the sort they felt would be rewarded in the studio, and the sort they felt would work in the real world.

⁹ It is worth noting here that we are still talking about first year practice-based students here who had gone in six months from reading Malcolm Gladwell to picking apart the complex theories of Bourdieu – 'dumbing down' indeed...

suggest themselves: communications, culture and conflict (the alliteration is a deliberate affectation). However, these areas proved somewhat too broad to be useful in that they led us to struggle to come up with content that fitted neatly into one category rather than another – ironic considering the intention was to create links.

When writing a book partly based on the course (Baldwin and Roberts 2005) an amended version of the 'PEST' marketing tool suggested itself as a better model. In its original form, PEST stands for political, economic, social and technological – the four domains any business needs to consider when making plans. These domains also appeared to be similar to the discussions and topics that had been covered on the H&CS course. Adding in environmental concerns, which have become a frequently discussed point with students, gives us a new mnemonic of STEEP: society, technology, ecology, ethics and politics. How these generate curriculum content is described in Table 1:

Society	How society works How designers contribute to social education, information, cohesion etc Semiotics, body language, cultural consumption, psychology, audiences
Technology	Effects of mass media, fragmented audiences, ownership, the client
Ecology	Sustainability, globalisation
Ethics	Moral obligations of designers, the role of design as an educator, the career goals of students
Politics	Ideology, hegemony, the formation of public opinion, the communication process The business/economics of design, contributions of designers to the UK economy, the role of advertising as a promoter of consumption

Table 1: The STEEP curriculum model (early draft)

The strength of this approach is that unlike the 'three Cs' described above it makes the interconnectedness and interdisciplinary nature of design practice and history transparent, and it is difficult to separate theory and history from practice. It is also clear from this how 'history-less history' actually matches the Marxist view of history as something that is produced by the people in their everyday lived experiences, and that it is something that is created now, not at some freeze-frame moment in the past.

It should be easy to see how a similar approach to the whole course (studio and 'theory') might enable students and teachers to deliver a truly integrated course that has practical outcomes in the form of graphic design briefs, but also ensures that students learn and demonstrate their understanding of H&CS¹⁰.

A similar model of design history from a Marxist perspective, in which design history and current/future practice can be seen as production-consumption was described by John Walker in *Design History and the History of Design* (Walker 1989; Walker and Chaplin 1997). With slight

¹⁰ See www.jonathanbaldwin.co.uk/STEEP for an example of how the STEEP model might be used to produce an integrated curriculum.

modification (Figure 2), this graphical overview of the subject is a useful handout for students at the start of their course. However, as stated above, it seems odd that this model is restricted to design history rather than being used to inform the practical side of the course as well.

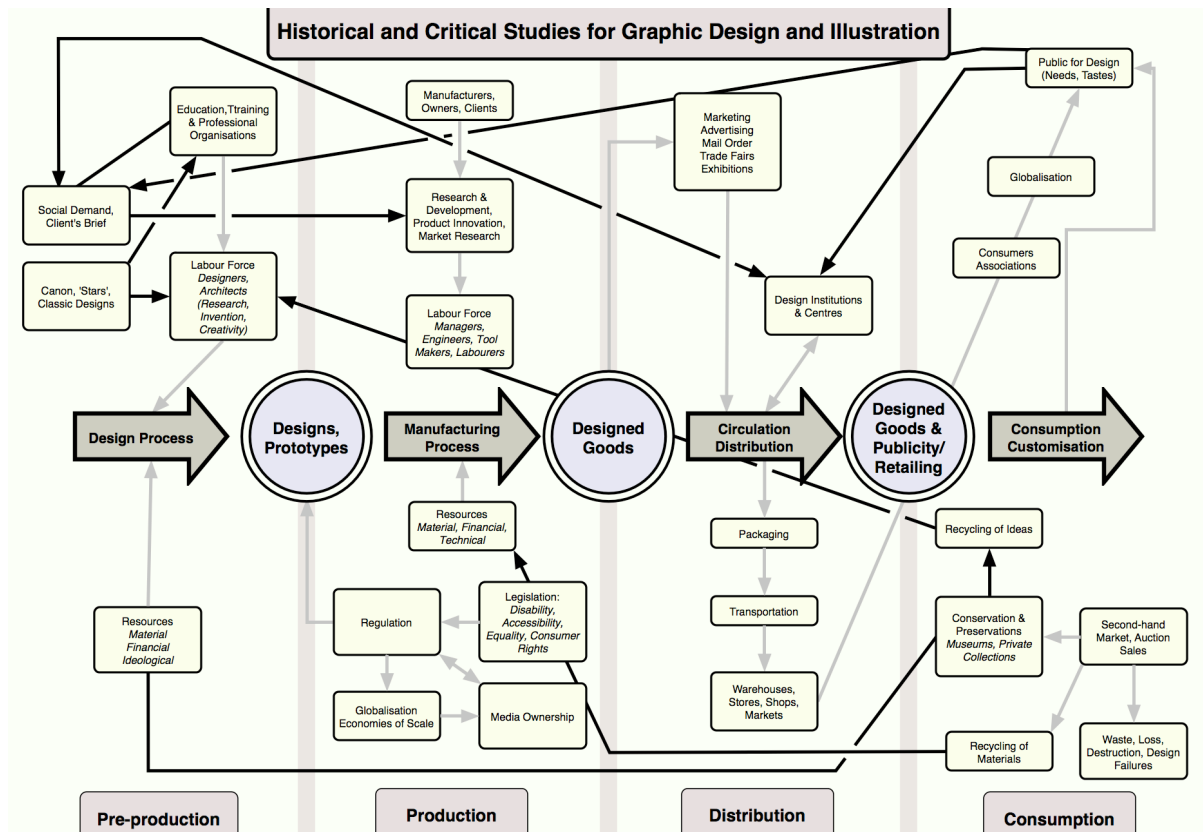


Figure 2: Walker's model amended for the Brighton course. Note new areas and terms.

Aligning outcomes with the curriculum

The approach outlined here can be seen to match up to the concepts described by Biggs (Biggs 1999), in that the curriculum and delivery methods are designed to guide students towards 'relational' and 'extended abstract' understandings of H&CS (see Figure 3). We would argue that traditional methods of teaching H&CS to practice-based students (slide-shows, lectures, essays, canons and timelines) have the effect of forcing students to respond with lower-order types of learning.

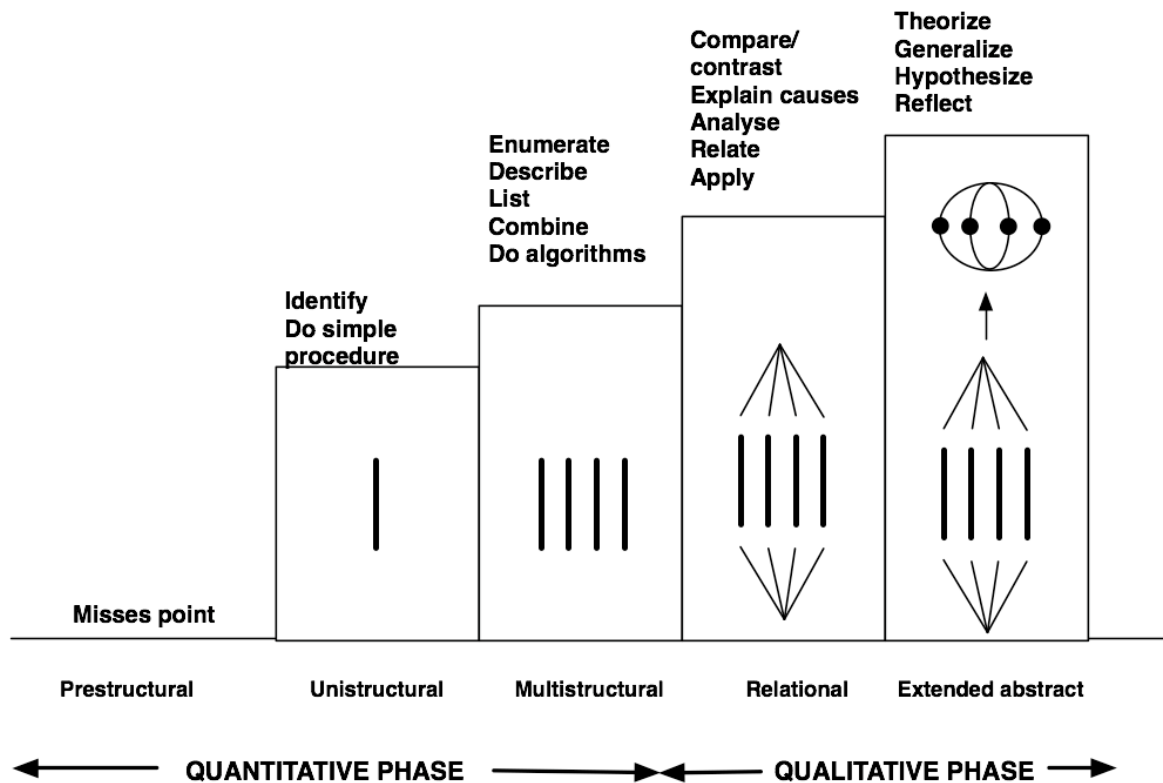


Figure 3: Biggs's taxonomy of verbs and resulting learning outcomes

However, to complete the process it is important that assessment emphasises it. The traditional essay appears to make this difficult (see *Abandoning Essays* for more background to this claim). To this end we adopted a number of approaches including asking students to conduct practical experiments. For example, to understand the role of polysemy, students were asked to find two apparently unrelated images and ask several people to construct a narrative that linked them together. The challenge, after recording these responses, was to find or create a third image that would cause most respondents to produce the same reading. Those students who accepted the challenge not only produced a visual project of the type they might have tackled in the studio¹¹, they also produced some well-considered essays that demonstrated a far deeper understanding of the concept of polysemy and the ideological potential of images than might have been the case if the previous essay had been set: "All images are polysemous, but text fixes meaning. Discuss".

Another popular assessment task asked students to locate un-posed photographs of themselves from several stages from their 13th birthday onwards and discuss the factors influencing them based on the clothes they were wearing. They were also asked to do the same with images from a fellow student whom they did not know. The aim of the task was firstly to question their own independence at a time in their lives when it would be supposed that they were asserting their individuality, and to see if generalisations could be made about relative strangers based only on their design choices. In

¹¹ One student produced a remarkable piece which was later exhibited at a local gallery

most cases, the resulting 'essays' were extremely perceptive and, on occasions, quite moving, as students demonstrated a sense that design has a simultaneous role as a differentiator, a form of social glue, and an agent of commercial ideology.

As a final example, an essay which asked students to examine the influences that had helped them form their own canon of tastes and preferences using Bourdieu's theories of cultural capital and distinction as the basis produced a series of essays that can only be described as transformational – both in the sense that students for the first time perceived their tastes as the result of nurture rather than nature, and (impressively) that many students actually chose Bourdieu as the basis of their third year dissertations.

But is it history?

At this point it may be appropriate to remind the reader that while the above examples don't appear to contain anything that might be termed 'history', our aim is to enable students to see history in the Marxist sense of the product of social interaction and consumption of culture. In this context, the answer to the question 'but is it history' is a resounding 'Yes!'

Abandoning Essays

The anxiety many design students associate with the H&CS courses seems to stem from the belief that it is within these classes that the essay-writing portion of their degree transpires. Writing, especially when associated with the word "essay", for many students within art and design is intrinsically linked with previous negative academic experiences, perhaps the experiences of previous weaknesses and failures (Edwards 2004). Many students when questioned early as to their motivations for pursuing graphic design at the University level admit that they believed it to be a "non-academic" degree. Many go on to assert their belief that designers are not required to write as part of their career. Overcoming notions about writing within the class structure of H&CS is an early hurdle to overcome. Students' preconceptions of not only perhaps the nature of the subject matter being inherently more challenging than the studio components of the course is compounded by the trepidation felt by students about the possible exposure of weaker aspects of their capabilities (or perceived weaknesses). These concerns are obvious early on when students asked as to what aspects of the class they might find challenging most mention that they are concerned about their written abilities. Students' concerns are not helped by the at times adversarial attitude displayed by those responsible for the studio components of the course who view the time allocated to H&CS as being unrelated to studio work and a general waste of time, better spent in the studio. Another factor adding to the anxiety of students is an inordinately high number of students who suffer from dyslexia within the design and illustration course, who by nature of the condition are already concerned with their written abilities. This high percentage of dyslexic students among design students is perhaps a reflection of the myth that dyslexics are naturally more creative, and less academic, than other students. These students, although not exclusively, believe that H&CS, because of the perceived high

written content, will be the only aspect of their degree where they will be unable to express themselves fully. This fear of failure when coupled with the belief that written ability is not required to be a successful designer places instructors of H&CS at a disadvantage. They are not only required to teach the students but must also demonstrate the worth of the discipline not only to students but also to colleagues on a yearly basis as well as prove to students that written abilities are important to all aspects of life. It is not the intention of the authors to suggest that instructors of H&CS courses should give in to the unsubstantiated fears of their students and abandon all written components of the course. This would be both a huge disservice to the students as well as to the discipline itself. However, new forms of assessment must accompany the move away from traditional modes of teaching history-related disciplines.

Recently when questioned about what they felt they would gain from the study of H&CS one student suggested that they would have essays which they could produce at an interview to demonstrate that they had acquired the skill of writing (see the discussion of student conceptions earlier for more on this). It should be the focus of H&CS to illustrate that the essay is not an end but rather, not unlike the studio aspect of the course, a process. The process of research, the selection and valuation and culmination of materials together offers the student more than just the mere regurgitation of facts and figures. The process of research should be demonstrated to be as creative a process and as integral to design as practical pursuits. Writing provides students with the opportunity to develop an argument. Many students, because of the factors previously discussed, see the act of writing as a valueless chore; it is imperative that instructors of H&CS demonstrate the creative aspect of writing. An answer to this may be the establishment of greater links between work done in the studio and that studied through H&CS. Another response may be the use of written exercises that cannot be categorised as traditional essays as described above. Encouraging students to write on a frequent basis such as writing up visual experiments can help students to overcome anxiety associated with writing. The use of writing like any other creative tool can help to alleviate the hierarchical positioning of the final essay as something one can fail, something that must be done perfectly or will demonstrate the weaknesses of the student. Thus the students develop their written skills and demonstrate their knowledge of the subject matter without succumbing to their self-defeating fears.

Words of caution

Issues with the integrated curriculum: process versus product

The goal of integrating H&CS with the practice-based aspect of graphic design is one to which many people claim to aspire, but examples of it are rare. A recent paper (Raein 2005) offered a useful case study and visits some of the arguments articulated here. The paper itself is not without problems that are worth mentioning. For example, praise of traditional methods of teaching graphic design (the crit, for example) is uncritical and ignores current pedagogical research that questions the educational benefits of such techniques. Secondly, students' motivations are not examined and students are assumed to respond to the course philosophy in the same way – something that appears unwise in

light of other research (Davies and Reid 2000; Shreeve and Baldwin 2003; Percy 2004; Pritchard, Heatly et al. 2005).

Raien cites a focus on 'deep learning' but later stresses the importance of the end product in the assessment of learning – yet research on deep learning suggests quite strongly that it occurs when students are allowed to focus on the process rather than the product (Biggs 1999; Davies and Reid 2000). This is an important potential contradiction that deserves to be looked at in more detail as it threatens to undermine any attempts to integrate H&CS (largely process-focussed in terms of what it concerns) and practice (usually product-focussed in terms of the teaching and assessment).

Delivery of H&CS by studio staff

Raien, like Pritchard et al, recommends that the same people deliver theory and practice. This seems to be an ideal situation, but as stated earlier it is clear from various observations in different institutions that many studio staff lack the knowledge of history and theory that is/should be required at undergraduate level, and often dismiss its value. Any course that sought to emulate the courses cited in these two papers would need to ensure that the integrity and (*pace* John Wood¹²) academic rigour of H&CS is not damaged. Similarly, from the other end of the scale, there needs to be assurance that H&CS specialists are able to teach practice of design. The more we think about this issue the stronger the argument becomes for keeping specialist staff (unless true practice-theory crossover specialists are available¹³) but integrating theory and practice in other ways (e.g. the integrated curriculum and forms of assessment as described above) and ensuring that practice and H&CS staff are viewed as a team by students.

However, more research is required here to see if there are useful models and examples of good practice, or indeed if what works in one situation will work elsewhere.

Part Three: Responses

The following comments were collected anonymously via a VLE at the end of June 2005 from first year graphic design and illustration students after they had completed the H&CS course. Though unscientific, they demonstrate a marked shift in attitude from verbal comments received from earlier cohorts more used to traditional delivery, curriculum and assessment.

"The group tutorials ... were very helpful to me. I also enjoyed the structure of the course, how many interesting ... methods were used to teach, rather than just a slide show or 10 page handouts. For

¹²

Wood, J. (2000). "The Culture of Academic Rigour: Does Design Research Really Need It?" *The Design Journal* 3(1): 44-57.

¹³ It should be noted here that the present authors are both practicing designers and 'theoreticians/historians'

example the “what flavour sweet is this” test¹⁴, the small clips from movies and the many interesting class discussions.”

“The lectures that we have had ... have been one of the key inspirational parts of the course. I feel that they have stretched my understanding on my subject area in a way that isn't addressed in my studio time.”

“Many of the ideas discussed in lectures have really ‘stuck’ in my mind, I feel I have been able to have a greater grasp of the subjects involved and ideas covered.”

“The lectures have covered such a wide (range) of subjects that there have been many that I have found interesting. There are definitely overlaps from the subjects so it is possible to understand one subject through a lecture on something completely different. This has been very thought provoking. For me personally lectures on Ideology and Hegemony have been a great influence”.

“Teaching staff clearly know what they are talking about. I appreciate the way they are trying to experiment with content/delivery/organisation of the course in order to make it better.”

“I feel that the course has helped a great deal and inspired me to read and maybe even write. It has clearly shown me how much power and responsibility I would have as an illustrator. [...] I feel that it has also helped me think about my life in general and how I want to live it. And for me that proves that Jonathan and Sarah must be good teachers if they have had an effect on me, not only as a student, but as a person”.

Summary

It should be clear from this paper that we are simultaneously proud and committed to the teaching of H&CS, and frustrated by many of the issues we have described. However, it should be made clear that the issues are not unique to Brighton and are not intended as a criticism of one institution but of the traditional approach and attitude to H&CS on practice-based courses that can be seen throughout the UK. We feel that it only takes a few small shifts in approach to have a marked effect on student perceptions and learning, and – crucially – a potentially overwhelming effect on the discipline of design history and its cognate subjects. It does design history no credit to stand by while a growing gap between the producers of design and the critics and historians of design is allowed to open at such a crucial stage, and the realm of design history can only be enriched if it welcomes the different approach taken to it by practicing designers.

Design history as a curriculum component and as a discipline needs to address the different needs and positions of practice-based students. It is up to us to adapt, not the other way around – there is no point clinging to an ideal of our subject or its pedagogy if the end result is that fewer students

¹⁴ A practical demonstration of the power of persuasion and the real implications of semiotics in which a group of students are given sweets (e.g. Starbursts) and asked to guess the flavour judging from the colour, then eating them to confirm their guess. Next the students are given a sweet with their eyes closed and asked to guess again – they usually get the flavour wrong.

engage with it – particularly as practice-based students are the people who will produce the objects and effects that are the study of design historians.

The design history curriculum on practice-based courses needs to focus more on history as a series of social effects than on historical figures and events, and teaching methods need to focus on discussion and expression through verbal and written forms rather than on didactic methods such as lectures and essays.

Assessment of students' learning needs to tie theory to practice, as well as offering more traditional essay models. In this vein, design history and its related studies need to be seen and delivered as an integral part of practice-based courses, not an add-on to farm out to other faculties or schools.

Design history staff need to be engaged on long-term contracts, not on a term-by-term basis, and they should be involved in the recruitment of students in some way. Students will not take the subject seriously, and it will be difficult to recruit good teachers, if universities continue to treat the subject in the current manner. We also need to be visible in the studio, and appropriate study time needs to be preserved for students to reflect the weight given to H&CS in the final grade: there is a huge gap in the 20% most courses claim for H&CS in their assessment and the 5% of timetable allocation some courses achieve. The development of the H&CS curriculum should be adequately funded and seen as ongoing, and examiners need to take notice of H&CS and be recruited on the basis that they can make appropriate judgements as to the quality of teaching, learning, curriculum and assessment in this area.

What next?

We believe there is a need for a more evidence-based research into this area and that there is a need for widespread change in the attitude towards H&CS on practice-based courses. There is a great deal of evidence that many graphic design courses are making changes already, and several did so some time ago. But anecdotal evidence needs to be replaced by objective qualitative/quantitative data and the scope of the enquiry needs to be widened. In particular there is a tendency in some reporting simply to claim that integrating theory and practice is enough, without objectively assessing the educational benefits.

There is an urgent need for properly funded research into different models around UK and internationally, though we would caution against the idea of a 'national' model. The next phase of benchmark statements in both graphic design and design history should not be undertaken without at least preliminary results from such an exercise. We would, however, suggest that minimum standards should be set in the same way that Sector Skills Councils (SSCs) are planning for the skills-based elements of courses.

We would call for the establishment (or renewal) of a network of history/critical theory staff teaching on practice-based courses and for engagement with industry bodies such as SSCs, D&AD, RSA and others, to apply pressure on practice-based courses to improve recognition and provision of H&CS

among teachers and students. At the moment there is a danger that moves by the sector skills councils to shape degree course curricula threatens to undermine the value of H&CS as a contributor towards 'graduateness'.

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