The H-words in Graphic Design Education: The Hand, Head and Heart in Haptic and Heuristic Learning

Jessica Barness
University of Minnesota

Steven McCarthy
University of Minnesota

Poster

Development of a personal voice is often regarded as evidence of a graphic design student's knowledge, maturity and confidence. This is more than just style; it's a deeper conviction connecting sense of self with greater social, political, economic and cultural meaning. In contrast, focusing on career anticipation and professional sensibilities may suppress personal voice. As a result, the learning environment may be compromised by turning education into job training.

With electronic interfaces potentially diverting the focus from hands-on processes, an additional tension is established between hi-tech and low-tech. Paradoxically, the more synthetic digital environment has its analogue in direct and transparent low-tech methods long associated with manual training (paper craft, drawing, letterpress printing). Emerging software presents a means to work with the visual, conceptual, and participatory with (almost) immediate fulfillment. Nonetheless, a classic cut-n-paste collage assignment addresses more than the principles of design; it also speaks to digital sampling and exploration of creativity, ownership and copyright issues.

Facility with varied media enables students to create hybrid designs—flexible, accommodating, transformative. This collection of skills is not unlike a toolbox, or ingredients in a recipe, allowing the student to select appropriate elements with fluidity. As an emphasis on heuristic learning shows, problem solving becomes infinitely more complex and engaging.

Do hi-touch (hand) and personal voice (heart) instinctively go hand-in-hand? Similarly, does mastery over hi-tech (head) deny the voice while preparing for employment? Could low-tech be considered hi-touch (haptic), and how might it integrate with hi-tech?

Our poster proposes to take these two polemical topics – personal voice and professional sensibility, merged with hi-tech and low-tech – and create more nuanced relationships. By grouping along objective/cognitive and subjective/emotional axes, we hope to demonstrate the value of an integrated approach to graphic design education, one that embraces the future's fuzzy borders.