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Contemporary Issues in Design: A Writing Intensive Course
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How can writing and design co-exist to strengthen a design curriculum? Can students take advantage of their strengths as visual thinkers when writing and, in turn, become better thinkers and designers through the writing process? In this presentation I will explore these questions by first talking briefly about the concept of writing across the curriculum; I will then talk about the specific course I have developed in the graphic design program; finally,

I will share with you several observations and questions pertaining to writing and design based on my teaching and research.

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The concept "Writing across the Curriculum" or WAC emerged in the mid-1970s, when literacy issues and concerns were being re-evaluated.

The following basic principles formed the basis of a writing intensive curriculum:

- Faculty writing workshops can create a nonhierarchical setting for real dialogue across the disciplines.
- Curriculum change depends on intellectual exchange among faculty members.
- Writing across the curriculum is built on a definition of writing as a complex process closely related to thinking.
- Undergraduates can be integrally involved in commenting on work-in-progress and can take a leadership role in the WAC program.
- Writing across the curriculum helps students to learn subject matter as well as to improve fluency in writing. (x Mcleod/Soven, <u>Writing Across the Curriculum</u>).
- Collaboration is the key to success among faculty members and students.
- Faculty members must feel a sense of ownership in a WAC program.

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Around the same time that administrators and faculty were pointing out the necessity of strengthening students writing skills, an article in Newsweek Magazine entitled "Why Johnny Can't Write hit the newsstands. This 1975 article was a critique of the American

educational system and its failure at teaching literacy skills. Industry and business leaders were frustrated with the ineptitude of students entering colleges and the workforce.

Though we have seen many changes since the mid-70s in regard to curriculum reform, much has remained the same. In particular, art departments continue to expect the majority of the writing done by students to come out of the art history courses. The question I raise here is whether it is truly feasible for a student to gain the necessary literacy skills by taking one or two freshman composition courses and the required art history courses. This may be particularly difficult for students accustomed to think in a visual mode. Many professors at the university level assume that a student should be able to enter a 300 or 400 level class with solid literacy skills. However, we all know this is typically not the case.

In an attempt to solve this problem, in 1989, the Faculty Senate at Oregon State University adopted 'Writing Intensive' or WIC Courses as part of the then new Baccalaureate Core. By 1993-1994, each department offering an undergraduate major also offered a WIC course particular to that major. Since then the number of courses has continued to grow. All WIC courses must be approved by a university-wide committee, and by the Baccalaureate Core Committee, in consultation with the WIC director. The five criteria set forth as guidelines for all WIC courses were as follows:

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- **Criteria 1:** Writing intensive courses shall use student writing as a significant approach to learning.
- **Criteria 2:** Writing intensive courses shall base a significant part of the grade on evaluation of writing.
- **Criteria 3:** Writing intensive courses shall focus on content related to the major and be taught by faculty knowledgeable about that discipline.
- **Criteria 4:** Writing intensive courses shall discuss issues pertinent to that discipline, as such issues apply both academically and professionally.
- **Criteria 5:** Writing intensive courses shall be upper division.

The WIC program at OSU works under the assumption that students can actively engage in a topic they are truly interested in through writing. Addressing writing outside of English classes forces students to see that writing is integral to their discipline. Throughout the term, the WIC program supports faculty by conducting workshops, offering grants for WIC related projects, and in lunchtime meetings, where faculty across campus can share and discuss ways to bring writing into the classroom.

Related to this issue, I recently found an article entitled *The Writing Consultant, Collaboration and Team Teaching,* by Peshe C. Kurloff. In this article, the author suggests that any department about to embark on a more intensive writing curriculum should first study itself. He then presents several questions divided up into two sections; the first is more of an inquiry, and the second involves creating a context based on the answers to the self-study.

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I have tailored these questions to a design curriculum and I have found them helpful in the development of my course. They have also helped me as I look more broadly at the parallels between writing and design.

Inquiry and Self-Study

- What are the forms of writing in the professional practice?
- What do those forms reveal about how graphic designers think?
- How is new knowledge created?
- What type of reasoning, what type of questions, what type of evidence do graphic designers respect?
- What type of language do they use?

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Based on this self-study, other questions could then be addressed:

- How do we want Graphic Design students to think?
- What is their relationship to knowledge in their field and outside of it?
- What forms and styles of writing are appropriate for them to practice?
- What purposes should they consider?
- What texts can serve as models for them?

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So how can writing be used as an effective learning tool in a design curriculum? How can we foster literacy— both written and visual? My colleagues and I had the opportunity to consider this question when re-designing our curriculum in the winter of 2000. Some of the key reasons for changing or "re-inventing" our curriculum were;

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- a need to integrate new media, critical theory, history and writing
- a need for NASAD Accreditation
- a need for course sequencing (building upon knowledge from each course)
- a need for clear outcome statements from each course.
    - This would create a consistent knowledge base from each section of the same course
    - This would be helpful to adjuncts and new faculty

Though all 21 new courses embrace writing as a part of the learning process, the course "Contemporary Issues in Design"is the designated WIC course, the one that complies with the university WIC standards.

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This is one of four designated WIC courses offered by the department of art. The four courses are:

Fine Arts	Contemporary Issues in Art
Photography	History of Photography
Art History	Methods and Theory of Art History
Graphic Design	Contemporary Issues in Design

Contemporary Issues in Design is a 400 level course required for all Graphic Design majors. The intent of the course is to investigate design issues through reading, writing and discussion. Writing is used as a tool for learning about these topics and to strengthen students' ability to think critically. The class also emphasizes writing as a visual process and attempts to show parallels between writing and designing.

Though I have taught this class for a number of years, it remains a work in progress, with many successes and failures. I'd like to share some of these with you today.

For example, this is often the first course where many of the students have had the opportunity to think about design within a broader cultural context and specifically about the responsibility they have as designers.

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There are no set topics for any given course and each professor can freely design the course according to his or her particular interests. Topics I have explored include:

- Appropriateness / Ethics
- Activism and Social Responsibility
- Branding strategies/identity issues
- Globalization
- Sustainability
- Personal voice/self driven projects
- Writing in the professional practice
- Technology and design

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Although this is the course where writing is used most extensively, all graphic design classes incorporate writing. This may take the form of developing concepts through research and writing, written critiques and evaluations, reaction papers to readings, self-authored work for visual projects, project descriptions and briefs or writing an essay to accompany a visual project.

Over the past several years, I have become continually more intrigued and challenged to find ways to empower students in their writing. Perhaps it stems from my own fears when faced with a blank piece of paper, which in turn may stem from my training in the visual arts. My art school education prepared me quite well for solving visual problems, but we had very little writing in our curriculum.

I have often felt nervous as I attempt to teach aspects of writing, being trained as a designer and not as an English professor. Though the course is meant to stimulate thinking and learning through writing, conventions of grammar do arise. I assign a good Writing Handbook, such as Diane Hacker's *A Writer's Reference,* and also go over the 10 to 15 most common writing errors and post a number of writing reference websites on our class backboard page. I put much of the responsibility on the students to correct and revise their own work with peers in the class. OSU has a very good Writing Center, where students can get additional help.

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Peer review is emphasized, and students seem to enjoy this method of critique. Again, I talk about peer review with them in terms of reading a paper for organization and content. I also hand out various peer review forms that help guide students through the critique of a paper. By the time students enroll in this class, they are fairly comfortable with design critiques so I talk about parallels between a critique of a visual piece and a critique of writing.

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Visualizing Writing: Process/Organization

The process of writing is often a confusing and frustrating mystery to students—something they typically find foreign to their design process. It is true that writing is traditionally taught through a more linear, sequential process, and the final form is typically linear in structure. While visual projects may be viewed less linearly in final form, similarities can be drawn in process. There are times when this process flows smoothly from one step to another-

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Designing	Writing
- Ideation	Ideation
- Concept Development	Topic development
- Research/writing	Research/ writing
- Idea organization	Idea organization
- Roughs/thumbnails	Rough draft development
- Evaluation/revision	Evaluation/revision

- Final project development   Final project development
- Self-evaluation   Self-evaluation

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There are times when the creative process takes on other forms—where ideation and planning need not be limited to a traditional linear outline, for one reason or another. In the book *The Politics of Writing,* authors Romy Clark and Roz Ivanic suggest that writing is anything but a linear process. They use the phrase writing as a "thinking process"in which writing is viewed as a fluid process of thinking and learning, a back- and-forth dance while creating.

Though this diagram illustrates this "non-linear" process for writing, it could be easily translated into a design process.

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Perhaps mind-mapping and other forms of divergent lateral thinking can be adopted in writing projects. How about a 3-dimensional outline for a paper? Or beginning a writing project with visual exercises? Or beginning a design project with writing in order to clarify and organize concepts. What about physically cutting up a written essay and re-ordering it to bring about a totally different meaning? Or, to make the original meaning clearer?

It is arguably more challenging for a student to write his or her own compelling essay than to take the words of an existing text and create an extraordinary visual piece. The fact that a student has excelled in design does not necessarily mean he or she will excel as a writer. But emphasizing similarities and deconstructing the process can help students gain more confidence in their skills. Another area we examine within the realm of this course is the different types of writing in the discipline.

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Visualizing Writing: Content

The students explore many forms of writing. We discuss some of the pragmatic applications of writing in the field

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- creative brief

- cover letter
- resume
- portfolio/project descriptions
- statement of intent
- personal manifesto
- outlines/notes for presentations
- email etiquette

Students have an opportunity to explore their understanding of contemporary issues through several types of writing such as:

- comparative
- descriptive
- expository
- persuasive
- journals/sketchbook writing
- opinion essays
- researched essays

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Another vehicle for students to write and participate in discussion is through a weekly weblog. This is infinitely more valuable and interesting than simply posing questions in class for discussion. I pose a question each week based on a theme we are exploring and students respond online. The discussions are lively, the writing is direct and clear and these entries give me a jumping off point for further discussion in class. In addition, the web log gives all students and equal voice, including shy or non-native speakers.

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Visualizing Writing: Form

One aspect of writing that continues to plague students is the lack of connection between the final form of a design project and that of a written document. I assign four writing projects a term and I give students an approximate length for each. Though I place no other criteria on the paper, most arrive double-spaced, flush-left with a centered title. They leave a standard one-inch margin and the paper is typically typed in 12 point Times or Helvetica. They rarely use a hierarchical structure to facilitate reading. I am generally

shocked at the lack of imagination and sensitivity to page layout and typography. The usual response: "I didn't know we could design it." Immediately, I see a lack of connection between that which they know and feel confident in—designing—and how they synthesize in writing. I am not expecting over-designed experimental works—simply a paper that visually supports the content. Most of our students at this point have taken 3 to 4 typography classes, yet they still see a clear division between writing a paper for school and creating a visual piece with type in a typography class. Why is this?

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I am currently trying a new approach to the final research paper, by having the students translate this visually, once the written piece is completed. Questions arise as to the effect the design has on the content and ultimate meaning of the topic. We discuss audience and perception and each student is responsible for presenting his or work and process to the class. The visual form of the piece is open, as an interactive piece may prove more appropriate than a printed piece for a particular topic. This may be one way that students can take advantage of their strengths as visual thinkers when writing.

How does design and writing affect the way in which an audience engages a piece? There are times when I give students a writing assignment geared to a specific audience and there are times when I have them tell me what audience they are writing for.

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One example of a project, which brings together the visual with the written word, is a 3-panel triptych, requiring students to distill a newspaper article down to exactly 25 words. The article need not be directly related to graphic design, but the topic needs to be provocative enough to warrant interpretation. Examples of topics include water contamination, the war in Iraq, immigration and gay marriage. Students find a voice and take positions on issues that are often new to them.

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The goal is for a student to find the most concise, appropriate way to re-state the message of the article in exactly 25 words. A second panel must contain one image and a third panel must contain one word that summarizes the concept. Literal images and

explanations are discouraged and students are to think about analogies, metaphors and new relationships.

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During the critique, we talk about the order of the panels and why one order may be stronger than another. We talk about the power of words and the power of an image. We also discuss possible relationships this topic has to design and the ramifications within our culture. Students exhibit these panels without any project or concept explanation, so that viewers can draw their own conclusions.

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Writing and Research: The Student Writing Guide

Finally, I'd like to address the question: how does teaching about writing inform my own research?

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As I furthered my research into the area of writing and design, I saw a need for a writing guide that addressed these issues. In the spring of 2001 I developed a Writing Guide for students. I conceived of the guidebook as a tool for students to use as they move through a writing project.

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To conclude, the discussion of what constitutes '21st century literacy' skills continues throughout academia, and new paradigms are being developed. An example of this can be seen at UCLA's Institute for Multimedia Literacy, where new methods of writing and creating narratives are underway. The program at UCLA has students from disciplines as diverse as medicine, religion and philosophy, creating fully interactive and animated final term papers. Literacy for the 21st century means understanding the complexity of information in our world—how to translate it and finally how to disseminate it. Whatever form this takes, an understanding of how to organize thoughts, articulate clearly and think critically are necessary. The challenge is to find innovative ways to bring writing into a Graphic Design curriculum, without diminishing the necessary studio component. Writing intensive courses are one such solution.