

Stewards of the Typographic Landscape: A Model for Education

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Design educational programs vary greatly. Some of this variety is good, reflecting the diversity and energy of the profession. Unfortunately too often this variety reflects lack of quality: lack of substance, focus or organization. Typography—an integral component to communication—is commonly the weakest educational link. It should be the highest priority.

Typographic education suffers because of the proliferation of design programs and the lack of qualified and knowledgeable faculty to develop these programs, set standards, and maintain a rigorous learning experience. This steady erosion of basic typographic knowledge must stop. The issue is not “do we teach on the computer or through insistence on hand skills,” nor is it about conservative versus experimental approaches to typographic form and communication, nor is it about distinguishing between interactive and traditional media. These arguments are tedious and distracting from the real issue. These are programmatic decisions—not indices of quality.

The issue is that *the knowledge base* for fundamental typographic understanding is eroding while *the need* for substantive typographic education is increasing. Typesetters (who in the past saved many of us from our own ignorance) are an extinct class. They have been rendered obsolete by designers who may not understand the nuances of typography but who do, thanks to technology, control the final form of the work. It is unconscionable to allow designers to graduate ignorant of the foundations of typographic communication. Unconscionable, but unfortunately quite common.

Design students generally lack understanding of and appreciation for the traditions of typographic form. This is not a statement of typographic conservatism; it is a reality. There is a difference between experimental typography and typography that is sloppy and awkward because it was created in ignorance. Students believe design is ephemeral—gone into the ether or the landfill after a quick perusal. While that is often true, such a mindset does not lend itself to a desire for mastering details of typographic function and form. As educators we must instill that desire in our students.

Instilling a passion for typography is not easy. Typography involves subtlety, attention to detail, and patience—not attributes most college students have cultivated. Our task as educators is to insist upon mastery of a typographic knowledge base as a key step towards professionalism.

Perhaps an analogy to other professionals provides a starting point. In hiring a professional—a dentist, an architect—we don’t expect to know everything about what they do. But we expect them to know what must be done. We understand that if they have not mastered their subject, we will suffer for it. It is reasonable and logical to expect a similar level of expertise for typographers.

A model for typographic education can be borrowed from landscape architecture and community planning. Good stewardship—whether topographic or typographic—requires balance between historic preservation, reclamation, adaptive reuse, and planning. This model is thoughtful, flexible, and

sustainable. It provides a structural basis for a thorough and organized typographic program that references and builds from the past while looking to the future. It avoids a “project-based” curriculum, which too often focuses students upon narrow solutions without facilitating their development of vocabulary and criticism and their understanding of universal principles.

The typographic stewardship model consists of five sections, each targeting a specific facet of typography. The model is not intended as a linear progression but should be integrated throughout every level of an educational program. The route to success is to think programmatically. Courses must reinforce each other with content that reaffirms and assures student’s understanding of key information.

Section One: Historic Preservation

Focus: Thinking

Providing an increased emphasis on typographic content within educational programs and creating awareness of the rich and varied traditions of typography.

“You will find that almost all the virtues of the perfect wine glass have a parallel in typography.”

Beatrice Warde

Standards are not arbitrary. An effective educational program establishes context, thus informing students that standards endure because of their ability to enhance communication. Beatrice Warde’s *The Crystal Goblet* is an excellent initiation to historic study. An eloquent plea for typographic clarity, it is as pertinent today as it was when first published in 1932. *The Crystal Goblet* essay, which has been republished in multiple sources, should be required reading but if students use the internet to find it, make sure they read the full essay rather than an abbreviated version.

Frederic Goudy said “only an inventor knows how to borrow. We should study [the early types] not merely to revive or imitate them because we admire them indiscriminately, but rather so that we may piece together the broken threads of tradition, there intact, and finally to adapt them...”¹ Zuzanna Licko

could be studied as an inventor who also knows how to borrow. Or Matthew Carter. Or perhaps Gerard Unger, who succinctly points out that “typography itself is a language. But a language can create problems as far as communication is concerned.”² Promoting student mastery of this typographic language is the educator’s primary task.

A capable educator develops creative and meaningful learning experiences for students. Students can be challenged to conduct typographic research individually or in teams. Their opinions must be supported by facts to encourage substantive debate and discussion. Subjects will vary. Which is more critical: the person who designs a handsome typeface or the one who uses type in a powerful way? Which is more essential: legibility or readability, and what is the difference between them? Which letter of the alphabet has the most colorful history or the most intriguing basic form? Students could stage a hypothetical meeting: if Chank Diesel, Carol Twombly, Adrian Frutiger, and John Baskerville met to talk about typography, what would their conversation be?

What are the watershed moments through typographic history? The impact of “new” technology is worth investigating: how might students compare Gutenberg’s movable type with the invention of the linotype, or with the Macintosh computer? These discussions illustrate the additive nature of history

as it connects to current ideas. Research is as likely to lead students to insights from 2004 as from 1904 or 1604. Students soon realize that dramatic changes have created opportunity and turmoil through the centuries of typographic history. They also discover many concerns remain constant.

Section Two: Reclamation

Focus: Seeing

Advocating fundamental typographic standards. Identifying typographic variables and through systematic manipulation, illustrating their impact on message clarity.

A solid understanding of typographic variables should be a fundamental core of every design curriculum. Educators must refuse to sanction mediocrity by consistently pointing out examples of crude and sloppy typography. Students must become aware of hackneyed solutions such as: relationships of point size, line length, leading and spacing that hinder absorption of text content; arithmetic symbols standing in for quotations and apostrophes; awkward text rags that distract through too much visual activity or through inadvertent formation of an identifiable shape. In our profession such lapses in form are significant and are inexcusably amateurish.

That these clumsy solutions continue to proliferate points to a dismaying lack of typographic standards coupled with the increased democratization of publishing. Educators must structure experiments that allow design students to identify and manipulate variables and to understand their inter-relatedness and their impact. Our students must understand that although the tools of typography are widely accessible, professionals are held to a higher standard of accountability.

Students delight in finding typographic faux pas once they know what to look for. Their resulting journal of sketches, photos or photocopies is most meaningful when accompanied by notes and critiques using precise design vocabulary. There is no shortage of poor typographic work but remind students to document examples that are elegant or clever or beautiful as well. By consciously seeking both, the contrast between them becomes even more apparent.

A sound typographic education focuses the student's attention, assuring comprehension of fundamentals before jumping into creating specific products. Exercises are not simply for beginners. Advanced students benefit from continued exercises as a way to reinforce their understanding and their confidence for executing increasingly complex assignments. Students at all levels must be reminded that poor typography has ramifications beyond simple visual ugliness.

Section Three: Reuse

Focus: Implementing

Investigating issues of reading and communication to pinpoint critical characteristics of letter/wordform recognition. Analyzing the relationships between verbal and visual, image and type.

To consider reuse of typographic form implies awareness of how typography was used and manipulated in the past. It also implies recognition of broader issues influencing how typography is presently used, whether in traditional print media or in digital delivery. What is the difference? Eric Eaton, a senior designer at Wired Digital, says "the Web is about cross-sections, broad strokes, big pictures. Good

“According to research at an English university, it doesn’t matter in what order the letters in a word are, the important thing is that the first and last letter is in the right place. The rest can be a total mess and you can still read it without problem. This is because we do not read every letter by itself but we read the word as a whole.

How do we read? How does our brain process typographic communication?

typography on-screen is certainly not about subtle distinctions between letters. Typesetting in the case of the Web is an amalgamation of type delivery, display, and client interpretation.”³

Educators must cultivate a healthy skepticism in students who are generally too accepting of what they see. As they study characteristics of type and investigate variations in visual form, students should strive to generate both questions and answers. What is the driving force for a solution? Artistic sensibility? Technological considerations? Content interpretation? What does it mean to use a typeface in a way that is appropriate to its original time or purpose? Could it—or should it—be used in a distinctively different way? Has type been chosen more for novelty’s sake than for an ability to effectively convey information? Students must use the design process to generate multiple possibilities and to analyze the communicative and visual impact of their decisions.

In his book *Inside the Word*, Parisian designer Philippe Apeloig writes “... illustration rarely reaches the same level of conceptualization as that achieved in typographic compositions... Typography is the very essence of drawing: a balance between full and empty, light and shadow. It is a discipline halfway between science and art... and exact and arbitrary materials... functional and poetic.”⁴ Type seldom stands alone though, so typographic education cannot ignore image. How do type and image work as a team? Exercises and problems that explore, recognize, and control the relationship between type and image are another critical component of design education.

Are we educating our students to become thoughtful and outspoken design professionals? New York designer Rocco Piscatello told of a meeting with a client who wanted certain parts of a text to be visually highlighted. Piscatello told him that the words, as currently written, did not deserve such visual emphasis. As a result, a professional copywriter was hired to rewrite the pedestrian text and the final piece was strengthened in both design and content. We need to remember that part of our task as professionals is to *give clients what they need*—not what they think they want.

Section Four: Planning

Focus: Clarifying

Examining typography and design through scientific, social, psychological, cultural and other perspectives. Considering the impact and ramifications of design decisions in a larger context.

It has been said that bad typography never killed anyone, but are we sure of that? Intuition has its place, but educators must constantly reinforce the notion that coming to a problem from a knowledgeable standpoint offers the greatest potential for diverse ideas and unique and appropriate final solutions. Emphasizing the ephemeral or esoteric without considering appropriateness and meaning is counter-productive.

Education should emphasize reading, thinking, and testing visual solutions from multiple vantage points. It is not difficult to locate examples where design and typography have been objectively and scientifically investigated. Students could investigate James Montalbano’s work in developing the Clearview type family, which increases the legibility of highway signage. Tests indicated that use of this type could

provide up to a 24% increase in the amount of time a driver would have to read a sign when traveling at 70 mph. The nighttime legibility distance could be increased by 70 feet.⁵ Montalbano's careful research and thoughtful design decisions may actually save lives. Recently the Federal Highway Administration granted approval for Clearview to be used as an alternate to the current Standard Highway Alphabet: the first new typographic decision the administration has made in half a century.

Students could examine specific uses of typography: in signage, on packaging, through film or digital display. They might look for research studies investigating how age and changing vision affect older people's ability to read. Color—its physiological and psychological impact on clarity and message—is another fertile area of study.

There are varied levels of research and even informal questioning can be a legitimate avenue for gathering information. Design students often forget their preferences and abilities are not universal. How might someone from another culture, age group, educational background, primary language, or gender interpret an idea?

Section Five: The Future

Focus: Integrating

Promoting intellectual rigour, attention to detail, and lifelong learning. Raising expectations for professionals to interact with educational programs in support of both students and faculty.

"One of the many things I learned in my year without clients, a year I had put aside for experiments only, was that I'd like a part of my studio to move from creating cool things to significant things."

Stefan Sagmeister

Creative director Stephen Doyle juried a design exhibit a few years ago and was critical of many of the entries for the prestigious competition. He said "Designers, it appears, cover behind a camouflage of complexity, taking refuge in confounding rather than clarification. We always want to push design forward, but we never ask where."

We must advocate fundamental typographic standards and an increased emphasis on typographic content within educational programs. Our profession and our educational institutions are too complacent and too accepting of mediocrity. We must make typographic education an issue by promoting those people—educators and practicing professionals—who uphold standards of excellence. We should not hesitate to be publicly critical of those who do not.

Who is accountable? It is the educator's responsibility to make sure that students ask—and have the ability to answer—questions defining the typographic landscape. It is irresponsible to perpetuate ignorance and disregard for basic typographic information. Stewardship acknowledges programmatic individuality, encourages depth and breadth of learning, and does not limit typographic diversity.

It is the student's responsibility to absorb classroom experiences and to seek enrichment opportunities beyond academic requirements. Building a reference library, attending conferences or presentations, participating in workshops or summer travel programs are important. Students can interview design professionals for their typographic opinions, gripes, successes and concerns. Face-to-face contact with local professionals is valuable, but emails, phone calls and letters to designers outside the area also offer legitimate learning experiences. These activities can have an additional benefit of easing a student's transition from school to work.

The design professionals have a responsibility as well. They They should be aware of what is happening in education. They must reinforce high standards by providing a positive role model as a life-long learner. Contacting a professor or talking to a student only to fill hiring needs is not enough. Some designers “adopt” a local program and visit schools as a part of their professional commitment. It is good for educators and students to know that practicing designers are concerned and are watching what happens in the schools. Designers can provide portfolio critiques, which are an obvious opportunity to point out typographic weakness in a student’s work. They must realize that students listen to them—sometimes more intently than to their professors, unfortunately—so their comments reaffirm material that is being emphasized in class.

Despite time constraints and an ever growing list of content to cover, a design education must always focus upon quality. Too many programs do not, seeking novelty at the expense of substance. Too many so-called professionals encourage this. Gordon Salchow, professor at the University of Cincinnati, is blunt in his assessment of this issue: “Few schools expose students to a genuine understanding of, and appreciation for, real excellence. Americans are fascinated by variety and often interpret this as complexity rather than recognizing that true complexity involves the depth of our understanding.”⁶

The language of typography is a living language, and the resources of people, time and opportunity are too valuable to waste. We must carefully educate upcoming generations of designers to be skilled and articulate in using typographic language. Promoting ideas and expanding possibilities for the world’s people through typography and design is a serious responsibility.

Notes

- 1 – Frederic W. Goudy, *Typologia: Studies in Type Design & Type Making*. 1940 (Republished by Berkeley : University of California Press, 1977)
- 2 – Gerard Unger, *Not the Typical Type*. [2003 Interview on-line]; available from <http://www.artyears.com/exclusive/unger.html>; Internet: accessed 16 July 2004.
- 3 – Eric Eaton, *Why Type on the Web is So Bad*. [1997 Essay on-line]; available from <http://webmonkey.wired.com/webmonkey/97/48/index3a.html?tw=design>; Internet: accessed 16 July 2004.
- 4 – Philippe Apeloig, *Inside the Word*, (Baden, Switzerland: Lars Muller, 2001), p49.
- 5 – Clearview type is trademarked by Meeker & Associates. The statistics also take into consideration signage fabrication techniques that enhance visibility under different weather and lighting conditions. Studies are available on-line from www-ce.uta.edu/faculty/Clearview.pdf; and <http://tti.tamu.edu/product/catalog/reports/4049-S.pdf>; accessed 16 July 2004.
- 6 – Gordon Salchow, “Two Myths about Design Education,” *Looking Closer: Critical Writings on Graphic Design*, edited by Michael Bierut, William Drenttel, Steven Heller, and DK Holland. (New York: Allworth Press, 1994)

About the Author

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