

Documenting the Classroom: Community and History

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Introduction

As students and teachers in the MFA in Design program at the California College of the Arts we have begun to incorporate documentation in our classes. This approach utilizes digital video, audio, and photography to record the stages of the learning process from initial instruction to final work—and everything in between. We have found this to be extremely beneficial to both teacher and student. The following paper examines the effectiveness of documentation and concludes with some practical tips for incorporating it into your classroom.

Documentation specifically targets two aspects of a class: Its history and its community. The ease and speed of digital recording technologies make it possible to view and review (and begin to comprehend) the history of a class even as it is still evolving. This method of “experiencing” history (as opposed to retroactively analyzing it) enriches the experience of students and teachers alike. And because it makes a historical record, documentation builds community by highlighting the everyday individual efforts that combine to make a classroom experience. Subsequently this encourages interaction, collaboration and self-motivation.



Community

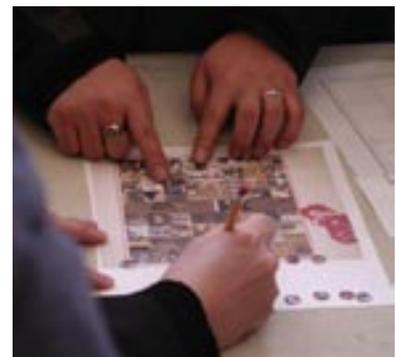
The Social Classroom

While planning lessons, grading and keeping up with the syllabus, it is easy to forget that the classroom is a social environment. But creating a classroom environment conducive to learning is equally if not more important than the subject matter at hand. If the students do not get excited about the course and take their own initiative, the teacher may struggle just to get the class to achieve basic goals. Though often the students and teachers are unfamiliar with each other when a class begins, casual and formal interaction and instruction builds rapport. By engaging students on a social and personal level—as well as an intellectual level—the students become more invested in the class, and are therefore more likely to voluntarily put in extra time and effort without a struggle. And with the students participating readily, the learning process ensues naturally. The more invested the students are, the more they will think about the class, and the more they will learn. When students lead with their own initiative and enthusiasm, the results can be surprising and unexpected, which is more rewarding for the teacher.

We have found that teachers (or even students) can use documentation to foster and examine the social dimension of their classroom. Documentation records fleeting moments of interaction, encouraging the individual students to think of themselves as an active part of the group. In this way documentation puts the focus where it needs to be – on the students. It reminds them that they are not anonymous faces quietly absorbing information. Instead, they are participants in a group in which they – not the teacher – are the focus. By documenting and thereby emphasizing the everyday learning activities (in-class work, discussions, critiques, etc.) the students realize that it is up to them to make the class. Documentation visually emphasizes that students and instructor share accountability for the success or failure of a class. Students may also begin to feel more ownership of the classroom and begin to document on their own (we have observed this on numerous occasions.)



Dawn, a student in a class Dan taught and documented, commented later on the documentation, “You could see in the beginning how we were kind of separate, (above) and how later we came together as a class. We were interacting a lot more at the end of the semester.” (below)



Documentation captures moments of interaction, which strengthens the sense of community among students.

History

Documentation as a Historical Record for the Student

Assessing our progress as students seems to be a task that is simultaneously essential and impossible during the course of a semester. When we do look at our complete bodies of work it is usually because an end-of-term critique approaches, and we are expected to make a cohesive presentation of our progress. The chance to leisurely sit down and organize everything doesn't come until vacation, long after the class has ended. There are, however, many moments during the course of a semester in which we could use a dose of perspective. When we feel uninspired and stuck, it is frustrating that there doesn't seem to be time or a context for abstract reflection on our personal trajectories.

By incorporating consistent documentation into the life of a classroom, students are provided with a surrogate memory that is already conveniently visualized. In our experience, looking at photos of class discussions and critiques as well as our own work reminds us of the distance our thinking has covered, almost without our noticing. Subsequently, the path of our respective work becomes more obvious and we can identify the next logical step that had previously remained hidden. Documentation provides visual material that aids personal reflection, and helps students move forward.

Whether design students want to go on to become teachers or practitioners—or both—they must learn the crucial skill of accepting and providing constructive criticism. As a general practice, at CCA our class digitally records and photographs student teaching and final critiques. It has been illuminating to see ourselves in these activities. Often we easily forget about body language, facial expression and responsiveness when our work is being critiqued.

Being able to see—not just feel—our physical response to criticism helps us grow as designers and productive members of the group. In this sense, then, documentation can emphasize the importance of receptive listening, one of the most frequent and yet least acknowledged of classroom activities.

Regardless of whether it captures the stages of a student's work or her critique personae, documentation naturally encourages self-assessment. It provides distance in which a student can forgo her perspective for a few minutes and adopt an observer's viewpoint. In this way, documentation becomes a resource that ultimately empowers students to take responsibility for their learning.



Documentation functions as a surrogate memory for work, be it still (above) or video (below).



Above and below: Documenting student presentations at CCA.



Documentation as a Historical Record for the Teacher

As participants in a classroom, we are only able to assess the social dynamics from our own experience. That is, evaluation is naturally contingent on our individual perspectives. Ideally teachers have a better sense of the group dynamic, and can intervene when they sense that students are discouraged or the expectations are not clear. Often times, however, this “pulse-taking” gets overrun by the daily pressure to keep the class on task with the syllabus. As much as the class could benefit from time spent dedicated to evaluating its progress, in the design classroom there isn’t a second to spare. Critiques run long, and the teacher can never give individual students enough personal attention. In our experience, “evaluation” times often revolved around pragmatic issues like scheduling and deadlines, and it wasn’t until the very end of the semester that we discussed means of improving the teaching strategy—for next year’s students.

Documentation is an objective witness to a classroom, thereby relieving some of the pressure on the teacher to both A) instruct and B) keep tabs on the general classroom dynamic. (We are not suggesting that both those things aren’t a teacher’s responsibility. We have found, though, both as students and teachers ourselves that the former is frequently prioritized over the latter.) In general it is easier to evaluate something you can see, than something that remains intangible. As designers, we are even more compelled to visual assessment. By definition, documentation provides things to hold on to and look at—documents. For teachers these documents visualize the classroom experience and their own teaching strategies by capturing the general level of students’ responsiveness to teaching style, mode of critique, etc. Documentation translates these factors to concrete, assessable objects, be it video clips or photographs or even sound bites. And with these in hand, the teacher can easily respond to what he/she sees, thereby beginning a tradition of evolving, documentation-guided teaching.

We have experimented with this in situations in which we were either officially teaching, or unofficially guiding others’ learning as a student presenter. In one experiment, Cassandra taught in the traditional style (teacher stands before the class and talks) and in a nontraditional style (teacher allows her students to actually participate in what she is talking about) and documented both. The results were telling; the traditional style was visualized on the faces of her students as boredom. (Optimistically she thought maybe those were not bored faces, but intently focused faces.) The nontraditional style however translated into laughing, smiling, engaged faces. By comparing the photos side-by-side there was a clear difference; the students unequivocally responded better to the



In a middle school class on advertising, this student preferred a drawing activity (above) more than an abstract discussion (below).



Visualized results of the teaching experiment. Above: traditional teaching style; below: nontraditional



nontraditional teaching style. The documentation provided a clear verdict as to which teaching strategy she should continue to pursue.

It is in this way that documentation can help realize that optimistic goal of always being the most effective teacher possible. Documentation is not a perfect science, but it provides data, and more importantly it suggests areas of improvement. And almost instantaneous improvement, not retroactive “I’ll do it differently with the next bunch of students” improvement, which short-changes the students one has now.

A Record of Process

Design educators routinely battle a chronic over-emphasis on the final polished product. While we want our students to complete a project at a certain level of design excellence and craftsmanship, we also want them to realize the importance of the process that got them there. Consequently teachers often encourage students to keep process notebooks and emphasize the importance of thumbnails, roughs and comps. Documentation is another method that can stress the design process. By recording work while it is created, pinned up or projected, the teacher can preserve stages that might have been discarded or completely forgotten by the student. Having a more complete record of the class, instead of just the final “portfolio” pieces, keeps the entire body of work alive as inspiration for the students. Documentation reveals the collaboration and cross-pollination that occur in a classroom, and encourages students to learn from each other and to take inspiration from disparate sources. It also teaches them to look back at ideas that were previously cast aside.

In this way documentation can become an important teaching tool. It provides a new visual medium which can be used to illustrate abstract ideas. Because students are looking at something they are already familiar with, this increases comprehension and interest and often injects some humor into the lesson.

As a visual medium, documentation can also teach new ways of seeing. Instead of abstractly describing ways of looking at work, the instructor can actually demonstrate the ideas. For example, a teacher can photograph a project to see if it changes the way a student understands it. Close-ups, cropping, or extreme angle photography can alter the perception of a piece without physically changing it. Three-dimensional work can be translated to 2D; two-dimensional work can be cropped, shot in perspective, or juxtaposed with other elements. These strategies are especially useful during critiques. By interacting with student work, crits transform from passive reviews to active, creative sessions. And as students become familiar with this teaching strategy, it will eventually become part of their own design practice.



Late in a class, after most of the students had left, Margie began to take computer print-outs and cut them up, trying out different arrangements for her composition. Knowing that this would get the point across much more clearly than standing in front of the class and encouraging them to occasionally get off the computer, Dan photographed her working. The next class, he showed the photos and had Margie explain what she had been doing and how it had helped her with the project.



During a critique, our professor isolated two photographs from the rest of the images on the wall, revealing a relationship between modern and traditional Japanese architecture that the student had not previously noticed.

Tips of the Trade

It's easy enough to talk about the merits of documentation, but quite another to actually put it into practice. For this reason, we would like to conclude with some practical advice about how to incorporate documentation in your classroom.

- Documentation may seem strange to you and your students at first. In our experience, being up front about your goals can be helpful. Let your students know why you are taking photographs. When the teacher begins documenting, we have observed that students often follow suit. With any luck, the students will do all of the documenting for you after a certain point.
- Documentation should be as unobtrusive as possible. It helps to turn off the flash on a camera, and even to literally “shoot from the hip.” Set a video camera up in the corner on a tripod so that the class (and you) forget about it. The less posed your documentation is, the more helpful it will be.
- These days digital cameras are ubiquitous and easy to use. And since many students have their own, teachers can delegate the documenting responsibility. Depending on how you want to use the photos there are a few options we recommend. For quick presentations, iPhoto can assemble the files in a slide show, which can then be projected or simply played on a computer for your class. If you would rather the students look at the photos on their own time, Photoshop's automated features (File > Automate) can create websites or contact sheets. In a matter of minutes, a folder full of images can be turned into a website that you can upload to the Internet, or a series of contact pages that can be printed out.
- Digital video cameras have the advantage of not requiring constant human attention. If you attach a camera to a tripod and hit record, you're set for the duration of the tape. The challenge lies in dealing with the hour(s) of collected footage. iMovie is an easy-to-learn, practical program—and best of all, it's probably already on your computer. You can edit and splice footage, and then export the project as a Quicktime movie.
- We have learned that when it comes to documentation, perfection shouldn't be the goal. Don't spend too much time editing or selecting the best-composed shots. Students don't really care if they have red eye, or a photo could have been cropped or a video isn't of cinematic quality. The point is to learn from your documentation, so look for information in every image, not just the beautiful ones. Though we don't recommend streaming two hours of unedited



Often students get involved with the documentation process, which can result in creative shooting. This photo was taken by a student standing on the table.



Our favorite: The Photoshop Automate function.



Tripods keep documentation discreet.

video, as long as the pieces have interesting, provoking, or even amusing content, anything more is simply an added bonus.

We hope we have convinced you of the merits of documentation. Now it's time to experience its effectiveness yourself. Good luck!

Bios

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Cassandra Kegler lives in San Francisco where she is a second year in the MFA in Design program at California College of the Arts. She has been a professional student for several years now, having received a BS in journalism from Northwestern University and a post baccalaureate certificate in Visual Communications from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. She is currently pursuing a design thesis on celebrity, politics and the media, for which she hopes to make use of both her skills and obsessions.