

Design in K-12 Art Education Curriculum – Bill Lynch

We are exposed everyday to countless messages, both written and unwritten, all of which are conveyed through the use of design. Design is used by commercial industry as a vehicle to motivate and persuade at every possible level of our modern visual experience. It is becoming increasingly important to be able to identify messages delivered through design and evaluate them for personal and cultural significance. Art educators are in a unique position in their K-12 classrooms as they may build an awareness of these issues as well as initiate opportunity to develop design strategies in their own student's work. This article is an invitation to consider incorporating visual design communications strategies in K-12 art education curricula while also providing a lesson that may be adapted to any art education program.

Recognizing good design and being able to demonstrate design competency is closer than we think in the K-12 art education classroom. The art room, hallways and the school are inundated with images that have been designed. Posters, books, writing materials (including crayons) have all been designed. We don't have to go far to find examples of good design, and sometimes bad. But how could "commercial" type of elements fit into the traditional aesthetical base of art education? Fundamental principles and elements of design used for functional, often commercial goals in design education have a lot in common with traditional art education. For example, the picture plane, or image area is predetermined and must be negotiated, simple objects used to represent complex forms, color theory and critique are just a few of the many similarities that formal design education and traditional art education have in common. Both also have the most important attribute of being able to express creatively by the individual and subsequently be interpreted by others for personal benefit. Aesthetic benefit of design incorporation in art can most readily be identified by Andy Warhol's work during the Pop Art movement. Personal benefit and cultural relevance must also be considered when viewing advertisements or other design communications within our visual culture.

We are surrounded in our daily life by images that attempt to inform or persuade and we are at a time when students need skills that help them make sense of our modern visual culture. Design has become an essential aptitude because of the quickened metabolism of commerce ⁴. To design is to apply individual creativity to functional object. However, the *functionality* of a created design can have several meanings.

In our society design is widely considered as a purely functional communication strategy for commercial gain. But, designing with basic elements for purely aesthetic goals can be an excellent base for higher end problem solving in itself. By examining and deconstructing elements of existing designs and reducing them to their basic forms such as squares or circles and then reconstructing them for personal relevance can allow us to do two things. First, it allows us to communicate why the

design is relevant to us in the first place and second, it allows us initiate creative process for personal significance. Approaching design on this type of conceptual basis can allow students to start exploring design at a comfortable level while building rudimentary skills. Design elements that art students at all levels will be aware of include line, form, shape, color and type. Basic principles that these may be used in conjunction with include placement, positive/negative space relation, proportion and message. There are numerous resources available for the art educator to investigate regarding the application of basic design. A working knowledge of the principles and elements of design provides a foundation for managing design decisions³. Basic design considerations can easily be worked into a variety of art education curricula.

Curriculum objectives that involve problem solving that is personally relevant for the student generates interest and provides motivation for success. Problem solving objectives are objectives in which the criteria to be met are specified, but the form the solution is to take is not⁵. An example appropriate for each grade level would be to allow students to create a book cover for their own life story using only typographical letterforms as the main visual element. Effective and complete communications can be created by type without images or by images without type¹. Type and typography is pervasive in modern visual culture and the conceptual development and cultural interpretation of letterforms can be a very worthwhile activity in the classroom. Lessons may be developed for this activity on many different levels from identification and replication of basic letterforms to convey purely aesthetical solutions, the study of basic design criteria such as balance, symmetry, rhythm or harmony to advanced study of mechanical type generation dependent on historical application and color theory relevance. Further advanced lessons could also include investigation of print and publishing requirements for actual book covers.

Regardless of applicable method of the lesson, a survey of existing type as design in the student's surroundings should be included as extensively as possible as well as individual and group assessments of one another's accomplishments. Through these procedures students can discuss, debate, and judge the quality of learned concepts and skills². This last activity also provides verbal communication elements that are crucial for synthesis and future employment of realized competencies by the student. Lessons as described above allow students to recognize benefit in design as a key element to understanding modern visual culture and our current conceptual age.

1. *Type and Image, The Language of Graphic Design, Philip B. Meggs, John Wiley and Sons Inc. 1992 (pg 67)*
2. *Teaching Visual Culture, Kerry Freedman, Teachers College Press 2003 (pg164)*
3. *Exploring the Elements of Design, Evans and Thomas, Thomson 2004 (pg 5)*
4. *A Whole New Mind, Why Right-Brainers Will Rule the Future, Daniel H. Pink, Penguin Press 2005 (pg 81)*
5. *The Arts and the Creation of Mind, Elliot W. Eisner, Yale University Press, 2002 (pg 160)*