

Principles and Elements of Design as Conceptual Tools in Art Education

William D. Lynch

University of Missouri, Columbia

Kathleen Unrath, Associate Professor

Curriculum in Art Education, LTC 8740

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Abstract

Basic design principles and non-representational elements can be used in art instruction for conceptual, criteria-based student projects. This kind of applied problem-solving involving design elements in the classroom has great opportunity to facilitate skill building and creativity in the art student (Vande Zande 2010). This paper will reveal commonality between established art and design education while providing project ideas employing familiar elements and design principles for personally relevant projects. The conceptual design approaches described in this paper promote critical inquiry skills that facilitate the development of visual communication evaluation skills needed in today's art students (Lampert 2006).

Keywords: art, communication, conceptual, creativity, design, education

Exposure to imagery and designed objects, and the creative application of these images is having a large impact on our culture, now more than ever. Student art projects reflect this and they are increasingly understood as a form of inquiry within our culture that influences their creators as they shape their own environments (Freedman 2003). There is a need to identify and interpret basic design fundamentals in artwork that distinguish effective visual communication. This includes visual elements and design principles that could be discussed, evaluated, and applied for lasting personal benefit. In the art classroom there exists the opportunity to study principles and processes of design that allow the student to be individually expressive and understand how creative behavior is influenced through objects and images that surround us (Vande Zande 2007). This does not imply that teachers should initiate complicated repetitive design exercises in the classroom. Rather, strategies involving teacher-facilitated recognition of communication intent may be employed to recognize individually specific, personally relevant ideas through application of design. This framework can be viewed as teacher and learner involvement in a continuous exploration of aesthetics and processes relative to visual communication by using application of basic elements and principles of design (Ozturk 2006).

With this approach we may begin to focus on important aspects of design projects that allow for evaluation of successful communication of feelings or situations in which students may find themselves without relying on realistic representation (Pitri 2003). This will promote student creativity while providing the teacher with criteria to provide lessons on basic design strategies. There are numerous definitions that refer to design

instruction and the purpose of design education are diverse. A commonality of note is: basic design education usually includes activities that focus on the arrangement of abstract form and the application of the elements and principles of design (Davis 2004). This definition may help to explain that the study of design does not have to be a complicated standardized process related to a specific systematic formula for application, but can also be applied to the conceptual project.

Principles of design are not universally understood and can vary dependant upon term specification, definition and interpretation. There are however, similarities and consistencies within various definitions. As Kim (2006) describes in *A History of Design Theory in Art Education*, “In any set of design principles, there are dichotomous but complementary design characteristics embedded throughout different members, and this corresponds to our more basic strategy as organisms of dealing with the outside world. I suggest that almost all the principles can be divided into two groups: the "unity" group and the "variety/contrast" group. The unity group principles can be conceived as compositional strategies that make parts or principles hang together to make a whole through visual relatedness. Repetition (or similarity), approximation, and continuation can be included in this category. Symmetry can be included in this category because it is one kind of repetition. The second category, the variety/contrast group, consists of strategies that break the unity by difference, unevenness, individuality, or novelty, manifested in variety, contrast, and asymmetrical balance.” Although there are numerous principles and interpretations, a few more worth mentioning here are rotation, reflection,

dilation, gravity, rhythm and perspective. Any of these are good criteria for applying to a classroom project.

As with principles, the basic elements of design are not universally established. For this paper and general discussion we may identify elements of design to include line, size, color, texture, typography shape and space (Evans 2004). Each of these familiar elements is worth exploring in great detail individually or in combination. As defined elements for projects, they are the basic tools students may use to organize, revise, and edit during the creative process (Nicol 2004). This paper will briefly review three of these elements relative to possible application within the kinds of conceptual visual communication projects proposed. These include space, shape and typography.

Space allows a starting point and a structure within the classroom for the physical dynamics of the project as set forth by the instructor. Space is dependent upon the image area, such as an 8 x 11 piece of paper. Positive space would be the applied form on the image area while negative space would be that which surrounds it. When does positive become negative? That's a good classroom discussion question and depends upon image composition within the image area and concept of the creator. For instance a small triangle in the center of the page may indicate loneliness. However, the triangle is a very stable shape and the creator may have created it to indicate confidence in a temporary situation in which they find themselves.

Shapes other than geometrics may reveal valid creative communication strategies as well. Organic shapes are typically taken from nature, such as a flower. This type of existing representational object may be evaluated for the visual parts that are useful,

simplified to a usually symmetrical basic shape and reapplied in context (Walling 2006). Then there are freeform shapes, entirely eye-dependant and often unplanned. These different types of shapes can be applied individually or in combination within the image area dependant upon the individual communication concept and classroom objectives.

Typography is the study of type and can be inexhaustible. For the sake of this paper we will consider the individual typographical letterform as a basic shape for the exploration of conceptual visual communication in composition. As we know, letters form words, which are the most subjective form of visual communication in our society. The use of words for proposed projects here should be avoided in favor of use as letterforms as basic design elements. This approach allows for numerous opportunities by the teacher to explore meaning in type shape and opportunities for the student to identify common visual elements for personal communication without the hindrance of blatant representation that can be distracting of quality in composition or conceptual message.



Letterforms as shapes in communication design provide a wide range of opportunity for art education lessons such as the historical and cultural uses of type or font generation. A conceptual project can be, instead of

words telling a story, let the letterforms display a narrative as seen in the example.

Familiarity with type and the concept of letterform as a design element can have obvious lasting benefits to the student including critical observation skills that allow for

deconstruction of complex messages within our visual culture. These thoughtful considerations can in turn be applied to their own work. Meaningful projects often come from these types of investigations and opportunities (Gude 2007).

In basic design problems, realistic representation of easily recognizable objects may be a good starting point for investigations of shapes and elements that provide inspiration for design, but they should not be apparent in the final product. As hard as it may be, students need to avoid the conscious representation of objects in favor of considering the communication possibilities of applied design. This increases the potential of students employing such conceptual strategies in their artwork. (Walling 2006). With younger students objective representation is inevitable. But, it should be avoided during design lessons in favor of non-representational basic objects for the purpose of communication and interpretation of message. This facilitates development of critical thinking skills and allows for multiple interpretations needed by the viewers during classroom discourse.

When students are invited to engage in productive discourse of classroom objectives related to the design process and established criteria it helps them to validate and make sense of their artwork (Marschalek 2005). The conceptual design approaches described in this paper promote critical inquiry skills that facilitate the development of visual communication evaluation skills needed in today's students (Lampert 2006). Developing critical thinking skills used in design production are invaluable to understanding and applying universal art and design concepts that provide the student with a better understanding of their visual world and the part basic design plays in it.

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