

Typography Day 2011

Typography and Expression

Storytelling through Expressive Typography

The interpretive and illustrative nature of visual-verbal compositions.

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Abstract: Through a typographic assignment, 12 undergraduate communication studies students at a major university in Singapore explore hand-crafted letters through various ornamental, exploratory as well as digital letters to bring out the “rawness” of meaning in selected quotes of their choice by a famous person, living, dead or fictitious. Underlying the interpretive and illustrative natures of the project lays the fundamental elements of storytelling such as setting, character identification, plot, mood, and movement. In short, by selecting a setting, the audience is provided a sense of time and place. Working with quotes which essentially are typographic in nature, these students are confronted with the task of identifying a character in the quote which makes their composition relevant in order to create an emotional tone for their expressive letterings, identified as mood within a plot which ties the sequential events together.

Key words: *Lettering, Typograhly, Storytelling, Semiotics, Semantics, Hands-on.*

Introduction

Storytelling is being used as a strategic method of communication and is fundamental to our sense of self. At the beginning of communication, the medium of expression was mainly the spoken word. People have been expressing their opinions in various sorts of way. The first story was probably told in ancient times around campfires and cave paintings are probably visual manifestations of these stories. According to Satish et al (2010), we communicate our ideas not only over space but also over time which leads to the memorization of an idea that will be passed down to the next generation. He added that this form of knowledge transfer led to the creation of an intuitive structure consisting of information. This is, in essence, the story itself in which storytellers would pick and choose the desired messages to make the story more natural and easily remembered and understood by the audience.

Storytelling has been a popular method of passing knowledge from one generation to the next and it is still one of the most compelling ways to communicate knowledge. Over time, it has taken form in many shapes from the oral tradition of telling tales, visual forms as in television and film and textual-based as in poetry or novels. Since young, we were taught how to read, write and interpret

texts but the efficacy of alphabets goes beyond their mere verbal meaning. This is an important realization because beyond the verbal meanings of words and letters, graphical and symbolic codes are embedded and they connect directly with our cultural heritage (Huerta 2008). According to McCoy (1990), meaning was not embedded in visual typographic form until the early twentieth century. Artists of Futurism, Dada, Constructivism and De Stijl turned their attention to traditional areas of art as well as text and visual-based communications by fusing typographic forms and compositional elements to interpret and extend the meaning of words and in doing so, they blurred the divisions between the fine and applied arts. The German-based Bauhaus combined crafts and fine arts into a unified school of thought that subsequently influenced art, architecture, graphic design, interior design, industrial design and typography. Since then, typography has become a visual language as well as a verbal one.

The dichotomous visual-verbal are two modes of how we traditionally receive messages in which image and text are two carriers of the message. The visual process of seeing is connected with images while the process of reading is typically connected with the verbal process of deciphering the text's written letters—signs. The process of seeing images is intuitive, emotional and simultaneous while the process of reading is rational, linear and sequential. Aristotle once proclaimed that “the aim of art is to represent not the outward appearance of things, but their inward significance.” White (2005) agrees because according to him by “contrasting type style, size, weight, position, color or treatment to show hierarchy,” the reader shall have enough information to decide whether he/she wants to be involved with the text and this is where the story really lies.

This underscores the need for expressive typography to go beyond the understanding of syntax and sentence structure. The end product is one that forces the viewer to ask, “I can see what this picture means but did the meaning come from reading the text or from looking at it?” This is because the work may contain overt or obscure signifiers or elements that can create or allude to coded meaning that when decoded, could reveal additional understandings. Halfway between graphic language and verbal written language, this interpretive typographic project affords the opportunity for 12 undergraduate communication studies students at a major university in Singapore to explore hand-crafted letters through various ornamental, exploratory as well as digital letters to bring out the “rawness” of meaning in the selected quotes relevant to philosophy, science, politics and culture. Each student was given the freedom to interpret the content and the form of their individual quote from iconic living, dead or fictitious figures. Storytelling is pervasive and type is ubiquitous. Customizing fonts with a certain hand-made feel through what is described as “expressive lettering” in a classroom where students experiment with typography is what this paper is about.

The project provides a channel for the students to interpret and construct their knowledge into a visually-driven format whereby words as a predominant form are “dressed” with images for a sense of accented dynamism. By crafting and customizing fonts with a certain hand-made feel, the realm

of their role as a communicator is no longer limited to graphic designing, but of a form-maker. They are also dealing with how meanings are constructed not just by them, but by their peers as audience which is a primary source since they are deemed as the intended recipient of the message. This paper seeks to explore the roles of storytelling in typography, specifically, how visual communicators, as form-givers, transmit their ideas through manipulations of forms and techniques in digital typography to influence their readers/viewers. Through an examination of storytelling with fundamental elements such as setting, character identification, plot, mood and movement, students identified and analyzed how storytelling can be theoretically used to guide the creations of an expressive typography.

The purpose is three-fold: firstly, to explore how meaning is constructed through transmitting the graphic value of written texts; secondly, to identify the interpretive and illustrative nature of communicating in text and visuals and finally, to understand the visual-verbal creations of non-design students. While this article is not proposing a deep pedagogical method, it hopes to offer opportunities in which multiple other arts-oriented pursuits such as film-making, photo journalism and graphic communication are linked in exploring creative exigencies in approaching an increasingly diverse learning and teaching environment.

Methodology

This research is illuminated by the basis that problem-solving relies on invention which introduces newness by combining existing things (Evans and Thomas, 2008) in which the students are encouraged to develop their critical thinking and creative expression through the realization of the class assignment. The case studies as reported in this paper are shaped by an assignment for 12 (four male and seven female) undergraduate sophomore students. Such class participants, using workshop methods, are common to a continuous assessment mode where continual feedback is conducted in one-on-one sessions with each student.

The “Expressive Lettering” project lasted for four weeks in a 3 hour tutorial session per week from September 7 to October 5, 2010. The students operate under the framework that famous people can inspire us through their words as they seek to bring out the meaning through typographic expressions. They operate with complete freedom regarding theme, format and the final poster is sized at A2 (420 mm x 594 mm) vertically or horizontally. Underlying the interpretive and illustrative nature of the project lays the fundamental elements of storytelling such as setting, character identification, plot, mood, and movement.

By exploring how the “behind-the-scenes” design processes are achieved, the students’ ideation process is revealed. This teaching technique can enhance the qualitative aspects of design pedagogy. The intent of such an analysis is to determine how the students shaped their encounter with design by creating visualized images guided by an interpretive nature of a quotation chosen by the students. In contrast to traditional imposition of graphic design related projects which are

usually born from commercial approaches, what differs in this typographic assignment is its non-mass-production model with an emphasis hands-on exploratory design methods both manually and technologically. Hence, the assignment is as reflective as it is organic, case-responsive and intuitively engaging. Because no two students can create something totally alike due to the freedom and lack of specifics in producing the final artwork, the major task is interpreting the quotation which is a challenge. One student remarked, “I stumbled at the beginning when my thoughts were constrained to literal interpretations of the quote.”

In short, by selecting a setting, the audience is provided a sense of time and place. Working with a quote which is essentially typographic in nature, the students are confronted with the task to contextualize the meaning of a quote. This makes their composition relevant in order to create an emotional tone for their expressive letterings. The tone, through realization of a composition of the elements of design such as color, texture, line, shape and other graphical or pictorial elements is identified as mood. Finally, movement in the composition is observed in which compositional elements are made clear and captivating. This in return, teaches the students about the importance of space. When effectively used, space can enhance the meaning of the design. Students received a brief explaining the objectives and requirements of the project. In addition to exploring, developing and analyzing their ideas through brainstorming and discussion sessions, they are required to reflect upon a set of five questions to ascertain the thought process of the students. Their answers, together with selected work of the students are reported in the analysis section below:

Analysis

QUESTION 1: Describing the process from the beginning to the end, with emphasis on elucidating the rawness of meaning through the act of creating an expressive typography.

For “an eye for an eye makes the whole world blind” by Mahatma Gandhi, literal keywords such as “eye”, “world” and “blind” are identified as keywords and the student admits that it is not an easy feat to create a design which can successfully incorporate all the qualities that are associated with the aforementioned keywords. Although her initial sketches are obvious interpretations based on the keywords, she also experiments with literal drawings inspired by the quotes. These include an eye with the chosen quote forming the pupil of the eye, an earth blindfolded with the quote written on the blindfold and so forth (refer to figure 1). She also tries to contextualize the quote in the context of war with the likes of US Presidents Obama and Bush as well as Iraq’s Saddam Hussein but she realizes through brainstorming sessions that placing the quote within one context also limits it from another.

Starting off with literal adaptations of the quote, she began to look for ways to make her design less specific and subtle. Braille came to her mind in exploring the word “blind.” By rendering an approach whereby her design cannot be seen clearly from far but has to be looked at in close

proximity seems to insinuate that we are on our way to blindness (refer to figure 2). To further enhance the visual aspect of her design, a visual reference of a graphical eye accompanies the quote which was placed to become the pupil of the eye and dimension was later added to it by using the fish-eye effect so as to make it also look like a globe.

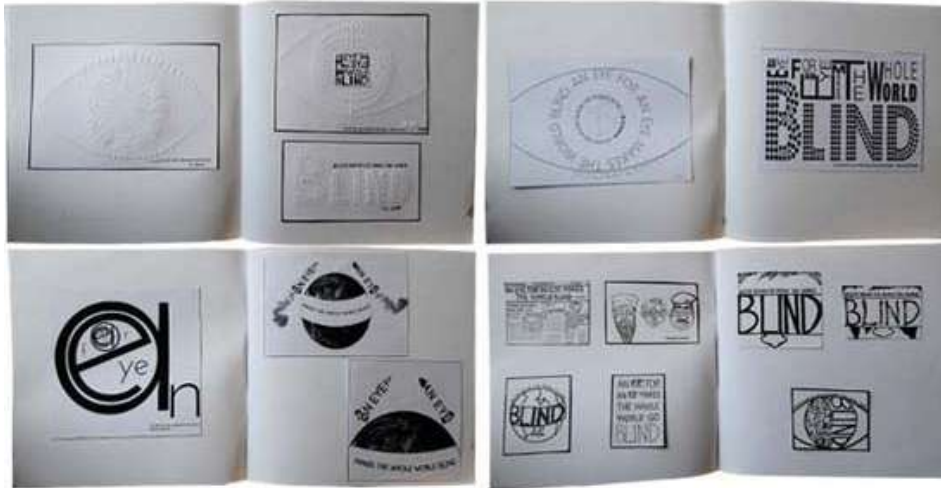


Figure 1. Sketches for “An eye for an eye makes the whole world blind.”



Figure 2. A student’s interpretation of Mahatma Gandhi’s “An eye for an eye makes the whole world blind.”

Influenced by knowledge of history, social and cultural development, technical knowledge and personal preferences, the students have resources to articulate the complex communicative network of communication by combining the persuasive wealth of visual vocabulary with typography. For one student, after deciding on the quote, she begins to critically analyze it by

thinking about the quote from different perspectives in her attempt to understand all the possible meanings and connotations. Next, she looks for relevant symbols or imagery as she finds them useful in directing and shaping her viewer's thoughts. The combination can be attractive if we observe them from new, interdisciplinary and suggestive angles. Combined with her sketches, imagery found from the Internet and brainstorming sessions, the strongest idea was refined through various subsequent sketches before finalizing them in paint programs like Adobe Photoshop and Illustrator. While she admits that working on the computer is "the most time-consuming and nerve-wracking part of the process" due to tweaking and touching up the details, she also consults with others for a second opinion. She wants to ensure the clarity of the message whereby the selected graphics is comprehensible and relevant.

For one student who attempts to elucidate the "rawness" of the message "Beauty is in the eye of the beholder," the initial experimentation is with floral arrangements as flowers are deemed to be beautiful during their blossoming stages before they shrivel up. She likens the association to the rise of women going for plastic surgery. Inspired by her classmate who was literally using Braille and "blindness," she experimented with flowers to form the words with progression of fresh flowers to dried ones. However, after the entire message was formed, her typographic arrangement was "too floral" as such that the message was being overpowered by floral arrangements instead and the idea of a subjective beauty was lost in the message.

Explorations are important before a suitable sketch can be narrowed down in terms of selection to progress to the next stage of refinement. Depending on the context of meaning, various methods of scratching, scrawling, scripting lettering, stitching, embroidering, sewing, and doodling are explored. While the students choose quotes with most room for interpretation, it is important that it has is also the most impact to maximize both the visual-verbal aspects of the assignment.

QUESTION 2: Using fundamental elements in storytelling such as "setting" in which the student's perceived audience is given a sense of time and space; describe how you made your composition relevant to the chosen quote in terms of visual relevance within the context of time and space.



Figure 3. A student's interpretation of Sun Tzu's "All War Is Deception."

A good story brings about emotion. A student reports that while it is difficult to portray emotion in a two-dimensional medium, she attempts to translate emotion by giving her viewers a sense of time and space. She places various design elements such as thick lines which are dynamically placed in her composition. As a result, she creates eye movement which can build suspense, drama, and conflict which work together to allow her viewers to see a "big picture" in her overall composition. She chooses ancient Chinese military strategist, Sun Tzu who authored the book *The Art of War* (figure 3). In providing a contextual basis for the particular quote, the full original quote, 兵者，诡道也。故能而示之不能，用而示之不用，近而示之远，远而示之近, is translated by the student into "War is also about deceptions. When you are capable, feign incapability. When you are good at deployment of units, feign that you are incapable. When you are near, feign that you are far. When you are far away, feign that you are near." The importance of deception in warfare is not to be underestimated because deception increases the change of a quick victory. Yet, the highest accomplishment in warfare is victory without fighting, i.e. to drive away the enemy without using a single soldier (Fu & Yang, 2006).

To make the phrase more meaningful and impactful, the quote is shortened to "All war is deception." By making 'all war is' a prominent feature as necessary in a story, the typography is clearly the main focal point of the story as viewers would first notice the text as the main attraction due to it being the only vividly colored element in her composition which acts as a strong magnet that draws the eye. The bright red represents vibrancy and exuberance as it is connotatively being associated with danger and blood. The bright red evokes an emotional response in the viewer and sets a mood of menace, as reflected in the message. The other hidden characters are in direct contrast to the bright red text. Rendered in monochromatic shades of grey, the

foreground in which the character “deception” was hidden creates a more contemplative mood for the message. In terms of space, the lack of empty space in the composition creates a feeling of a claustrophobic space, further compounded by the shades of the shadow which creates a sinister effect in the setting.

A sense of movement is created as the viewer’s eyes are drawn from the main type, up to the background of the wall by following the direction of the lines depicting the shadow. The conflict is caused by the indistinctiveness of the shadows against the background. The use of shadows is often associated with sinister themes, mystery and ambiguity and in deciphering the text within the shadow, a sense of suspense is heightened. The crisscrossed lines with shattered pieces of glass on the floor, the stretched shadowy lines and illumination as well as the overall dark tones contribute to the message of ‘deception.’

The climax of a story is the high point of a story, often when the conflict is resolved. Completing the character which ends with “is” requires the reader to search for the remaining text which is punctuated with a web of lines. Upon close inspection, the word “deception” is revealed as it is being “embedded” into the background. A resolution is reached once the texts are linked which completes the sentence. In this composition, the climax of the plot is when the shadows are deciphered as the word ‘deception’, thus resolving the conflict of ambiguity and suspense. Once the viewer realizes that the shadows are not an exact replica of the character, they realized the message of deception and how there is a form of visual trickery and distortion of the shadows.

QUESTION 3: Through the chosen quote of a famous person- dead, alive or fictitious, how the student turns the text-based quote into a visual solution to reflect the character (protagonist’s) meaning in his/her composition?

Victor Hugo’s statement “An intelligent hell would be better than a stupid paradise,” highlights the themes of religion, faith and intellect. The statement appears to be Hugo’s criticism of blind faith in which one believes in a higher being without concrete evidence of the being’s existence. A student interprets the meaning of the statement that even immortality is immaterial if one does not possess knowledge and understanding to decipher the meaning. She surmises that Hugo tries to convey the idea that “paradise” is ultimately a mentally-constructed notion. The student attempted to portray the meaning by using religious imagery which is related to the central theme of religiosity. The stained glass windows of monastery remind the viewer of the associations with Christianity/Catholicism. The image of a stained glass window calls to mind the reverent atmosphere of a place of worship.

Through inference, a religious setting is created in the viewer’s mind, and an association with Judeo-Christian faith is immediately formed. While the apple motif, as the fruit most commonly thought to be the ‘forbidden fruit’ that caused the Original Sin prompts deeper probing into the

message embedded in the quote. To put it in the context of the quote, the apple is key to knowledge, which gives Adam and Eve understanding of the true reality of their paradise, and when consumed, revealed their naïveté and disillusionment. Working together, these elements are intended to frame the viewer's interpretation of the quote and to elucidate Hugo's profound message, while allowing them to form their own inference, which is what Hugo is trying to evoke. Instead of positioning the window in the center, an overall image is one that is asymmetrical. In the student's rationale, it is one way to attract her viewer's attention as well as adding some dimension to the window.

In order to successfully convey the message succinctly with the same intention, the protagonist of the message, typographically arranged and placed at an off-center position creates room to allow light rays to stream in through the window, illuminating the dark surroundings which further add to the rather somber and pensive mood. This is purposefully intended to be a visual metaphor for the wisdom of the quote being an illumination of the mind. The large black background allows the viewer thinking space by de-cluttering the image as well as focusing the viewer's attention on the quote. A sense of contrast is added to the overall image, creating a focal point, thus drawing attention to the window and making it more visually impactful (refer to figure 4).

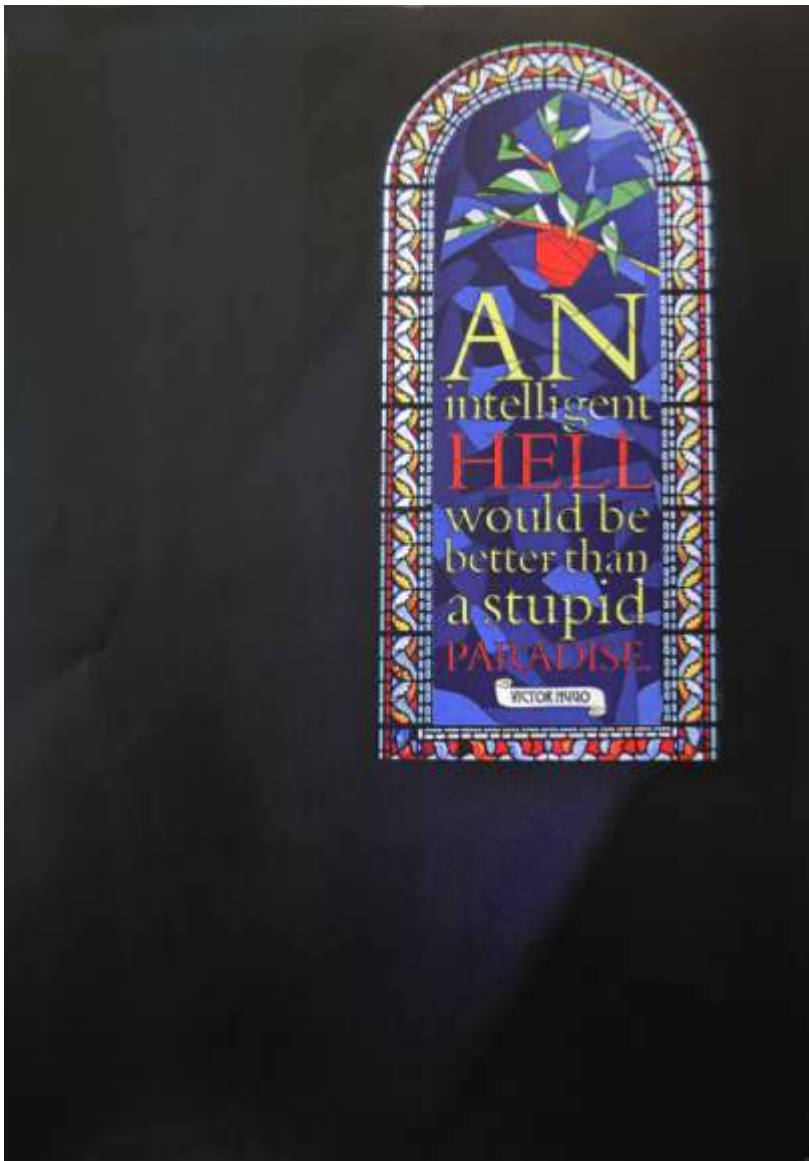


Figure 4. A student's interpretation of Victor Hugo's "An intelligent hell would be better than a stupid paradise."

For another student, the protagonist is in the form of a "stitched" quote onto a nude body to reflect Coco Chanel's statement, "Elegance is refusal." Human body as a canvas has become a launch pad for many ideas, triggering graphic designers such as US-based Stefan Sagmeister (1999) who carved letters onto his body for the 1999 American Institute Graphic Arts Detroit poster. The student's final composition is an acknowledgement of three things: Coco Chanel's roots in fashion and clothes-making, her belief that the female body is a canvas for art, and her desire to unabashedly flourish this canvas.

Visually, the student's poster features a stark human body to reinforce not only Chanel's refusal to embellish, but also her refusal to shroud the female shape as necessitated by societal convention of her era. Chanel's clean cut design does more than just refusing superficial embellishments and yet the purpose of Chanel's design is never unclear. Post 1945, cotton is a material commonly thought

of as reserved for lower classes but she challenged the old-school couturiers by using fabrics such as cotton and linen in her designs as her way of asserting that the body is most beautiful and elegant canvas. The body should be the focus because cotton's lightness allowed movement while its suppleness ensured conformity to the natural female silhouette (figure 5).

QUESTION 4: Identify the emotional tone in your expressive lettering and relate it to a plot in which you identify the conflict and climax in your expressive lettering. To understand "conflict," identify "problem" area(s) in your composition that creates tension in your composition. As for "climax," link the identified problem area(s) towards a strong focal point in composition that either enhances or distracts from your overall design.



Figure 5. A student's interpretation of Coco Chanel's "Elegance is refusal."

The first conflict is at the image itself due to the nude back with a prominently half exposed buttock at the bottom of the poster. This immediately calls attention and in the student's words: the images "does a terrific job of disconcerting our still conservative society." While demanding our

attention, it conversely obliges the viewers not to stare at it for too long for the fear of us being perceived as perverse. And yet, the reader has to pause for a moment in order to read the little box of text in the lower right corner. On its own, Coco Chanel's statement of 'Elegance is refusal' is abstract. What is the refusal about? Coco Chanel is obsessed with the beauty of the female figure as many of her signature creations reflect a desire to accentuate the body through the usage of light fabrics and clean, unembellished lines. The refusal to embellish provides the basis for arguing that the visual representation of the quote should reflect simplicity.

The expressiveness of typography is also dependent on proportion as the disproportionately small font and its asymmetrical placement forces the viewer to assess the image not as a picture but as a visual construction of meaning. Admittedly, it is a delicate balance and an understated point of conflict. If the text is too small, it may be missed and if it is too large, it may overshadow the picture and the intention of the message. In visually transmitting the meaning of the quote, the lack of image enhancement is an intentional choice as blemishes in the skin are left uncorrected because the student interprets that Coco Chanel believed that elegance was for everyone, not just for perfect women. As the viewer pauses to read the text, the viewer is distracted by the imperfections of the skin. Because the composition leaves very little space, there is nothing else to divert the reader's attention but to the text that is seemingly stitched to the skin.

To the student, the message expressed in figure 5 functions on two distinctive levels. First, the text cannot stand on its own because the composition relegates it to a lower right corner which renders it low in priority. Secondly, as the viewer is forced to stare at the image and to take notice of a naked body, a link between elegance and the timelessness of the human body is established. It is the visual construct that imparts meaning, not a pure interpretation of text. To represent meaning wholly, the text must not be read which may seem counter-productive. This is in line with simplifying the placement of the text to a level of obscurity. However, should the text be allowed to mystify the image as a whole, then it functions not as expressive lettering but merely as text on a pointlessly provocative background.

Another student agrees because for her composition, the climax is predicated on Gestalt's Law which states that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. The meaning of her quote can only be brought out when one is able to look at the composition as a whole. Visually, nothing stands between the text and the body, and likewise nothing stands between body and viewer, reinforcing not only Chanel's refusal to embellish, but also her refusal to shroud the female shape as necessitated by societal convention, hence fully representing the meaning of her quote.

QUESTION 5: In your opinion, how is meaning constructed in typography through the manipulation of design elements (such as color, line, texture, shape, form, etc)?

The success of one's design in managing to convey the meaning clearly is dependent on the audience's understanding of the word. Interpreting the meaning from text into a visual first and foremost requires extrapolating the essence of the meaning and this comes from understanding the essence/the core of the quotation. "Meaning is the signified" wrote one student because for her, every signified element should have tangible qualities that we can associate with. For the color red, we usually associate it with warmth due to our familiarities with natural elements like fire. Another example is the word "rage" which in of itself is an emotion and intangible but palpable, unlike a word like "bicycle" which refers to a tangible object.

According to White (2005), in order to challenge, provoke and entertain the reader, the way to express typography is to "predigest the copy, understand the message, and show off its meaning and its importance to the reader" (p. 21). As for the students who create the visuals, once the meaning of the quotation has been determined, visualizing of the meaning is conveyed through the use of design elements such as color, line, texture, shape and form. By applying and arranging each element in ways that compliment and contrast with the others, an overall visual effect is achieved. While one student writes that the typographic expression hinges on the principles of Gestalt theory, other principles such as symmetry, proximity, similarity, closure, figure-ground segregation and continuation must be observed. In other words, each element cannot be viewed in isolation, but its purpose and effectiveness is determined by whether it adds to the meaning and clarity of the intended message or the 'bigger picture'.

Another student believes that lines not only have the ability to add dynamism to her design, lines are boundaries which divides the foreground and the background. A line which is strategically placed at an angle in the middle of a composition creates dynamic tension, which examines length, width, depth and volume rather than a flat two-dimensional perspective, which only examines length and width. This adds to the effect of the theme in her composition about deception (refer to figure 3). Lines encourage and direct eye movement as there is 'action' in the design and the eyes are attracted to the dominant focal point of the composition. The use of zigzag lines in the background wall to represent shattered glass creates a vigorous force which adds to the overall texture of the composition. It is necessary as her composition calls for one that portrays a rigid and harsh tone rather than one that is associated with lightness and fluidity (refer to figure 3).

Another factor is contrast. High contrast usually enhances the clarity of the design, but low contrast, albeit less obvious, can also be effective if it suits the context. An example of low contrast would be ambiguous figure-ground segregation, creating an optical illusion, also known as visual trickery. This causes the viewer to perceive the same image in different ways, which could have an ironic effect. Contrast can be achieved using opposing bright and dark colors dark or rough versus smooth textures, but are not limited to these elements. Despite being fairly two-dimensional in nature due to the requirement of the eventual print to appear as an A2 poster, the students discovered that typography can be brought to life with the use of skin texture. Under different

lighting conditions, depth can be created in the presence of variations in color, reflections, and gradients within the constraints of a perspective. Focal points, which can also be created through high contrast or even with the use of lines to draw the eye, create emphasis on the important parts that need to be highlighted. This frames the audience's perception of the image, and thus of their interpretation of its meaning.

Discussions

Is expressing a message visually equivalent to a verbal expression? This section discusses the different issues faced by the students as well as some recommendations that can be used to further improve the pedagogical structure of the course.

Pedagogical learning

Type is a "visual presentation of verbal language" with an emphasis on functional concerns such as clarity and legibility (McCoy, 1990, p.5). White (2005) purports that legibility, defined as a type's capacity to be read under normal reading conditions in which the eyes discern more than the mind can absorb. Conversely, illegibility is a situation that takes place when the mind absorbs "faster than the eyes can discern" (Ibid, p. 131). Although images and type are inherently different languages, through this assignment, communication studies students are given an opportunity to explore fusing pictography and typography to communicate a message. They achieve this by transforming the type into a shape that carries visually-encoded messages. These shapes are altered and distorted, making them resemble both type as well as image.

The arrangement of the elements of design also forms the balance of the typography. A student acknowledges: "Depending on the context, balance can play an important role in getting the meaning across." Balance can affect the way meaning is interpreted as it also contributes to the creation of mood and atmosphere. For example, a symmetrically balanced typography can create a sense of harmony or stability, while an asymmetrically and unbalanced type can convey a sense of unruliness or instability. Another student agrees, writing the following: "Different fonts can create a different kind of 'mood' and 'atmosphere' and further added that fonts that are matched with imagery need to be compatible with each other or else the fonts will look very out of place.

If a story is an intuitive structure of information with a progression of event sequences which are selectively "packaged" within a finite time interval, as argued by Satish et al, then the combination of verbal literacy and visual literacy must be aided with supportive and relevant tools such as computer software and drawing techniques. Verbal literacy is analogous to visual literacy because a visually literate person understands and applies the basic components of the written language such as letters, words, spelling, grammar and syntax while a visual literate possesses the abilities to translate and interpret different elements of design which include dot, line, shape, texture, tone,

space and so forth to produce a whole message. In writing or composing visually, students applied their knowledge and comprehension to create through concrete materials.

The formal structures and expressive qualities of visual language from both education and applied arts are supported in the three teaching areas: Comprehension, Interpretation and Execution. In comprehending what needs to be communicated, the students interpret the message via the combination of text and images and finally, they delivered the message based on representational and symbolic ideas, realized through applications of the principles of design such as similarity, proximity and continuity. These principles are derivative from the cognitive psychology of the Gestalt theory which states that the meaning of the whole visual image is dependent on the relationship among its parts that come from the different elements placed within a composition. These verbal-visual elements are perceived to have some communal relationships when they are visually similar or when they are placed within close proximity. When these elements are dissimilar or seen as contrasting each other, a sense of contrast is created. From the brainstorming sessions, I observed that when students learn to read and interpret visuals, they learn to understand their own pattern of compositional arrangements.

How they comprehend the meaning of the whole composition is dependent on their own experience in design and their willingness to experiment. I noticed that students tend to place their verbal-visual element in the middle during their initial explorations which rendered these compositions balanced, static and “safe” as they are symmetrical in appearance. Van Leeuwen (1996), one of the authors of “Reading Images: The Grammar of Visual Design” who had the experiences of teaching in Singapore hypothesizes that the tendency to centralize their composition could be based on the fact that Singapore students have long been accustomed to a predictable pattern of subjugating one’s preference in favor of others in Confucius-influenced state like Singapore. While it is a conjectural observation, in essence, visual composition is similar to other forms of creative endeavor such as writing and music in which we seek harmony which indicates the grouping of related components so that they make sense together. This approach creates an overall appearance of continuity.

Technical skills

Creating expressive typography is an activity that demands a sense of aesthetics, a good dosage of creativity and applicable technical skills as well as patience. One reason for their shortcomings were evident in the inability to realize their ideas holistically as expressed by one student “Many times I was stuck looking at the same sketches and images without knowing how to develop them further.” With computer software, the students are able to render their stories in an easily understood form because they are able to control both the design and the production of their work. Software knowledge is seemingly an obstacle for a student who writes: “Sometimes I do think that I might have a good idea, but thinking about how I am going to execute it in Photoshop just makes it not feasible.”

Another writes: “Many times I find myself wondering how to use the more advanced features, and to create stunning artwork, and no amount of online tutorial videos can replace actual use and practice, especially under instruction.” A student wrote that after using Adobe Illustrator, he discovered even more ways to design since some of the tools such as “Create Outlines” made it possible for him to explore and he will continue to use the feature in the future. Underlying the form is the content which is the meaning of a quote. Because of this, the form itself does not fully reflect the meaning but an interplay of many interdependent elements that work together to deliver the message in a visual manner.

Despite their reliance on computer software and knowledge to execute their ideas, it is welcoming to discover that other aspects of assignment have helped some students learn, as reflected by this student: “To me, the most interesting activity was the one where we were given a font set and told to experiment with it. Initially when I looked at it, I was at a loss as I really had no idea how to go about doing the exercise. I am not sure if it was because I was too rigid in my thinking or it was another reason but a font set seemed like something not to be changed if not then it would not be the same font anymore. However, once I saw an example of how to go about doing it I sort of got the idea. The strange thing was that after doing one, there was a sudden influx of ideas in my head and soon I had too many.”

A manifestation of the spoken language, the written text itself is a visual form. Expressive typography is preoccupied with the manifestation of verbal texts as a visual register and the students are challenged to balance between being verbal and visual literacy. The students’ abilities to read, write, or compose visual language is predicated on the requirement that to become a wholly literate communicator, students need a basic course with a set of teaching objectives with components of applied skills. In this way, the course becomes relevant to the creation of tangible messages with skills necessary in contributing towards establishing a conceptual base for the discipline (Schamber, 1991).

Interpreting meaning

By individually or in combinations of symbols, letters and photographic images, visual messages can be interpreted as formal, aesthetical, psychological or pragmatic. The linguistic structure of grammar in language describes how words are combined in clauses and sentences. Visually, elements of form (dot, line, plane and volume), characteristics of form (size, shape, texture and color), and interactions of form are affected by positional, directional and spatial interactions (Bowers, 1999). In addition to an understanding of grammar, a model of how language is produced and how concepts are expressed visually for an artistically pleasing creation demand that students have not merely the knowledge about the structures of compositional juxtapositioning of elements but also the nuances of design. Lawson (2006) used the term “formal constraints” to describe the visual organizations of an object with rules about proportion, form, color as well as texture (p.

104). He argues that a good design needs order and structure because lacking them may render the design difficult to understand. These rules may be based on a modular system or grids and while they can be as elaborate in what Lawson (2006) describes as “visual gymnastics”, it can also be as simple as Mies van der Rohe’s ‘less is more’ (p.104).

American philosopher Charles Peirce’s semiotics model is concerned with the relationships between the components of the sign that enables us to turn signals in whichever form into a message we can understand. He argues that for how meaning to be formed, there are three main areas to consider: the sign themselves, the way the signs are organized into systems and the context in which they appear (as cited in Crow, 2003 p. 16). Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) agree that meanings belong to culture rather than to specific semiotic modes because images can cause a “socially determined attitudes” between what is being represented and what its viewers see (p. 129). In addition to the subjective attitudes, these viewpoints are individualistic, unique as well as a “quasi-mechanical way of ‘recording’ images (p. 129) This is because through the choice of words and clause structures, communicating visually draws from an inventory of elements and rules that underlie the basis of expressing something visually. Because of this dichotomy, meaning is affected.

Experimenting with expressive typography is about understanding how text becomes pictorial in appearance. As one student recalls: “One of the most inspirational ‘paintings’ I’ve come across is at the Museum of Modern Art in New York - a blank canvas painted across with the words ‘This is not a painting’.” He was forced to decide if he should read it or look at it like a painting with words. To him, this is the essence of expressive typography, where text and design work together to produce and convey a singular meaning. Underlying each chosen quote is a complex web of the originator’s goals, intentions, reader expectations and cultural knowledge. Adding to the mix is the student’s interpretation of the meaning of the quotation. A student remarks that while cognitive conditioning has taught us to separate images from text where we tend to differentiate between seeing and reading, the act of creating expressive typography deliberately blurs the lines of distinction between seeing and reading.

Anyone attempting to create some type of typographic work will have to make decisions about the aspect of letter design. According to McCoy (1999), the close-knit text-image connection means that typography is to be seen as well as read and images are to be read and interpreted. However, she added that because “meaning is inherently unstable and that objectivity is an impossibility, the audience must make individual interpretations ... that ‘decenter’ the message (p. 16). In other words, the students take on a participatory role as they bring their own inherently subjective views in decoding the message within the visual creation. Because expressing typographically is predicated on the reader’s own experience, this does not prevent them as creators of the message to assert their own agenda. However, the need for self-expression must be balanced with the responsibility to consider alternative points of view and the needs and concerns of others.

Realizing these, the students should bear in mind the impression that the finished artwork would make on their audience, as well as paying attention to the details of each design element to strike a balance between clarity and aesthetic quality. A student writes that texture plays a big part in her artwork. Texture has two forms: tactile texture is the way the surface of an object feels when we run our fingers through it but an implied texture is what the surface looks or is suggested much like the tonal arrangements of a printed picture. In creating a tactile texture, a student whose message is about confrontation, physically popped circles on a blank in order to appeal to the sense of touch (refer to figure 2). For a final lamination on the poster, a student chooses matt as opposed to glossy surface so that the overall poster looks more down-to-earth and less perfect. If 'Matt' and 'Glossy' were girls, she writes, "Matt would be the girl-next-door or plain Jane while Glossy would be the elegant and sexy pretty girl."

Conclusions

We learn a lot about ourselves by taking a closer look at what story captivates us. In thinking, interpreting and giving form to a message that encompasses its meaning as well as underlying ones, execution of the final result is easier said than done. However, assessments of this assignment favorably suggest that students find that the approach enhanced their resourcefulness and challenged their abilities to critically analyze and visualize their ideas. The interaction between students and the experimentations with production methods enriched their learning experiences. In these respects, the conditions most likely to generate ideas are when students are given the freedom to explore.

The difficulties of production, the different internal interference of brainstorming sessions and peer-reviewing and external influences such as the reliance on printers, and the less glamorous aspect of production side of design (such as specifications and deadlines) and computer software know-how are just some of the many issues faced by the students. While the students are able to ideate, computer skills have been the Achilles heel of some of the students who need more guidance to bridge the gap between their conceptualization and execution despite online tutorials. However, other aspects of personnel building and the practical issues of problem-solving also surfaced outside of classroom contact hours which need to be resolved mostly by the students own initiatives.

The usefulness of fusing different components of storytelling and the expressiveness of visual manifestations of a message has lead to many mixed reviews between the students. For some the assignment has increased the confidence and drawing skills of non graphic communication students. The alphabets are a sign system that represents speech which will continually evolve as human beings live in social, cultural, philosophical and technological contexts. As these students create, they develop their own "voice" which is a combination of skills, desire, experience, mistakes, as well as challenges. This has been achieved through the use of a particular visual component through

analytical, interpretative and applicable methodologies in relation to the context, purpose and audience. The meaning is best conveyed through typography when design elements are used carefully and purposefully, and not gratuitously or for mere aesthetic reasons. The positive results offered by juxtaposing aspects of storytelling into expressive typography allowed them to rethink their social, cultural and educational roles as the activity allowed both the students and the lecturer to reinvent the concept of communicating text visually and vice versa.

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