How does visual communication work?

What is this workshop about?

Welcome to this workshop. In this session we will look at the practices of visual communication design as a distinct discipline from other forms of visual arts. We will discuss the purposes, approaches and role of visual communication in our everyday life, and the common misconceptions. It explores the different levels on which a piece of visual communication could be viewed and read, through analyzing of sender and receiver processes. We will examine the design process, looking at how a designer typically approaches a design problem and how he/she thinks. These issues will be discussed through the perspective of a design educator, based on a student-centered approach to studio learning. The discussions will be supported by examples of design briefs, student projects, teaching approaches and assessment methods.

[NOTE: I'm sorry, but there's simply no time to add illustrations to this document, despite the fact that I'm talking about *visual* communication. Please refer to my slides during my presentation. — KT]

1 What is visual communication?

Visual communication is all around us. It is a survival skill that we tend to take for granted. We do not have to visit an art gallery, read an art/design book to experience visual communication. We use visual communication to navigate and understand the world. Packaging, signs, logos, bills, receipts, leaflets, books, mobile phones, appliances, advertisements…, to name but a few, are all examples of visual communication. A watch or clock is a classic example of visual communication that we have grown used to depend on every day. Wether consciously 'designed' or not, they play an important part of shaping our very existence. Indeed, 'noticing' or being aware of design is not an essential criteria for a piece of visual communication to fulfil its function.

Is design different from art?
'Visual communication' is a very loosely defined term. The term 'visual communication' does not necessarily preclude the realm of fine or visual arts. However, in the context of this presentation and the way we teach visual communication at the PolyU School of Design, we put visual communication under the realm of design rather than 'art'. That is, we are interested in visual communication that has a purpose or objective, created with the intention of reaching to a predefined 'audience' or 'user'.

The form is perhaps not the only (nor the most important) tell-tale sign of whether something is art or design. It has to do with its purpose and the context of use. One might say that 'art' in the traditional sense is more expressive, with less concern about the audience and more focus upon the 'self', while design has more to do with 'targeted' communication, with more efforts spent in finding out about the audience or user. But even this is only a generalization; some designers tend to take a more expressive approach to design. But again 'functional', 'purposeful' and 'targeted' are perhaps the key terms that distinguish 'art' from 'design'.

Visual communication? Graphic design?

Visual communication used to be called 'graphic design' until quite recently. The term 'graphic design' was coined by the American designer William Addison Dwiggins, with the intention to raise its status from 'commercial art'. With the emergence of new media beyond printed matters, terms like 'communication design' or 'visual communication' became popular in order to reflect the increasing complexity of the field, and rightly puts the focus in the core of the business—communication.

What does a visual communication designer do?

One might think the most important trait of a visual communication designer (or any other kind of designer for that matter) is creativity. They are usually the eccentric type who has an 'artist disposition'. In fact, creativity only constitute a part of what a designer does. Designers do not necessarily have to 'draw', though they often draw as a way to explore ideas and/or to communicate them. A visual communication designer utilizes both the left and the right side of the brain. He/she not only has to be able to 'think outside the box' so to speak, but to also work methodically and systematically and to communicate clearly. Research, often on the intended audience or market, also forms a large part of a designer's work. I can't put it in a better way than Paul Rand, the master American design who designed the famed IBM logo, amongst others:

> 'To design is much more than simply to assemble, to order, or even to edit; it is to add value and meaning, to illuminate, to simplify, to clarify, to modify, to dignify, to dramatize, to persuade, and perhaps even to amuse. To design is to transform prose into poetry. Design broadens perception, magnifies experience, and enhances vision. Design is the product of feeling and awareness, of ideas that originate in the mind of the designer and culminate, one hopes, in the mind of the spectator.'   Paul Rand, *Design form and chaos*, 1993

Approaches to visual communication

There are many types of visual communication designers. Some take a more analytical approach, some more conceptual, some expressive. Below are some examples of the various disciplines within the larger field of visual communication design.

Brand identity design

In brand identity design, the visual communication designer's role is to understand the lifestyle and behaviour of the target market, its competitors and develop a visual identity system that communicates the values of the brand. Its ultimate goal is to attract sales and increase the profitability of the business. A brand experience is more than a logo.

Information design

This is an emerging field (particularly in Asia) that focuses on how users interact with information, such as wayfinding systems (signage), transportation schedules, bills, web interfaces, guidebooks, etc. Usability is the top priority here. Clarity and precision are the criteria for good information design. The ultimate aim is to promote understanding and reduce stress and frustration.

Advertising and promotion design

Advertising is a booming business in Hong Kong. It involves the development of communication strategies that best target a predefined market. Similar to branding, market research is important. It is often important for advertisements and promotion designs to attract attentions of passers-by. The 'big idea' is important in advertising design and it often appeals to the audience's emotions, causing them to make a purchase or to change their perception/behaviour.

Illustration

Some designers work exclusively in the illustration discipline. They communicate ideas through drawing, using traditional and/or digital media. They may work for book or magazine publishers, or they work independently, or self-publish their own books.

Motion designers/animators

Working with moving images, motion designers or animators also make use of the power of visual communication, often to tell a story and to appeal to the audience's emotions, through video, motion graphics, animations and sound. Motion designers might work for a television station, creating on-screen graphic for the programmes. In the United States there are design firms who specialize in opening credits for movies.

Publication design

Books are the most traditional form of visual communication which has been around for a long time. Book designers work with authors, editors, illustrators, photographers on the design of the entire book, from the cover to the typographic system/layout of all the interior pages. The aim is to provide the optimal reading experience for the reader, both physically (size of book, typesetting, use of material, weight, etc.) and visually. A magazine art director or designer works in a similar way.

Disciplined freedom

I borrowed the phrase 'disciplined freedom' from a poster on calligraphy that I have had for a number of years and is now hanging on my office wall. It has become my guiding principle as a designer. For me, the essence of being a designer is 'disciplined freedom'— that you have to first and foremost be disciplined about the 'rules of the game' (ie communication), the constraints and limitations, as well as the 'craft' of it, before you could attain a sense of freedom. Learn the rules before you break them, and when you do break them, break them with grace and dignity.

2 How do we go about designing?

Design is both a verb and a noun (Paul Rand). Design is much more than what meets the eye. Design could be considered a form of 'creative problem solving'. A good designer would utilize both the left and the right sides of the brain. A designer has to be both playful and serious at appropriate moments—being able to see possibilities without jumping to conclusions too quickly, as well as to be critical and objective when it comes time to make some serious decisions.

Design is both a verb and a noun. It is the beginning as well as the end, the process and product of imagination. Like a huge onion with multiple layers, the more it is peeled, the more it reveals. Content is the raw material of design. Form, in turn, is the reorganization and manipulation of content.
Paul Rand, *Design form and chaos*, 1993

Design is not a linear process

Designing is not a linear process; one does not move straight from point A to point B. Designers in fact take detours: they begin with a design problem, gather facts (research) and then try to come up with as many possible solutions to this problem as they can. This is called 'divergent thinking'. Many methods could be used, for example mindmapping, sketching, photography, collage, etc. At this stage the designer should not be too critical about what they produce. They should simply play. Once a lot of ideas are generated, the designer would then have to chose the most appropriate, effective, or innovative solution to the problem, based on what the design brief asked

for. At this stage the designer has to be his or her harshest critic. At this point the designer may ask the potential audience group to gather some feedback on the design.

It is important to note that these are not 'steps' but perhaps a cycle of activities that could be carried out throughout the design process.

The importance of research
Research is essential in the process of designing. The designer must find out as much as possible about the audience or users. Successful design is not based on the assumptions of the designer. The following are some examples of research activities:

- Ethnography—observing user behaviour and documenting it using camera/video camera and taking notes and conducting critical analysis
- Surveys and interviews
- Competitive analysis—understanding the competitors of the client
- Secondary research—reviewing statistics related to the users/market, studying historical precedents, empirical research concerning usability

3 How do we read 'visuals'?

There is are essential differences between 'expression' and 'communication'. Expression appeals to our emotions, engaging the audience in a deeper level, but it tends to be more ambiguous and often less precise. The word 'communication' came from the Latin word *communicatio* meaning 'to share'. There has to be a mutual agreement between the sender and the receiver of a message in order for communication to function.

Visual communication is therefore similar to how verbal or written language works. We use 'visual language' to communicate to an audience. However, visual language might not be as reliable or consistent as written language, which has a more formalized set of conventions and rules.

When we talk about visual communication, we speak of a unification of content (the message) and the form (how it looks). We as designers are 'senders' of the message. Through a medium, we deliver the message to the receiver. This is not necessarily a one-way process; the receivers could provide feedback to the sender and in turn the process is reversed. There are many ways in which the meaning of the message is impaired during the process of delivery. This is called 'noise'. Such situations happen when the receiver is unable to decipher the visual language and hence not able to gain the correct (intended) meaning of the message.

Ambiguity
Ambiguity means that a visual has multiple meanings. This is sometimes the intention of a designer, but very often it is not. Clear communication attempts to avoid ambiguity as much as possible, but never completely.

Viewing/reading; images/text
When we talk about visual communication, we also talk about the use of text. Typography (designing with text) gives visual form to written language. Typography is therefore an extremely complex set of signs. Text communicates more precisely and accurately than visual imagery, especially abstract ideas. Using a combination of images and text is therefore a powerful way to communicate. An audience combines the acts of viewing and reading when they are faced with a piece of visual communication.

Appropriateness

The appropriateness of a piece of visual communication refers to the fitness of a visual form for its intended purpose. An inappropriate use of visual language might get unexpected reactions from the audience or user.

Conventions

Conventions are accepted 'unwritten rules' for understanding things that are learned. Visual communication relies on conventions in order to function. Some examples of visual communication are more governed by conventions, for example road signs. Others are less reliant on conventions, for example a painting. In order for a piece of visual communication to function as such, the use of conventions is unavoidable. Humans can only understand something through connecting with something that they have previously learnt.

Semiotics

The term 'semiotics' refers to the study of signs, first used by Americam philosopher Charles Morries in the 1930s. Morris believed that by analyzing visual and verbal signs, communication could be improved. There are three aspects of semiotic theory namely syntactic, semantic and pragmatic. All three aspects work together. The relationship between the signified (eg the animal 'dog') and signifier (eg the word d-o-g and/or an image/icon of a dog) is arbitrary and is learnt. A signified could be read on the denotative and connotative levels. For example, the meaning of a sign such as the image of an apple is beyond the object 'apple' that it represents (denotation). Connotatively it could mean the fruit from the Tree of Knowledge in the biblical story in Genesis, which in turn can symbolize temptation or sin. It could also convey 'health' (as in the saying, 'an apple a day keeps the doctor away').

Perception

Sensation is a lower-level function of our brain, referring to reponses to simple properties of stimuli such as warmth, colour, taste, etc. Perception, on the other hand, is a high-order function that deals with more complex characteristics. We use prior knowledge and experience to interpret, understand and create meaning from what we see, hear, etc. We have an innate ability to establish order according to certain laws of perception, such as Gestalt psychology. We constantly construct relationships and groupings between things in an organized way.

For theories of visual communication please read John Bower's *Introduction to two-dimensional design*.

4 How do we teach design?

Design is best taught in a studio setting, and the teacher's role should be a facilitator for learning rather than an 'authority figure'. As the Chinese saying goes, 'those who teach and those who teach grow together'. Do not assume too much responsibility on your students' learning (this is not to say that you could be lazy!). Encourage student to discover by themselves. It is unhealthy to keep banning students' seemingly immature ideas. Instead, encourage them to try it out anyway, or to redirect their attention by asking a series of questions. A good learning environment is one that focusses on positive encouragements. A teacher's persistently negative comments greatly deter students from learning. Good design can only be achieved when the students are not afraid of failing and are engaged in the process of designing because it is fun.

The primary motivation for learning should not be good grades but in internal desire to create designs (one might call this 'passion'). The process should be enjoyable. I think that is true for all kinds of learning but especially for design or art.

An interactive classroom

It is essential to engage students in classroom activities as much as possible. Encourage them to ask questions, and engage in discussions. A very simple exercise is to show them images and ask them to read them on different levels (or some up with as many adjectives as possible that describe their response to the images). Frequently encourage them to express their opinions and insights. Remember that their opinions are as important as yours. If they would like to speak up, let them do it first.

In my opinion, learning in design cannot happen when the subjectivity of the teacher gets in the way. This is easier said than done, because we all have our personal biases, especially when it comes to aesthetics/taste. It is in both the learner's and the teacher's interest to shift the focus of discussions *away from the self* to the *context* and the *communication effectiveness* of the project. When you want to voice your own aesthetic preferences or taste, make sure to declare it as such so that students are not confused.

It's the process, not the product

Is good design judged by the end product? Yes, definitely. But a good end product is not always a good indicator for good learning. It is more fruitful to make sure students go through a good process of designing. It is essential that for each project students are asked to submit a process (sketch) book. Assessment should be based on the end product as well as the process. Self-motivation should be evident in the process book.

Write a good brief

Good results, and therefore effective learning, cannot be achieved without a good project brief. State the objectives of the project clearly, and who it is intended for. It is usually a good idea for a design project brief to set some perimeters or constraints, for example size, medium, etc. This is not to limit the students' creativity, but a chance for them to find out why the constraints are there in the first place. Don't penalize them for pushing the constraints if they have a good reason for it (except when they simply want to rebel!).

Critiques are key

Critiques are a very important teaching and learning tool in a studio setting. I find that it is more fruitful to conduct critiques in the middle of projects, or one week before the final project is due, so that students have a chance to take the feedback and improve on their designs. Critiques are most effective when the teacher prepares it in a structured way rather than giving random comments. Students should be leading the discussions instead of the teacher in a critique. The teacher might want to ask questions to help guide the discussions.

Below are some techniques that I have used in critiques:

Establish judging criteria first
It is extremely helpful (before the critique proper begins) to revisit the design brief and ask students to contribute to establishing a set of criteria for judging the work. Ask, 'what would make this a good piece of design?'.

Give them some time to 'preview' the work in detail
Give the students 20 minutes or so to closely study their peers' work. Some work require more time to appreciate than others (eg book designs). Posters might require less time. Get the students familiar with what their fellow students have been doing.

Presenting someone else's work as if your own

This is an interesting technique that students always find fun. Get each student to choose one of their peer's work, give them some time to examine it, and then ask them to present it to the whole class as if they did it themselves. After the presentation, the student who originally created the work would have to ask two critical questions about the work as a member of the audience. This reversal of roles invites students to view their own work with some distance and objectivity, and also to enable students to decipher someone else's work and verbally rationalize what they see. The effectiveness of communication is very easily revealed.

Assigning someone to lead the discussions

After an initial 'preview', each student could choose one piece of work that interests them and write down one word on a post-it note to describe one thing that does not work in the design. The student will then lead the discussions based on this word. This ensures that the subsequent discussions are purposeful and does not lose focus.

Silent critique

The teacher prepares self and peer evaluation forms with bipolar scales of qualities that describe the student work. Students will evaluate their own and two other peers' work using this form, and write comments on them. Students can then modify their designs based on these evaluations.

Three colours

This technique is interesting in that it encourage students to think of the priority of their peers when they designed the piece. Three slips of coloured paper are attached to each piece of work: blue, yellow and green. At the beginning of the critique, the class as a whole decide what those colours mean, for example blue means the work is 'functional', while yellow means that it is 'aesthetically pleasing'. The green (which is a combination of blue and yellow), then, should be a sum of the blue and yellow, ie the work both serves its function well and it is aesthetically pleasing. After carefully reviewing each piece of work, students put a mark on one of the colours.

Further reading: Teaching Perspectives Inventory

Visit the Teaching Perspectives Inventory website (by Dan Pratt at the University of British Columbia, Canada) and take the Teaching Perspectives test to get your own teaching profile: www.teachingperspectives.com. I find the five teaching perspectives extremely helpful in understanding my own way of teaching and for me to improve my teaching. The five perspectives are:

- *Transmission*—effective delivery of content. Effective teaching requires a substantial commitment to the content or subject matter.
- *Apprenticeship*—modeling ways of being. Socializing students into new behavioural norms and ways of working.
- *Developmental*—cultivating ways of thinking. Effective teaching must be planned and conducted 'from the learner's point of view'.
- *Nurturing*—facilitating self-efficacy. Effective teaching assumes that long-term, hard, persistent effort to achieve comes from the heart, not the head.
- *Social reform*— seeking a better society. Effective teaching seeks to change society in substantive ways.

You might be interested in reading his book:
Pratt, Daniel D et al. *Five perspectives on teaching in adult and higher education.*
Malabar, Florida: Krieger Publishing Company, 1998.

5 Further reading

Bowers, John. *Introduction to two-dimensional design: understanding form and function*.
New York: John Wiley and Sons 1999
[I highly recommend this book as an introductory text to visual communication.]

Baldwin, Jonathan and Roberts, Lucienne. *Visual communication: from theory to practice*.
Switzerland: AVA Publishing 2006

Mijksenaar, Paul. *Visual function: an introduction to information design*.
Rotterdam: 010 Publishers 1997

Pettersson, Rune. *Information design: an introduction*.
Amsterdam: John Benjamins 2002

Newark, Quentin. *What is graphic design?* Hove, UK: RotoVision 2002

Roberts, Lucienne. *Good: an introduction to ethics in graphic design*.
Switzerland: AVA Publishing 2006

White, Alex W. *The elements of graphic design: space, unity, page architecture and type*.
New York: All Worth Press 2002

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