BRANDED: WHY NO PROJECT IS SINGULAR
By Dave Underwood
From The Designer's Corner • University of Colorado Boulder, 2015

When I was in art school, many of our first-year assignments were mere exercises. We would hand ink a one-foot-tall, lower-case Helvetica "a," for instance, or render a common, household appliance in orthographic projection. The goal was for us to learn things such as type anatomy, stylized illustration, working with vanishing points and perspective grids, and a whole lot more. These were fun, yet practical assignments, and I saved virtually everything I did that first year.

What I didn't know then, and what became painfully apparent as I put together my first student portfolio, was that, even in my first year, I was already developing my own "personal brand." Some of the work I and my fellow students did that first semester was quite good, and, had I known better, might well have looked great years later to a potential employer. But I was thinking *assignment* rather than *body of work*, and, the pieces I produced typically reflected this.

I've since wished my instructors had mentioned that the effort invested in those seemingly unglamourous freshman exercises, might have, with a bit of extra care, been leveraged to help with a much bigger challenge; finding that first job. I know now that some employers would've been very interested in seeing my brushed-ink caricature of Ernest Hemingway... had I taken the time to get the hands right. Close, but no cigar.

Figure 1: Hand jive - the author's fatally-flawed spot illustration of Ernest Hemingway

Thinking about the long game
In art school I learned that no assignment should be considered singular. Even the most pedantic piece, if approached with the long game in mind, can prove valuable at some point down the road. And being mindful of the integrity of one's personal brand never hurts.

Whenever I have the pleasure of working with first-year students on, say, an in-class presentation, I mention this:

I know this is just another one of dozens of PowerPoints you'll be preparing during your time here as a student, but think of it as something much more: the starting place for developing your own unique style. And think about next semester in another class; if you already have a style you're happy with, or that requires just a bit of refining, you'll already be well ahead of the game. Then think about how great your work will look by your fourth year!

I also mention that cookie-cutter templates and themes, while convenient to work with, can be a guaranteed pass to mediocrity. You only have to break their spell once, and good things will surely follow.

I've been lucky enough during the course of my work at CU to meet with many students repeatedly as they've moved up from lower to upper-level classes. And I've noticed that many of them do, in fact, recycle, fine-tune, and style-stamp their work across a broad range of courses - *Great use of white space... I'd recognize your slides anywhere, Allison!*

This is gratifying to see, and, as an added benefit, I know that these students are spending their time on much better things than reinventing the wheel.

Beyond orthographic projection
Because these days, in so many fields, employers are looking for students to be effective communicators in a variety of media, the notion of personal branding makes more sense than ever. What is it about you and your work that is unique, and how can you show this? Clearly, thinking about ways to collect, showcase, and target one's work should happen sooner rather than later.

Otherwise it's all too easy to end up with a shoebox-full of Ernest Hemingways with badly-drawn hands.