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essay 1	the western graphic design curriculum musn't continue to resist diversity	2016	digital	hp
+	an american public art institution was to publish this essay around the winter of 2015/16. after a few months, i grew unhappy with our dialogue and chose to do it myself.			

i have worked in the field of graphic design for 15 years. i am heartened that there is a slowly increasing focus on the problem of under-representation, unequal benefit, and racism facing minorities in the creative industries as a whole. having to constantly regard my career, even as an 'established' designer, in relation to these hard and blunt issues is troubling.

by simply presenting itself as socially progressive, graphic design does not exempt itself from this brutish reality. i worry that the need to fairly level our field is expressed largely within private dialogue. every designer of color i've met and spoken to this past year – without exception – has expressed concern that the cultural and critical hierarchy governing the industry remains stubbornly¹ exclusive² and thereby inherently unjust. so, while it seems that a minority consensus that there is a problem exists, the momentum needed to change majority-driven policy is nowhere close.

four years ago, i began teaching night classes in introductory graphic design, advertising design and graphic design history. university extensions and similar schools are open to all, comparatively affordable, geared towards working people beginning or re-considering their careers, and include a sizable population of students studying abroad. in my take, they are one of the most important formative centers of popular design culture, and perfectly summate the trenches of its industry. i consider part of my academic duty within this particular system to nurture self-investigation and professional confidence, especially within those students who will inevitably face tremendous critical and financial adversity. having always been publicly schooled myself, i also feel some personal responsibility for the quality of these programs.

i believe that the existing graphic design academic environment erodes its students expressive potential and self-worth by refusing to engage outside the narrow critical confines of its existing canon. by hanging onto their academic xenophobia, the entry to rewarding working lives afforded by its institutions to students of color remains a pinhole. here, i'll share five study examples from my classroom whose effectiveness as "corrective" measures have been co-signed by my alumni. my hope is that they are simple enough to understand and assimilate into any existing design course, even if in principle, and stir a larger discussion about the failings of historically prescribed curricula.

1 – that all introductory design courses begin by surveying global (and not excluding western) traditions of visual expression.

(example, in lecture) hangul: why and how was the language engineered? comparing and contrasting the social needs reflected by written languages. for instance, aniconistic islamic calligraphy and roman square capitals.

(example, in dialogue) asking students to discuss their first classes in handwriting and penmanship, and how those standards affected their personal and professional attitude. or, asking students to share examples of regional slang and oral tradition that express complex values.

(example, in practice) documenting contemporary vernacular signage from their cities of origin – such as los angeles gang graffiti – and determining its audience and purpose.

2 – promoting a literacy and skepticism of the critical measures that dictate 20th century canon³.

(example, in lecture) a look at martha scotford's "is there a canon of graphic design history?"⁴. it posits a distinct analytic approach as to how the field writes its own history that i think encourages students to examine the qualitative standards of design work and draw conclusions themselves.

(example, in dialogue) how do the applications students use to socialize within and outside their respective culture determine how they communicate? how do they get around the limits inherent to those mediums to freely express their values? for example, describing the continual subversion of a particular emoticon's meaning.

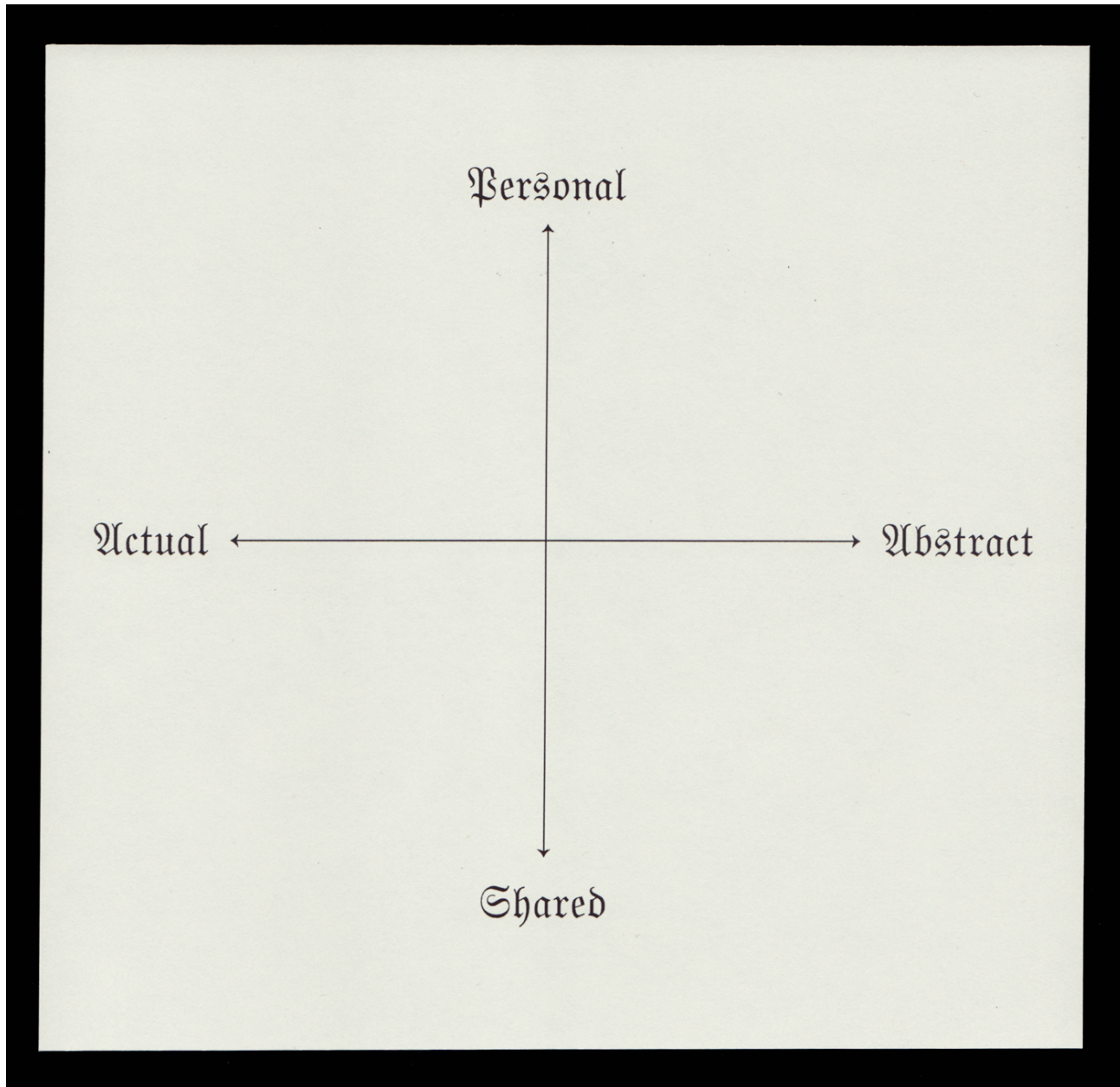
(example, in practice) students collect images depicting the cultures they feel they belong to, using a popular search engine. these engines determine their result hierarchy by aggregating its users affirmations of image associations (i.e. what is clicked most frequently). students see

firsthand how such attitude-dependent algorithms profoundly affect our self-perception and engagement with one another.

3 – instilling a critical framework of examination and creation that simultaneously considers personal and shared contexts.

(example, in lecture) looking at how youth subcultures around the world expertly use fashion to bend shared meaning on its ear. in america, it could be the fit of jeans that signals a specific sexual attitude.

(example, in dialogue) this is a critical graph i devised some years ago to formally and conceptually describe any visual image. we refer to this "association map" throughout group critiques to analyze work and describe the relationship between creative autonomy and civic participation.



(example, in practice) color association. students eyedrop colors from paintings by californian fine artists. then, they derive additional swatches based on a mixative formula i provide. finally, they list five separate associations with the resultant colors in writing. for instance, i associate certain shades of orange with ceremonial marigold garlands i'd see as a child in india, or certain greens with the mosquito coils we'd burn in our kenyan home.

4 – encouraging that students first practice commissioned work within their own communities.

(example, in lecture) fan-made design from niche cultures: fliers, bootleg album artwork, and online micro-communities.

(example, in dialogue) transparent, anecdotal sharing of industry experience, down to numbers. the financial and social reality of working with

friends: what jobs require written contracts, and which rely on trust? if cash is considered tangible capital, then what is the value of a skill exchange, and how is that measured? how do collaborators who invest their time and labor in each others work clearly state their individual long-term expectations? what are the pros and cons of working with family?

(example, in practice) instead of creating student work around imaginary commissions, students are asked to seek out a need for design in their social circle and consider it a space for serious practice. for instance, re-designing the menu of a friend's new restaurant venture in exchange for dining benefits, starting a longer-term business collaboration. creating a portfolio around the resultant work illustrates an involved citizen, and not a commercial tool.

5 — that students share their work real-time, and do not divorce their personal values from their professional conduct.

(example, in lecture) i walk my students through to-the-minute examples of working designers online presences that i think range from carefully opaque to totally forthright.

(example, in dialogue) students are asked to discuss how their social media presences could jeopardize or unfairly advantage their professional standing.

(example, in practice) i encourage all students to regard all stages of creation equally, and to share work-in-progress with their entire social spectrum. by refusing to regard professionalized, cooled-off documentation as the neat sum of their creative process, they learn to regard their mistakes as a healthy part of work. this, i am sure, promotes real growth.

finally, there must be a more populist discussion as to how to differently credential and elect graphic design educators, who still mostly fit a singular cultural profile. we've used the same, tired standard of scholarly qualification in graphic design for 30+ years: a private school mfa (that is likely debt-laden, and certainly discounts most working people of color), or a studio practice that has somehow validated itself by generating readily measurable revenue. what i find most horrible of all is that young designers entering the workforce might reasonably question their critical acceptance as tokenistic, or that they stand a better chance at professional success by affirming a pre-held majority conception. or that we must wait decades for a natural change of the guard. things are moving too slowly, and an over-saturated field prone to cloying and confused output cannot — intellectually or spiritually — wait any longer to self-reflect.

to younger students belonging to minorities: it's entirely possible to be both warm and direct about the fact that we are marginalized intellectual presences. i encourage you to be vocal about your experiences with under-representation and mis-representation, and to offer up your own solutions publicly. good educators will be especially keen to hear how they could re-shape the academy to remain vital. i am indebted to tuan phan, who taught me in college, and thank him for challenging me to consider these topics so early in my life.

1. <http://designobserver.com/article.php?id=38542>
2. <http://www.aiga.org/medalists/>
3. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Eus2GCvBiKY>
4. "Is There a Canon of Graphic Design History?"