WHY DESIGNERS CAN'T THINK

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Michael Bierut's second essay in his Seventy-Nine Short Essays on Design responds to his chapter title question: Why Designers Can't Think. Bierut first praises the wide variety of subject matter that graphic designers can take on as projects and the plethora of specialties that potential clients may bring to the table. While a wide variety of projects is definitely a benefit of being in the design profession, my personal experiences have differed.

My first co-op was at the Boston Beer Company, which includes brands like Samuel Adams and Angry Orchard. If you had asked me five years ago who I might work for in the future, I never would have guessed that I would design collateral for a beer company — and how much I would love it. Bierut's point, however, is not only that you can work in a field that you enjoy, but also that you can achieve breadth rather than be stuck in one discipline. I have not had the chance to work at a design studio with a large number of clients, but it seems this is the situation in which a designer could attain the most variety.

Personally, I am not convinced that a design studio is the end-all be-all best choice. I have enjoyed working in-house for two companies and have found that designers can arrive upon the most creative solutions when forced to stay 'in a box.' For example, if you were to create ten brochures for one brand, you would have to explore ways to push the boundaries of the brand and use the existing assets in a creative way. On the other hand, if you were to create ten brochures for ten different brands, you would certainly attain a large spread of visual ideas, but you would miss out on exploring the depths to which you could take the brand. There is, in my view, a higher level of creativity that comes from working within constraints.

When Bierut began comparing the two American schools of design training, I immediately identified Northeastern's Graphic Design I class as the epitome of a process school, or 'Swiss' school. The graphic translations, the unifications of the object with a letterform, Univers... It was a valuable class, but even more valuable to know that it could 'trace

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[its] lineage back to the advanced program of the Kunstgewerbeschule in Basel, Switzerland." However, there were also elements in my Northeastern design education of being a portfolio school, or 'slick' school. Graphic Design II was all about mocking up real world examples of a campaign, which is also very useful. Having both schools under my belt is a good balance.

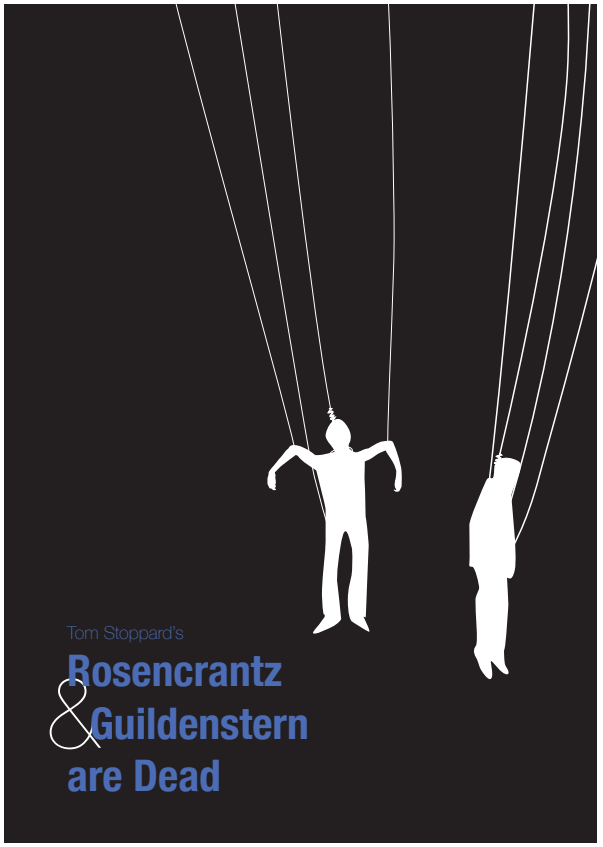
At my second co-op, we were interviewing newly-graduated designers for an open design position. One of the candidate's portfolios was made up of a number of examples — all were clearly mock-ups. Perhaps it was because of our shared Northeastern-education, but my co-workers and I were less drawn to his work than to other candidates who included real photographs and real examples. His portfolio did not include much explanation of his design process or of his thoughts behind his design decisions, which was probably the bigger reason none of us liked his work. Bierut nailed it on the head — it seemed "distastefully commercial, shallow, and derivative."

In the end, though, Bierut then goes on to criticize both schools, saying that above all, it's how it looks, not what it means that is important to the young designers of today. I remember John Kane saying something similar — if it looks good, the design (and designer) can float. You can get by and get away with more if it looks good. But take it to the next level — give it meaning, and that's the sweet spot. However, if you have only meaning and it looks bad, then it can't float. Personally, I think meaning should take precedence over something looking 'pretty,' but when I see something ugly I don't care about the meaning. While I want to disagree with John, he's right.

One of our projects in Graphic Design I was to design a poster about a play. I chose Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead, an absurd play by Tom Stoppard exploring what it means to be a minor character in Shakespeare's Hamlet. They wander around the castle, unaware of their purpose and surviving with no backstory. Hamlet's only line about their death is also the title, "Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are dead." Because there is no more context

given about their deaths, in their own play, they have no idea why they have to die and simply disappear from stage, not graced with any explanation for their deaths or an emotional death-scene.

For our first poster, we were told to design it in another designer's style. I chose Saul Bass and included Bass-esque figures peering behind a curtain at Hamlet, who was in the background. For the second poster, we were told to design it in our own style. When faced with that challenge, I brainstormed everything I could think of about the play and came to the conclusion that at the heart of the play was the notion of manipulation. Instead of illustrating a scene from the play like in the first poster, I created a simplified image of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern hanging from marionette strings, communicating the main concept behind the play. While the two characters are not necessarily hung in the play, nor are they literal puppets, the poster carried Stoppard's idea behind the play. This is an example of a poster that doesn't simply "worship at the altar of the visual," but includes thought and deeper knowledge of the play.



Early work for Graphic Design I, taught by professor John Kane. The thinness of the ampersand mimics the thinness of the marionette strings.

Bierut argues that designers should be well-versed in a wide variety of disciplines so they can better apply that knowledge to their designs, and I fully agree. Without the knowledge of what Stoppard's play was about, I wouldn't have been able to create anything that really meant anything. Passion and knowledge of the content you're given to design is what gives you the leg up and can instill your work with deeper meaning.

At my second co-op, the company I worked for specialized in second-party data within the sphere of digital advertising. At the beginning, there was a lot of specific jargon that accompanied second-party data that I didn't understand. As I was taught what the company dealt with, I was able to better design for the company itself. For example, the design department would be charged with creating more appealing presentations for the sales force; we were simply told to 'clean a slide up.' While at the beginning, I could change colors, hierarchy, and make the type more consistent, I was able to add more value once I understood what I was cleaning up. For example, a visual representation of a technical term didn't make sense to me, so I sketched a few ideas about how to more clearly demonstrate what the sales force was trying to communicate and was able to implement it. Once I was more educated about what I was designing, I was able to design smarter, rather than just making it 'look good.'

The "meaningful range of culture" that Bierut references at the end of his second essay can be tied into our designs to give it more lasting significance. If designers are unable to instill meaning into their work, that work won't resonate over time and will simply be forgotten.

"Until educators find a way to expose their students to a meaningful range of culture, graduates will continue to speak in languages that only their classmates understand."

MICHAEL BIERUT

THE COMMON CORE: A RESPONSE

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Geoffry Fried and Douglass Scott's The Common Core, though twenty years old now, is still relevant today. The main point of the "What We Teach" section is that an education in graphic design should cover three main things: perception, concept, and method.

Perception refers largely to the "visual sensitivities" — the ability to differentiate subtleties in gestalt principles. It is important to be able to see what is working and what is not working in a design, and even more valuable to be able to identify why. Being trained to think about form space, value, and composition is valuable in both fine art (where I was first introduced to these concepts) and in design (where it came as second-nature after having been taught about them in middle and high school). Although I did not take 2D Foundations, I'm assuming that class was focused on the elements of composition.

Secondly, being taught about concepts are what makes design lasting. In Bierut's second essay of his Seventy-Nine Short Essays on Design, Bierut makes a similar point, saying that if designers are only worried about if something looks good, they ultimately lose out on the bigger picture. What I thought was particularly interesting was when The Common Core asserts that "How things are interpreted is always a function of the context in which they are seen" (9). Designers cannot only rely on making things visually pleasing, but also have to consider context. At Northeastern, there is a class dedicated to the History of Graphic Design, which helps put contemporary design in the context of what has been designed in the past.

Thirdly, method is largely about using tools and technology, as well as ideation and the design process. I appreciate that this third category includes the general design process because

iteration and ideation are so important to visually solving problems. Some people assume that being trained in graphic design is solely about becoming fluent in Photoshop, Illustrator, and InDesign — the widely-accepted tools of the trade. However, I can't even begin to imagine myself or any designer without the skills of perception, concepts, and method. It ties in to the beginning of the journal when Fried and Scott talk about how computers have made it easy for people to combine text and images and to self-publish a poster, invitation, or newsletter. Just because they have the technical skills of using Word or another program does not mean they applied various elements of composition, thought about context, evaluated their work, or know the first thing about color or typography.

When reading Herbert Simon's suggestion of a "ten-year period of accumulation in any profession" (2), I wasn't sure that I completely agreed. While experience and an aggregation of knowledge are definitely important to becoming a better designer, it's hard for me to quantify that experience with a number of years. Who is to say that a designer who spends ten years in one position, doing one task or job-type is more of a professional than another designer who spends five in a wider breadth of jobs? Perhaps the first would be an expert on all things related to that job-type, but how does it translate to other skills?

There's no denying that experience betters the designer. At both of my co-ops, I have learned a lot — in different ways. My first co-op was my first full-time job as a designer. I had worked full-time in the medical service industry prior to this at an optometrist's office, where I learned to deal with customers, train patients on contact lens insertion, and do basic ocular pre-testing before the doctors saw the patients. I understood how to work on a team and communicate professionally, which translated well to being on a team of designers.

Besides being on a team, in that six months working at Boston Beer Company, I got faster and faster at using shortcuts in InDesign and Photoshop. The majority of the type of jobs that we worked on from day-to-day were largely the

same from the first month to the last month: typesetting collateral, adhering to the various brand guidelines of the brands owned by Boston Beer. There were also other more creative jobs that came along, but those were less frequent than the massive amounts of requests for posters, menu cards, and banners that came in from the sales team. Because the jobs were largely repetitive, I learned how to adjust size, color, tracking, and leading efficiently in InDesign. The reps would send us the theme of the poster (for example, Summer Ale) and then provide us with the copy they wanted on the poster (Beer of the Month: Samuel Adams Summer Ale. $4.50 Pints. Ask your server for details!) It became easy to identify what was important and how to treat the type using hierarchy of size, color, and font to make sure that the price was easy to read.

On my first co-op, I was also able to work on some large-scale installation pieces for liquor stores. I had to learn how to deal with massive Photoshop files on slow computers and learned a lot about printing at large-scale (materials, resolution, dimensions, their relationship, best practices for sending large files to print, PSBs vs. PSDs...) that I never had to deal with in school. By the end of my co-op, I felt that if my job were to stay largely the same, I would be continue to be very efficient at it, yes, but I didn't feel that I would continue to learn as much as I did at the beginning of my time there. While there is definitely room to move up in the company, as a temporary co-op, I definitely felt like I had learned as much as I could, and if I were to stay on for another six months in that same position, I probably wouldn't have gained as much.

"[Design is] to see things of our world in their interconnection and, where possible, to make things better."

ARMIN HOFMANN

In contrast, at my second co-op, the work that I was doing for ownerIQ on a daily basis was more varied — I might be working on a coaster design one day, updating the website the next, and then working on an animation the next week. There was a mix of print and digital work, as well as variety beyond the templated form that I didn't get to experience at Boston Beer. This was largely because the size of the companies were so different: being on a bigger team of designers at Boston Beer meant that my position was more specialized. However, for a smaller company like ownerIQ, I was able to take on a larger role on a smaller design team. This difference in experience is largely why it's hard for me to agree with Simon's suggestion of a ten-year timeframe to become a 'professional.' While both experiences were valuable, I feel that my time at ownerIQ was perhaps more beneficial to my learning in the breadth that it provided.

At the end of The Common Core, the assertion that "work of the highest quality is always possible" struck a chord with me. Even in my position at Boston Beer, where I felt comfortable and efficient and (dare I say it) a little bored, there was never a question of producing work that was less than my best. Going into my last year of classes, I have mentally shifted to treating them more like a full-time job in both the time I spend on projects and their quality. In the end, I hope to always produce work of the highest quality.

ESTABLISHING CREDIBILITY AND TRUST FOR DESIGN: A RESPONSE

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In the seventh chapter of Creating the Perfect Design Brief, Peter Phillips asserts that "design is not considered an equal partner" in most companies (70). While I think this sentiment is widely acknowledged by designers, what is perhaps more interesting is that he places the responsibility of communicating designers' worth on the designers themselves. It's easy to complain about being underappreciated when it's not your fault, but once you realize that communicating your worth is your responsibility, half the battle has been won.

On my most recent co-op experience, I was on a small team of three designers. The design department was contained within the larger Corporate Marketing department, and the head of the Marketing department, Aidan, acted as our advocate. There were positive and negative aspects to this setup: she was definitely seen as a part of the leadership group and an equal partner, and met with us on a regular basis. However, her training and experience was more business-oriented and less design-oriented. In this way, she was easily able to communicate in a way that resonated with our Chief Marketing Officer and Chief Executive Officer.

However, because she was not a Creative Director and did not have any training in design or typography, the design process amongst the other two designers and myself was largely self-led. We would critique each others work on a regular basis and felt comfortable offering feedback to each other. Once we felt that we were in a good place with a project, we would then show our work to Aidan. More often than not, her only feedback was that everything looked great. It was nice to be in a supportive environment, but her concerns were far different than those of a Creative Director. Sometimes, her feedback would be more business- and marketing-oriented, such as updating copy to have a more focused message,

or asking that the company logo be bigger. While it was great that she acted as an effective bridge between the designers and the 'higher-ups,' it was hard without a more experienced designer to lead the team.

Phillips' point that design is more about surface-level aesthetics brings up another common misconception of design. Often, one of our tasks would be to clean up a one-sheet that offered a brief overview of what the company did. The content would be pulled together by a sales rep and if we were to simply act as the expected 'decorator' or 'art service,' then we would be meeting their (albeit low) expectations. However, too often, when reading through the content provided, I would make changes in its organization in order to increase the coherence of the one-sheet. If I were to treat my job solely as making it 'look more appealing,' I would be missing opportunities to strengthen the collateral that the company and sales force provided to their potential clients. Designers are trained to look for and create hierarchy, they cannot ignore the content in doing so.

The chapter's main point was about "establishing credibility and trust for design" (73). Credibility and trust are necessary on all levels: as an individual on a team, as a design team in a company, and as a company in an industry. This concept is central and applicable to so much in the business world.

On an individual level, by recognizing your own value that you add to a team, you can instill this level of confidence and competence into your team. In the past couple of years, I have learned the importance of confidence. Naturally, I tend

to be a quieter and more thoughtful person. When there is an open-ended question asked in a meeting of ten people, I tend to not be the first (or even second) person to speak my mind. I generally like to put my thoughts together rather than saying what first jumps to my mind. On the other end of the spectrum, there are people who tend to be loud and unafraid to speak, no matter the subject. Though I am still working on this, my confidence in my own skillset and opinions have allowed me to be more bold and to share what is on my mind, without worrying if what I have to say is valid. By recognizing my own strengths and how I fit into my team, I have been able to establish more credibility and build my team's trust in me.

As a design team, establishing credibility and trust within the company is also crucial. In the early stages of my co-op, the other departments trusted the team and accepted that the work we produced was our best. As an individual on the team, I was given more and more responsibility and control over projects as I produced more and more work that was on-brand and up to their standards. After a few months, I could sense a shift in attitude: in meetings, other departments would offer guidance but micro-manage less. Rather than going through each page of content and suggesting how we treat a title or give a suggestion of an image, they began to trust us more with taking it in whatever direction we saw best. The credibility and trust within the company had definitely increased as they saw the quality of work we were producing.

On a larger level, it was the Marketing department's responsibility to build the company's credibility in the industry. Before

> "If you really aren't very clear on just why you're a valuable asset, no one else will ever get it either."
>
> PETER L. PHILLIPS

I began my co-op, the designers had gone through a six-month rebrand process. Their previous logo was outdated and screamed the '90s with its drop shadow and general use of clip art-like imagery and silhouettes. At the heart of this rebrand was adding credibility and trust to the company itself, which has immeasurable value. The vast majority of the work was done in-house, on top of the design department's daily workload. In the end, the department felt jilted by the lack of appreciation for the hard work that went into it. While the designers didn't feel that they got enough credit from the CEO and from the company as a whole, the effect was massive. One employee in another department found out I was in the design department and confessed that when she first interviewed with the company under the old brand, she thought the website and branding looked like a scam — like a fraudulent company scraping by. The value of design was obvious to her.

Overall, it was powerful to have the Marketing Director as our liaison. Throughout my co-op, I was able to see how she carried herself and presented the design work to those who didn't necessarily see the design team as their equals. Phillips' assertion that it is the designer's responsibility to communicate our importance is something I hadn't considered before. Powerful words for a bright future.