

## TOWARDS A DESIGN COMMUNITY: COLLABORATIVE PRACTICE IN DESIGN EDUCATION

**Biography:** **Veronika Kelly** has a professional background in graphic design for television, digital media and print spanning twenty years – as designer with the Australian Broadcasting Corporation and in her own consultancy with community agencies and corporate clients. Veronika currently lectures in Visual Communication at the South Australian School of Art, University of South Australia.

Her design practice and research in education explore the social and cultural contexts of visual communication and the global significance of design as a collaborative process.

### STILL, FIRST THINGS FIRST

The *First Things First Manifesto*,<sup>1</sup> launched in 1964 and redrafted as *First Things First Manifesto 2000*,<sup>2</sup> has fuelled an ongoing debate about the graphic designer's role in both commercial and social/cultural contexts. The original manifesto suggests that an emphasis on consumerism has been at the expense of the broader context of design. The redrafted version was a further attempt to redress this perceived imbalance, particularly in light of the dramatic growth of global commercialism.

The manifestos called for a 'reversal of priorities in favour of more useful, lasting and democratic forms of communication – a mindshift away from product marketing and toward the exploration and production of a new kind of meaning'.<sup>3</sup> Designers were asked to explore alternative ways of working in design that included broader contexts, such as information design projects, cultural interventions, educational tools, social marketing campaigns and charities that needed the expertise of designers.<sup>4</sup>

The single-minded focus on commercialism is the principal concern of the manifestos – if designers devote their efforts to a mental environment saturated with commercial messages it changes 'the very way citizen-consumers speak, think, feel, respond, and interact'.<sup>5</sup>

The negative effect of commercialism can be seen in Australia. Professor Alastair Davidson has spoken of the impact of globalisation on the growth of the service sector in Australia – where the largest part of our workforce is in entertainment, tourism, the media and communications. This has brought with it the ideology of the marketplace – an environment where being good at human relations is measured by

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1 The original First Things First Manifesto was written by designer Ken Garland in London 1963, then in 1964 was co-signed by twenty-one prominent visual communicators and distributed internationally.

2 Lasn, Kalman, et al 1999, URL: <http://www.eyemagazine.com/feature.php?id=18&fid=99/>

3 Lasn, Kalman, et al 1999, URL: <http://www.eyemagazine.com/feature.php?id=18&fid=99/>

4 Lasn, Kalman, et al 1999, URL: <http://www.eyemagazine.com/feature.php?id=18&fid=99/>

5 Lasn, Kalman, et al 1999, URL: <http://www.eyemagazine.com/feature.php?id=18&fid=99/>

the capacity to persuade, to win over the client, the customer, the consumer. Consequently a new ethic has evolved, where the 'prized person is he or she who can strike a deal'.<sup>6</sup>

This environment measures effective communication by one's capacity to persuade, to sell. This is a practice based on the primacy of the commercial transaction; it commodifies our culture and reinforces the notion that everything is for sale. The sheer pervasiveness of commercial messages affects the way we communicate with each other and this in turn shapes our reality, our culture, our society. This reinforces the wider community's perception of design as principally a commercial service and the designer's role as that of service provider.

The manifesto was criticised for being naïve and impractical at one extreme, and lauded for being inspirational and responsible at the other. Some designers simplistically focussed on the implication that design is good and advertising is bad,<sup>7</sup> other designers were inspired to act by committing themselves to alternative ways of working in design.

## **INFORMATION / PERSUASION**

Rick Poyner has described the manifestos as drawing the critical distinction between design as persuasion; getting people to buy things, and design as communication; giving people necessary information.<sup>8</sup>

To examine this further it is necessary to look at definitions of information and persuasion in design. Information and persuasion are well-understood concepts in design that can be described in a number of ways. They can be observed as primary functions of form that influence each other depending on the contexts of design.<sup>9</sup> McCoy has said that they represent a traditional dichotomy in graphic design that relates to types of content specific to the sender's intention.<sup>10</sup> In addition, information/persuasion are described as modes of communication that overlap and interact, not as an either/or opposition.<sup>11</sup>

The concept of visual contrast in design can be usefully applied in exploring how information and persuasion function as modes of communication. In the design process contrast defines the extent that one form can be distinguished from another. Yet wherever there is contrast, there is also interaction between the parts, because contrast itself implies interaction. In the *Interaction of Color* Josef Albers discussed how it is the interaction of colours as they appear in context with each other and their surrounds that determine the perception of a colour, not the factual recognition of it.<sup>12</sup>

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6 Davidson 2003, URL: <http://www.abc.net.au/rn/talks/perspective/stories/s798648.htm/>

7 Bierut 2002, pp. 26-31.

8 Poyner 2002, p. 8.

9 Bowers 1999, p. 6.

10 McCoy 2000, URL: <http://www.highgrounddesign.com/design/dcessay992.htm/>

11 McCoy 2000, URL: <http://www.highgrounddesign.com/design/dcessay992.htm/>

12 Albers 1975.

Information and persuasion as communication processes in design operate in a similar way; they interact and are not mutually exclusive. This interaction was initially explored in a table where information and persuasion were configured as binary opposites but it is more useful if they are observed as two ends of a continuum (Figure 1). This interpretation describes information as: to *tell*, to convey and persuasion as: to *sell*, to convince. What can be observed in this table is the concept of collaboration relative to information, participation and community.

While this continuum shows the contrast between information and persuasion, the structure is too linear. The subsequent interpretation explores a more organic structure, relative to the design process itself. In this model, information and persuasion are framed as the parameters of the intent of the design process, while community/marketplace are positioned as the parameters of the context of the design process (Figure 2). In this study the relationship between empowerment and active participants, control and passive recipients has evolved.

Saur takes note of Helfand's statement that it is critical that designers treat their many audiences as citizens, not only consumers, as this means that they are potentially recognised as participants in a democratic process.<sup>13</sup> The participants can be the designers, collaborators, clients, citizen-consumers, the broader community or in fact, all of these. A democratic design process involves a commitment to ways of communicating and working with others in design that is inclusive, active, participatory and collaborative.

## **COLLABORATIVE PRACTICE IN DESIGN EDUCATION**

*The space between people working together is filled with conflict, friction, strife, exhilaration, delight and vast creative potential.*<sup>14</sup>

Collaboration is highly valued in contemporary design practice and has been cited as fundamental to the future of global design.<sup>15</sup> In addition, Australian graphic designer Fabio Ongarato has promoted the perception of design as a process of open collaboration rather than service provision by referring to the importance of a *design community* rather than a *design industry*.<sup>16</sup> The importance of collaboration can also be seen in new media where designers are not specifically the originators or authors of visual ideas but are part of a multi-disciplinary team that develops visual solutions together across a variety of media.<sup>17</sup>

Design education can develop a culture of collaboration and active participation rather than an emphasis on educating designers as service providers. By working in collaborative teams on design tasks learners can develop greater awareness, flexibility and negotiation skills thus improving their ability to communicate with

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13 Saur 2002, p. 11.

14 Mau 2002, p. 109.

15 Mau 2004, p. 18.

16 Ongarato 2003.

17 Wild 1998, pp. 39-52.

partners in the design process and resulting in better design outcomes. This is the basis of a model for design education that places greater emphasis on supporting the development of learners that value a broad based, participatory design process. Design education should aim to be 'nurturing a crop of active citizens, informed, concerned participants in society who happen to be graphic designers'.<sup>18</sup>

Effective collaboration does not happen by default, and unfortunately the collaborative skills that are so highly valued in professional practice receive little attention in design education. Learners can struggle on collaborative design projects and this can have an impact on their experiences of working with partners in the design process, and their overall perception of collaboration in design. In addition, too many design educators are unable to give adequate attention to facilitating and evaluating collaborative tasks.

Developing effective skills in collaboration must be one of the primary objectives of a collaborative design task, in combination with the best/most appropriate design outcome. This improves the ability of learners to work in small teams and large groups while they undertake research, idea generation, creative exploration, concept development and design production. Through negotiation, constructive criticism and humour students can begin to understand the ways that 'individual characteristics not only determine learners' behaviour and their reaction to others, but also those behaviours and reactions in turn influence the reactions of others'.<sup>19</sup> In this way learners can be consciously drawn to the ways in which information and persuasion can be observed both as part of their creative design practice and in the communication between participants. The design educator's role is to facilitate the collaborative process and to provide communication, problem solving and conflict resolution skills as part of learners' design coursework.

## **A MODEL FOR COLLABORATIVE DESIGN PRACTICE**

The objective in developing a model for collaborative design practice therefore, is to provide a context in which learners can achieve individual design outcomes within the broader context of team goals; and where the respective contributions of individuals, small teams and the larger group are able to be clearly evaluated.

In discussing the increasing complexity of design tasks, Davis cites J. Christopher Jones' description of a hierarchy of design problems.<sup>20</sup> In this example (Figure 3) the simplest level design problems are products or components. These can be defined as design tasks with a product outcome. At the upper levels of this hierarchy are systems-level design problems which are defined as related products or activities; and community-level design problems that involve related systems and pertain to complex societal environments. Davis criticises design

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18 McCoy 1997, p.92.

19 Cranton 1992, p.179. Cranton refers to Shaw's 1976 book, *Group dynamics: the psychology of small group behaviour*.

20 Davis 1998, pp. 27-28.

education for relegating most design tasks to the component (product) level, where in fact most design in practice exists at the systems or community level.<sup>21</sup>

This structure developed by Jones can be applied as a model for collaborative design practice (Figure 4). This builds on the idea of increasing complexity relative to component, systems and community level design tasks and contexts by including the role of the designer in the model. In collaborative design practice this appears as component-participant, systems-small team, community-relation of systems and teams. The learner moves from the component-level design task to the systems and community-levels. The degree of complexity relates not only to design content but also to the communication and collaboration required to incorporate the views of multiple stakeholders into the design solution.

It is the structure of this model in combination with the process that is significant; the design content is variable. What is being modelled is design practice as a collaborative process of active participation; a model that is not based on competition or winning, but on working collectively to achieve the overall shared outcome.

## **A COLLABORATIVE PROJECT FOR DESIGN STUDENTS**

This model for collaborative practice has been applied to the design and production of a large-scale banner, measuring nine metres by one metre. The project was undertaken with twenty-nine visual communication design students, incorporating the work of individuals, small teams of four or five people and the overall group.

The design of the banner was based around a series of components (Figure 5). Each participant was responsible for two components of the banner and each team of four was responsible for eight components. The task for individuals was to negotiate and collaborate within their team and for the teams to collaborate as an overall group.

The theme was to explore visual communication. The learners worked individually and brainstormed in small groups to determine what constitutes visual communication. From a long list of options they condensed the information down to seven categories: media, images, typography, communication, people, design fundamentals and technology. Seven groups were then created, each learner was allocated a group at random and each group was required to research one of the seven areas (Figure 6).

The participants were involved from the outset in determining the parameters, design approach, specification and production of all components and criteria for evaluation of the design task. Evaluation was continuous, reviewed in stages as an open, collaborative process driven by the participants. The most important role for the facilitator was to create a context that guided the learners through the collaborative process and to carefully construct scenarios that invited creative exploration, questioning, discussion, participation and reflection based on the design tasks. Learners worked on tasks both independently and together through to the final

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<sup>21</sup> Davis 1998, pp. 27-28.

stages of the project (Figure 7). The facilitator was there to bring their awareness to connections between the creative process, project development, group dynamics and behaviours.

## **CONCLUSION**

One of the continuing challenges for contemporary design practice is to balance the broader contexts of design with commercialism. This paper has sought to address this by exploring the relationships between the design process and the communication process in design education, in order to present learners with alternative ways of working in design.

Progressive visual communication design education supports learners in exploring these broader contexts in different ways. By teaching and modelling collaborative skills, learners are encouraged to become more active in the debate about the future of design. This extends the boundaries of graduates' creative and professional practice by improving their capacity to communicate with partners in the design process. In turn this contributes to the development of active, socially responsible designers and the formation of a broader design community.

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Figure 1 Table: Information/persuasion continuum

| Context          |                     |
|------------------|---------------------|
| Information      | Persuasion          |
| tell             | sell                |
| to give form to  | to cause to believe |
| to convey        | to convince         |
| clarify          | hide                |
| active, engaging | passive, submissive |
| empower          | dominate            |
| active           | passive             |
| participants     | recipients          |
| collaboration    | service provision   |
| Community        | Marketplace         |

Figure 2 Diagram: Information/persuasion as design intent, community/marketplace as design contexts

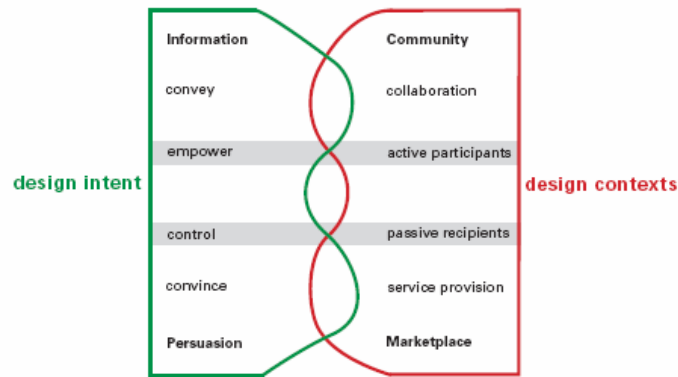


Figure 3 Table describing J.C.Jones' hierarchy of design problems

| Hierarchy of graphic design problems |                 | Applications   |
|--------------------------------------|-----------------|--|
| 1                                    | Component-level | Design product (Brochure, web page, book, retail item)                             |
| 2                                    | Systems-level   | Related products, activities (Corporate identity, communication system)            |
| 3                                    | Community-level | Related systems – complex needs (Stakeholders – government, commercial, community) |

Figure 4 Table developed as a model for collaborative practice in design education

| DESIGN PROCESS    |                 |  | PARTICIPANTS                               |  |
|-------------------|-----------------|--|--|--|
| Levels of project | Applications    | Degree of design collaboration   | Roles and objectives                       |  |
| 1                 | Component-level | Design product (Brochure, web page, book, retail item)                             | Participant                                | Individual contribution, learning style  |
| 2                 | Systems-level   | Related products, activities (Corporate identity, communication system)            | Small team                                 | Team parameters, dynamics                |
| 3                 | Community-level | Related systems – complex needs (Stakeholders – government, commercial, community) | Relation of systems (teams) as the overall | Overall relation between teams, dynamics |

Figure 5 Diagram showing structure of banner.

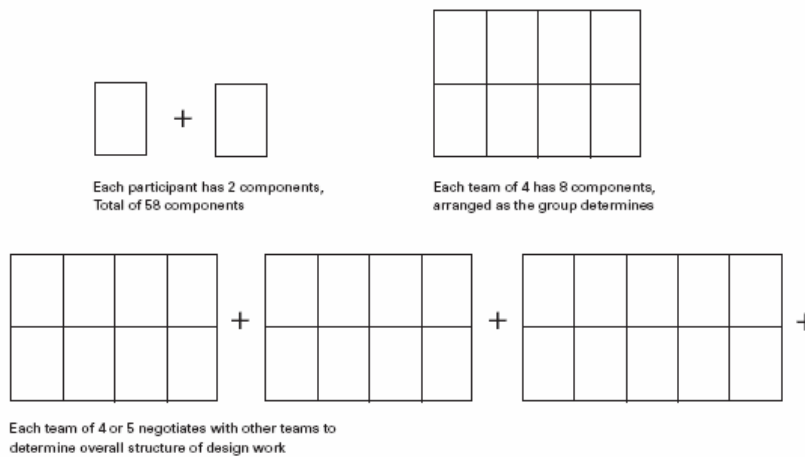


Figure 6 Image showing overall banner, dimensions 9 metres x 1 metre

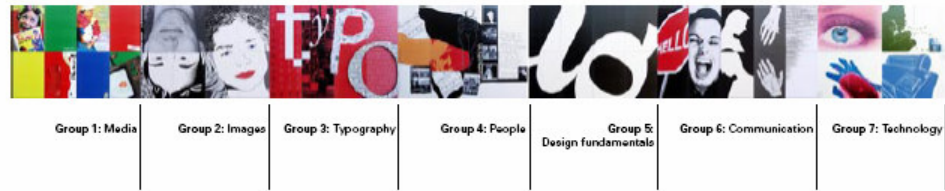


Figure 7 Completed banner

