Graphic design: focus on nine professional reflections?

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Abstract

Graphic designers undertake a wide range of activities in their commercial practice. The variety presents a rather confusing image of the profession and it is difficult to get a general view ‘what graphic design actually offers’. A similar difficulty arises in graphic design education where discussions about the contents of curricula need to be based on a reliable description of professional practice.

Through observations of practice, and interviews with practicing graphic designers, a set of common activities, reflections and patterns were distilled. These commonalities were verified and validated through further interviews, and were compared with the literature on reflective practice and visual argumentation.

The professional practice of graphic design can be – provisionally – presented in nine different reflections. Only one reflection – ‘considering a visual configuration’ - is characteristic for graphic designers. This characteristic reflection can be further subdivided into three groups: visual elements, visual strategy and visual dialogues.

The description can be used to discuss the role of graphic design in projects and in education to check if a graphic design curriculum covers all reflections sufficiently. And, the description provides a direct relation to a theoretical basis: the ideas of reflective practice and ‘visual argumentation theories’.

Keywords

graphic design practice, reflective practice, investigating professional practice, visual argumentation.

Introduction: Situation, problem, and approach

A rereading of the five anthologies of “Looking closer” that appeared between 1994 and 2006 shows that there are several remarks about graphic design that still seem to be applicable in 2013. Comments like ‘it’s difficult to describe what graphic design exactly covers’, ‘there is a gap between education and practice’, ‘designers design for designers’, and ‘we need to educate our clients’ seem just as relevant now as ten or twenty years ago.

These loose remarks, based on critical personal views, create an image of a profession that is not very sure of its position. For most practicing graphic designers, this is not really a problem. Society clearly needs effective, efficient, and attractive visual communication, the amount of visual information on screens and on paper still seems to increase, and commissioners are prepared to co-operate and involve graphic designers.

However, there are a few issues that show that this lack of clarity about professional practice ought to cause some concern. Below are six examples that illustrate this.

1 - The fuzzy description of the activities of graphic design becomes problematic in relation to national and European policies. The ‘Creative industry’ is one of the topsectors and substantial funding is put into this sector to increase market value (DG
Enterprise, 2012). However, it is unclear how ‘graphic design’ fits into the creative industry or into European strategies such as ‘design-driven innovation’.

2 - In larger projects, where many different specialists need to work together, the activities that a graphic designer can perform, or the results that can be expected, need to be negotiated. For example a package for a medicine needs to conform to all sorts of standards and requirements provided by legal-, marketing-, production-, and identity-specialists. The actual role of graphic design in such a team is not clear at the outset because the activities and effects of graphic design are vague.

3 - Most professions can point directly to a body of established and reliable knowledge. Lawyers can point to legal systems, and medical doctors to anatomy, physiology, and pharmacology. Teachers base their work on pedagogy and didactics, and priests can turn to theology. Graphic designers seem to lack this direct contact between their practice and a body of published knowledge. Graphic design knowledge seems to be loosely based on a combination of ‘art history’, ‘aesthetics’, ‘professional business’, ‘design thinking’, ‘printing technology and digital technology’, ‘communication studies’, and some other fields like semiotics. One of the consequences is that the terminology is very problematic and opaque (Beirut, 1994).

4 - There is a substantial amount of research on ‘design methods’ (for example Dubberly, 2004) but it is unclear if these methods are used in practice by graphic designers.

5 - The focus of the profession is on refined outcomes, not on the process. Graphic designers value their work in competitions and awards (Akama & Barnes, 2011), but can rarely point to concrete performance indicators.

6 - The insecurity about its role and relevance is reflected in educational curricula of BA and MA-courses. The studio model in which ‘a student’ is taught by ‘a master’ forms the basis, but clear pedagogical structures from ‘elementary exercises’ to ‘exam projects’ are rarely available (Poggenpohl, 2012). The exact difference in approach between BA and MA courses remains difficult to describe, and the added value of a Graphic Design Masters degree is elusive.

Each of these six examples could be further investigated, and it is relatively simple to add more examples. It is also fairly easy to find counter examples of graphic designers that do have a clear description of their activities, that base their work on reliable knowledge, that apply proven methods, and who measure their effectiveness. And there are of course many differences in curricula that teach graphic design.

However, the aim of this paper is not to provide a full and detailed review of these issues. The aim of this paper is to try to develop a description of graphic design practice that can be used to start to investigate if the issues are related to each other. Without research it is not possible to indicate how relevant the abovementioned issues are and if the examples are common practice or exceptions. It is part of ongoing research. Initial results were published in Visible Language (Waarde & Vroombout, 2012). This article develops some of the arguments and changes the emphasis of some of the issues.

Exploring graphic design practice
The approach of this paper is to use ‘professional practice’ as a starting point. How do graphic designers themselves see their relations to policies, methods, a theoretical basis, and relations with education? The only group who can provide a reliable answer are practicing graphic designers. Other approaches, such as a literature review, an analysis of graphic design competitions, a review of museum policies in relation to graphic design, or a review of blogs-magazines-websites would only provide information ‘about the profession’. For an initial description, it seemed necessary to collect actual data of current practice in stead of relying on secondary sources.
Describing design practice is a fairly common activity (Gero & Kannengiesser, 2004). There is a whole range of methods to investigate graphic design practice (Tan & Melles, 2010; Akama and Barnes, 2011) and the literature about researching professional practice is increasing (Green, 2009).

The following description is based on a preliminary analysis of research undertaken in the Netherlands between August 2007 and May 2012. It is part of an ongoing research project that aims to describe ‘graphic design practice’. About 150 graphic designers were approached and interviewed. The sample was selected from a list of about 700 graphic designers in Breda, the Netherlands. All participants call themselves ‘graphic designer’. Another 20 interviews were conducted with ‘adjacent professions’ like advertising or communication consultants. These interviews were used to check if the differences that graphic designers mention about other professions are perceived in a similar way by these professions. The investigation used depth interviews as a first step to find out how graphic design practitioners work in commercial practice. Initial descriptions were shown and discussed in subsequent interviews. The descriptions were updated according to these interviews and discussed again. It is clear that many more interviews are necessary to check the assumptions and results of this project.

The research so far indicates that visual designers seem to follow two main patterns: ‘considering visual configurations’ and ‘professional reflections’. Below follows a brief description of both patterns.

**PATTERN 1: Considering visual configurations**

In a project, visual designers undertake three activities:
– they consider visual elements,
– they consider visual strategies,
– and they consider the dialogue between a commissioner and beholders.

These three activities are shown in Diagram 1. As all diagrams, it is a representation to show the different activities. The stark distinctions and grouping cannot be observed in reality. However, the grouping makes it possible to map the practical activities of graphic designers onto specific communication theories. The description of practice is used as the basis; the relation with suitable theories is a next step.

**Activity 1: Considering visual elements**

There are only four kinds of visual elements: text elements, image elements, schematic elements, and ‘inseparable combinations’. Graphic designers choose - and sometimes make - these elements and combine them. *Text elements* are shaped through the conventions of typographical design. *Image elements* are all visual matters that can be interpreted as pictures: photographs, illustrations, symbols, etc. Visual elements that do not have a direct meaning but provide structure and ornaments such as lines, colours, frames, borders are *schematic elements*. And the last group of *inseparable combinations* are visual elements that are combinations of the other three types but that must be used as a whole. Examples are logo’s with a brandname, diagrams, and maps. Graphic designers either use these as complete elements or redesign these as complete elements. In the digital realm, these four kinds of visual elements are considered in combination with sounds or movements. Graphic designers are able to make and combine the visual elements into a single rational artefact.
Diagram 1: Graphic designers develop visual concepts through a simultaneous consideration of visual elements, visual strategy and visual dialogues. This process aims to combine these three forms of visual argument into a single, all encompassing ‘idea’ or ‘concept’.

**Activity 2: Considering a visual strategy**

Visual strategies combine three aims:
- to clarify the identity of the ‘speaker’ (source: where does the message come from?),
- to represent the information (contents: what is the message?), and
- to structure the information in such a way that it suits the audience (orientation: what are the expectations of the audience?).

The first aim of graphic design is the need to identify the commissioner or speaker. It must be made clear – through the use of recognizable visual identity elements – who the originator of a message is. The second aim is to present the contents of the complete message into a visual format/structure. The format/structure represents the structure of a message. And the third aim is to make it possible for a reader/user/beholder to navigate through a message. People must be able to orient themselves in order to find a starting point, to decide how to continue, and to decide when to finish. Graphic designers always have to consider a combination of these three aims when they develop a visual strategy.

**Activity 3: Consider the visual dialogue between commissioner and beholders**

The third activity of graphic designers is to consider the positions of commissioners in relation to the people they want to communicate with. Graphic designers make these relations visible and enable this dialogue.
**Process: Concept development**

These three activities influence each other. For example, making a decision about a typographic element will have consequences for the visual strategy and the visual dialogue. And the other way round is considered too. Decisions about the positions of a commissioner in relation to his/her beholders will influence the design of typographic elements. (Example: Text set in type that is too large might make a reader looks less competent and might make a commissioner look paternalistic or authoritative.)

Graphic designers switch continuously between these three activities to achieve a combination in which all considerations are satisfactorily dealt with in a single visual configuration. This combination can be called ‘a concept’. Considering all three activities at the same time is called ‘concept-development’. The distinction between the activities is based on the interviews: graphic designers talking about their work. It is not based on direct observation, and it is likely that the three activities cannot be strictly separated.

**Theory: Visual arguments**

The results of the analysis of the interviews with professional graphic designers indicate that graphic design practice can in part be described by referring to a specific area in communication studies: argumentation theories. The three activities that graphic designers describe seem to be directly related to three classic forms of argumentation:
- The elements and their combinations adhere to **visual logic**,
- **Visual rhetoric** determines the visual strategy, and
- **Visual dialectics** provide the background for the visualisation of the relation between commissioner and beholder.

This direct link between graphic design and argumentation theories is not surprising if a main aim of graphic design is ‘to enable communication’ between commissioners and beholders. However, it is surprising that this relation has rarely been mentioned in the literature about graphic design.

**PATTERN 2: nine professional reflections**

The second pattern that was observed and confirmed during the interviews with visual designers revealed that ‘considering a visual configuration’ is only a part of the activities. Considering a visual configuration forms the main focus and is characteristic for the profession, but this cannot be done without undertaking other activities. There are at least eight other activities necessary to design.

The interviews showed that a graphic design process is not a linear activity of a number of subsequent and recurrent steps. It is more like a ‘spider graph’, or a ‘web of moves’. The sequence of considerations is determined by all sorts of influences such as experience, personal preferences, subject knowledge and skills.

This might indicate that the activities of graphic design professionals could be described as ‘a web of moves’ as it was suggested by Donald Schön (1983, p 102). Professional behaviour is characterized by a swift consideration of each move, and frequent switches between these moves. Each move starts a new reflective activity. Each activity supports the development of a visual configuration.

Diagram 2 shows this ‘web of nine reflections’. Any starting point is acceptable and could be used. The starting point in this ‘web of reflections’ is not set beforehand, and this
starting point might differ per project. It is likely that any start leads directly to the consideration of other reflections.

Diagram 2: The 'web of reflections' shows the activities of graphic designers that are necessary to make the development of visual configurations possible.

**Reflection 1: Considering visual configurations**
This is described in the previous section. This is what graphic designers see as the core of their activities.

**Reflection 2: Planning en management**
Every project has to deal with financial matters, time-management, and the organization of activities of different people. This combination needs to be considered through planning beforehand, monitoring during the project, and evaluation afterwards.

**Reflection 3: Presentation and argumentation**
Every project must be presented to others to get support and feedback. Meetings with commissioners, design meetings with peers, test sessions, and planning discussions require different forms of presentations. In these presentations, it is essential to provide arguments why a specific visual configuration was developed and which benefits a configuration could have. Such a presentation must be considered carefully to contain all the relevant arguments to persuade and make an assessment possible.
**Reflection 4: Evaluation and testing**
The evaluation of a design to establish its effectiveness is a separate activity. This can range from a very informal check with colleagues to a full usability test with tangible prototypes. At the moment, formal testing is rarely conducted, but most graphic designers ask for informal feedback.

**Reflection 5: Modification for production**
In every project, the production facilities, distribution channels, and implementation strategy must be considered. Opportunities and limitations will influence a visual configuration and need to be taken into account during a graphic design process.

**Reflection 6: Consider a situation**
Designers, commissioners and beholders are active within a larger context. This context encompasses for example languages, financial structures, social structures, political situation, and a host of other influences that need to be known and considered before visual information can be developed. For example, in order to design visual information about medicines, it is necessary to know about the relations between governments, industry, doctors, insurances, pharmacies and patients. This provides a context that needs to be used as a basis for the development of a visual configuration.

**Reflection 7: Consider problem**
Within a particular context, a designer focuses on a specific ‘problematic issue’ with the ambition to intervene. Selecting a problematic issue from a range of possible problems in a particular situation needs careful consideration. This defines the initial boundaries of a project and it provides some assessment criteria during the development. For example, information about insulin medicines is poorly understood by newly diagnosed diabetic patients: it’s too much, poorly structured and rarely personalized. This is a problematic issue that needs an intervention to modify it towards a preferred situation.

**Reflection 8: Consider a perspective**
The angle to approach a specific problem needs to be considered too. It is likely that there are many possible approaches to consider a problem. Technological-, economical-, aesthetic-, ethical- and sustainable-approaches are examples of different angles to move towards the alleviation of a problematic issue. For example, if European diabetic patients need information about their medicines, can we use mobile telephones to support this? What kinds of information and how exactly?

**Reflection 9: Personal development**
Before, during and after every project, a designer reflects on the value and suitability of a project from a personal point of view (‘do I like doing this work?’) and from a company point of view (‘is this the kind of work that improves my/our profile?’). This reflection considers if an activity fits into the individual development and/or the development of a company.
Process: professional practice

In every project of graphic designers, it is possible to point to each of these reflections. Not all reflections need to receive the same weight of attention and some might be considered to be not relevant for a particular project. The time to consider all reflections varies according to the available time. This can range from a few minutes to iterations of days or even weeks. From a very practical point of view, it seems possible to calculate the necessary time and costs for each activity separately. Only the ‘personal development’ is seen as an investment.

Theory: reflective practitioner

Each of the nine reflections can be trained and evaluated separately. Each reflection might have its own theoretical background that can be found outside traditional graphic design theory. Project management, anthropology, selection processes, decision processes, writing convincing presentations, user testing, and implementation strategies are part of other professions, and some of these have a substantial theoretical basis. The central starting point remains the idea of the reflective practitioner who engages in a web of moves to change situations into preferred ones.

Discussion

This preliminary description of two patterns – considering visual configurations and nine reflections – seems to cover the research findings of the investigation into the activities of visual designers in Breda in the Netherlands until now. They show the current state of professional practice.

One of the very practical results of the description of visual design practice in two patterns is that this nearly always provokes a fundamental discussion about professional activities. The patterns and diagrams trigger reactions and channel discussions into fruitful dialogues about professional graphic design practice. The diagrams suggest that it is possible to define ‘a professional’ as someone who is capable of considering all reflections as a coherent activity.

In order to show the practical applicability of both diagrams, it might be beneficial to briefly reconsider the six examples that were listed at the beginning of this article.

1 – The diagrams can help to show how ‘graphic design’ fits into the creative industry and into strategies such as ‘design-driven innovation’. The professional addition can be found in ‘enabling dialogues between commissioners and their relations’ by providing visual arguments for this dialogue. That is a clear role for graphic designers within the creative industry.

2 – The role of graphic designers in a team can be negotiated by showing how visual configurations are related to other activities. The activities and required effects of each of the activities can be separately discussed within a project.

3 – The diagrams point to a body of established and reliable knowledge for graphic designers. The first pattern can be directly related to argumentation theories. This is a specific area within communication studies and might provide an academic home for the consideration of visual configurations (see for example: Tindale, 2004). The second pattern can be directly related to theories of ‘reflective practice’. Starting with the work of Donald Schö, this topic has developed into a sizable area of study. The combination of both is interesting and worth exploring.

4 – The diagrams show that graphic designers do not use a single design method, but execute a sequence of activities. In most projects, the sequence and intensity of the
nine reflections varies. Breaking it down into activities that are actually observable in professional practice makes it possible to compare how each reflection is undertaken by different designers. This is an essential condition to establish ‘better practice’ or ‘best practices’.

5 – Each step in the process – that is: each reflection – can be individually assessed. The focus of the evaluation of a project can shift from ‘just the visual results’ to a detailed assessment of each of the reflections. The progress of each reflection can be established, but it is also clear that each reflection needs its own set of criteria and assessment tools.

6 – It is possible, based on the two patterns, to build educational curricula of BA and MA-courses in graphic design. The studio model can be augmented by other forms of teaching within a structure that leads from novice to inexperienced professional. Educational projects can be assessed in more detail if they teach and assess each of these reflections separately as well as in combination.

Conclusions

It is too early to draw firm conclusions and this article should be seen as a small step in a longer process.

The professional activities of graphic designers seem to fit into two patterns. The first pattern is the ‘consideration of visual configurations’. Graphic designers work with visual elements (text, image, schematic elements, inseparable combinations). They consider a strategy to present a message in such a way that the source (speaker, originator), contents (message), and orientation (related to the expectations of an audience), and they consider the ‘dialogues’ between commissioners and their relations.

The second pattern describes nine reflections. In every graphic design project, all nine reflections need to be considered. It is likely that the skilful combination and choice of the sequence of these reflections are an indication of the professionalism of a graphic designer.

A practical benefit of the description of the patterns is that both diagrams seem to provoke discussions about graphic design that focus directly on the professional activities. A second benefit is that the patterns directly relate professional graphic design with two established academic fields. The first pattern can be related to the theory of ‘visual argumentation’, and the second pattern to the theory of ‘reflective practice’. Both need to be further investigated, but they are likely to provide a firmer theoretical base for the activities of graphic designers.

References


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