

## **Teaching 2-Dimensional Design**

### **Introduction:**

Two of the community college courses I teach include design basics as a large part of the curriculum: a foundation class called *Design: 2-D* and an introduction to graphic design, called *Graphic Design I*. The catalog description for Design: 2-D states that this is “... a foundation course which introduces the student to the processes of visual perception and how these processes function as a basis for understanding and creating two-dimensional works.” Design: 2-D is required for photography, fine art, and graphic design students. The catalog description for Graphic Design I reads, “... an introductory overview to the field of visual communication.... Students gain an understanding of visual communication theory used in a variety of traditional graphic design applications.”

### **Objective:**

I decided to incorporate more advanced and abstract theory in both classes. I had previously taught basic design theory only in the Design: 2-D class. This semester, I finally understood concepts that I had not formerly understood and decided to revise my lectures, demonstrations, examples, and hands-on exercises to incorporate this new understanding.

### **Motivating Force:**

Although I have a degree in graphic design, my education as well as my professional experience was based in practical real-world technique. Prior to my current position at Northwest College, I taught graphic design at a vocational school and presented the information the way I learned it: through hands-on practice in layout and production of camera-ready art. The program I now teach leads to an Associate of Arts degree, and the students have needs that are different from those in the vocational school.

Students at this college take other courses to learn layout and production. I am required to teach the theory behind the practice. This has been difficult for me. I have never studied design theory and had the belief that theory was mumbo jumbo written by academics for other academics. I avoided it until I found myself in a classroom facing 22 students and was supposed to be the expert about design principles and elements.

### **Resources Used:**

To be able to teach Design: 2-D, I have read many books on design theory. I watched videos on the subject. I read the syllabus of other design teachers. After teaching the course four times, I still was not happy with my lectures and assignments. Some parts of the theory I understood, such as how to make a 2-dimensional image have a sense of stillness or a sense of dynamic movement. (Use diagonals for movement and horizontals for stillness). But the advanced concepts of “tension,” “unity,” “harmony,” evaded my understanding. So I just hadn’t taught those concepts and stuck to the ones I did understand.

This fall, I read new books in a continuing effort to grasp the principles and figure out ways to teach these concepts. We have an adjunct professor teaching a third section of Design: 2-D this semester. She queried me frequently about how I teach the course and I have shared my course materials, lectures, and assignments with her. She and I had several great discussions, which helped me see the subject from another point of view. She suggested some new texts, which I read, but I did not revise my course materials.

In November, I was surfing the Web and stumbled into a website by a graphic design professor at the Rochester Institute of Technology. [Rob Roy Kelly Courses: A Mini Course in Design...](#) Mr. Kelly has developed several courses for teaching design theory to graphic design students. I copied the exercises and used them in my graphic design course as an experiment. I thought they were wonderful. They were practical and simple, yet they forced students to experiment with and “feel” the principles of “tension,” “unity,” “harmony.” The students responded well to these exercises too.

I decided to revise the curriculum for Design: 2-D and Graphic Design I to incorporate these exercises and to develop new lectures. I rewrote the catalog description for Graphic Design I and now require Design: 2-D as a prerequisite. I believe the new lessons will improve the quality of our student's work and conceptual thinking.

**Amount of time spent in this learning project:**

Each class meets formally for six hours a week. I spent 2 to 4 hours a week in addition to class time reading and thinking and preparing new materials. This is the 15<sup>th</sup> week of classes, so I've invested at least 240 hours in teaching design, studying design, and revising my methods of teaching design since September.

**Level of satisfaction with outcomes:**

I haven't had a chance to fully implement the new concepts so my satisfaction in the outcomes is still to be determined. But I'm excited about my newfound understanding and the new course material. I've spent years trying to understand how to teach something abstract. The materials developed by Rob Roy Kelly made a light-bulb turn on in my brain. I finally found exercises that I understood and could apply to the advanced concepts that I wanted my students to learn. I experimented with the new lessons in four class sessions of Graphic Design and two class sessions of Design: 2-D. I was pleasantly surprised at how well the students could "see" the concepts we tested. In the first experiment, I didn't make the class discuss and critique the results and so I was unable to assess the outcome. This made me realize the importance of group discussions after the exercise to cement the concept and allow me to observe the students level of understanding.

**My reaction to entire process as related to adult learners**

Each class (design and graphic design) has an average of 22 students. There are usually one or two adult learners in each class, but the majority are traditional freshmen and sophomore age students. Adult students react differently than freshmen/sophomore age students to these design exercises. Generally speaking, adults trust that I am leading them into unfamiliar territory and are willing to suspend judgment until the end of the exercise.

The younger students approach the same exercises with skepticism. A few get into it and find it interesting, but these exercises are deceptively simple. The young student tends to want to rush through the steps and when they do, no learning takes place and they feel the exercise was a waste of time. So I have to be careful and make sure all students approach these lessons with a willingness to learn and experiment.

I would like to conclude with some reflection on the process of learning how to teach design. I had always felt frustrated with the Design: 2-D course materials because I didn't fully understand them. My lack of understanding was reflected in my student's morale and performance. It has taken several years of study to "get" the concepts, but once I did I can see many applications of the principles and can easily point them out for my students. In fact I'm excited enough about design theory that I want to expand the lessons into Graphic Design I.

I've wondered why it has taken me so long to learn these concepts. They just didn't have any relevance to me until I saw the same concepts presented in terms of graphic design. Once I could see the application to something familiar, the ideas fell into place. I just hope it won't take my students as long to learn.