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Social Networking as a Mentoring and Engagement Tool Between Design Alumni and Early Design Students

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Abstract: *In graphic design education, there is an increased need to integrate design thinking, with less focus on the designed 'object' and more focus on its message. Realities of the contemporary profession mandate the development of broad thinking skills; students need to begin viewing themselves as problem-solvers first, image-makers second. The Alumni Mentor Initiative was devised to introduce beginning graphic design students to design thinking as it manifests itself in practice. Using the LinkedIn website, 80 alumni from the university's graphic design program were identified and asked to participate in an online mentoring program. Each was matched with one beginning student, who posted three questions to a discussion forum. In this phase, 240 questions and responses were collected. This is phase one of a research initiative. In this phase, the questions and responses have been analyzed based on the following questions: 1) Will experienced design practitioners reinforce the need for abstract thinking skills? 2) Does discussion with alumni help students to understand the groundwork we are setting for advanced communication challenges? 3) Can students better integrate textbook knowledge of theory and methods through conversation with practitioners?*

Keywords: Mentoring, social networking, design education.

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The problem

In the field of graphic design, there is an increased need to integrate thinking in education, with less focus on the form of the designed 'object' and more focus on its purpose and message. Realities of the contemporary graphic design profession seem to mandate the development of broad thinking skills, since graphic designers are increasingly asked to design innovative solutions that go beyond the boundaries of print and web-based media. It is vital for design educators to prepare the graphic designers of tomorrow to view themselves as problem-solvers first, and image-makers second. When learning to create the objects that are traditionally associated with graphic design (logos, websites, signs, books, etc), the students need to learn to consider not merely the aesthetics of the object, but its purpose and function for both its client and its user. An understanding of the relationship of design and business will be fundamental to their educational experience. Similar demands are being made in all of the design disciplines, where traditional boundaries are being blurred due to the complex design problems that need multidisciplinary solutions.

Ideally, this new emphasis would begin at the earliest stage, once students are admitted into a graphic design program. This can be challenging, however, since there remains a need for the students to learn fundamental skills of composition, typography and image making before the more comprehensive studio projects can be introduced. In addition, there are technical skills required for the creative manipulation of software. Thus, the introductory year in graphic design is filled with form and technology basics, with little opportunity for design thinking in its broadest sense. The preliminary studio projects at this level don't seem to be the right place for integrated thinking; assignments with complex marketing challenges are best introduced after the students have attained a level of basic skills. New methods need to be found for advancing integrated thinking at earlier stages of the graphic design curriculum, concurrent with the studio fundamentals, to better prepare students for the profession.

Responding to the Challenge

This study involves a two-phase initiative that begins to respond to these concerns in a large graphic design department within a university setting. The graphic design program is situated within a college of design, which itself has been looking for ways to better prepare students for their potential to impact change on many levels and across many disciplines.

Previous assessment of upper level students within the graphic design department showed that they have difficulty perceiving their roles as problem-solvers rather than form-makers. Even with a curriculum that integrates liberal arts, design process, and writing within the curriculum, students are still enamored with the many superficial, style-conscious designers saturating the web. When asked to create innovative solutions that respond to complex client needs, they are intimidated by the abstract thinking needed for such an assignment.

One response to meet these curricular needs was the recent development of a lecture course taught concurrently with the studio coursework. In this course, such topics as communication theory, design thinking, and branding strategy are introduced a year before they are explored in studio projects. Theoretical content is delivered in the lecture format that can set the groundwork for advanced studio coursework. Graphic design can now be presented within the context of business, and viewed as a

problem-solving methodology. While this course is clearly a positive step, the students still have a difficult time weaving together the theoretical and strategic issues from lecture class and the form-driven concerns of studio class. They also have an extraordinary level of anxiety at this level of the curriculum, due to factors such as competitiveness, intensive workloads, and uncertainty about the profession as a whole.

With a campus location that is several hundred miles from any large cities, the students have little exposure to major design firms, and have few opportunities to interact with design practitioners. While many students *do* find their way to urban centers on their internships, the beginning graphic design students are still two years away from that opportunity. They crave information about the business of graphic design, and immediately look to the web for such exposure. Unfortunately, while browsing they will gravitate toward the websites of graphic stylists; these sites display graphic work that is flashy and fun, but doesn't accurately represent the complexities or communication mandates of the profession.

The Alumni Mentor Initiative

In response to this situation, the Alumni Mentor Initiative was devised as a mechanism to introduce beginning graphic design students to design thinking as it manifests itself in current practice. Many alumni had previously expressed a desire to 'give back' in some way, in gratitude for what they believe was a quality education. It was determined that alumni would be an ideal 'voice' for the department's new focus on problem solving and design thinking. Students have always regarded what their professors say about the profession with some skepticism; they consider instructors to be too distant from the workplace to accurately portray it. Conversely, they tend to accept the word of a practicing designer as 'truth.' If alumni professionals could help them understand the contemporary demands of the graphic design profession, it would add validity to the teaching mission and encourage them to embrace design thinking.

Using the professional networking site LinkedIn, graphic design alumni of the program were located. Current and past job descriptions are listed on the site, which helped to determine which alumni have the breadth of experience needed to serve as mentors. These alumni were then invited to participate in the mentoring program; those who accepted were then added to our online courseware as 'guests'.

Research Questions

After a review of the mentoring literature and an assessment of the challenge, three research questions were devised:

1. Will experienced practitioners within the graphic design profession reinforce our beliefs about the need for abstract thinking skills in solving complex client problems?
2. Does discussion with alumni help students to understand the significance of the curriculum in setting the groundwork for advanced communication challenges to come?
3. Can graphic design students better integrate their textbook knowledge of communication theory and problem solving methods through conversation with experienced professionals?

Unique Aspects of the Study

The practice of alumni mentors exists in several professions in one manner or another. There are numerous such relationships established in law schools (Boylan 2006, p. 3), nursing schools (Sword 2002, p. 427), engineering, the medical profession, business schools and others. These vary in structure, although most involve in-person meetings of mentor and student, and most of the time the degree of involvement expected is left up to the individual pairs. There is, as of yet, no published information about any alumni mentoring programs in graphic design education, and no information regarding online student/mentor discussion forums.

The Alumni Mentor Initiative uses web-based course support in an innovative way. In our technology-based university of 25,000 students, where more than 1400 courses include a web-based component, no other courses have attempted to use the course support software to create discussion groups that involve participants outside of the course itself.

Unlike other mentor relationships that might be established, the conversations between participants of the Alumni Mentor Initiative are available to all students and mentors. An individual student can learn, therefore, from 80 mentors, not just the one that is assigned to answer his/her question. This semi-public access also sets high standards for the seriousness of the questions and responses.

The ability to formulate a question (rather than answer one) requires a more active role in the learning process. Students' comprehension of/interest in the course material can be immediately assessed by the depth and curiosity of their questions.

Upon completion of the 3 posted questions and responses, students are required to contribute at least 4 intelligent comments/observations to any of the discussion threads. This follow-up question demands that the students read *all* of the posted questions and answers, not just their own. This provides an opportunity for students to share their observations with peers, and for professors to assess their comprehension even further.

Knowing that these successful alumni studied in the same program provides validation that the curriculum is strong and purposeful, and gives students the confidence that they, too, will be well prepared for a career in the graphic design profession. In addition, the common institutional background among students and alumni helps them to immediately build a stronger sense of community or in-groupness.

Participants

There were 80 students participating in the alumni mentor match. All were enrolled in the "Introduction to Visual Communication and Branding" course, which is a required fall semester lecture class for beginning students in the BFA Graphic Design program. All had been accepted into the program the previous summer by competitive portfolio and review of grades.

In order to provide a one-to-one match, 80 alumni were identified to participate as mentors. Their work experience ranged from 2 to 30 years; all were alumni from the university's graphic design program and all had received the same degree (BFA in Graphic Design) that the current students will receive. They work in 23 cities across the U.S. These alumni work in a variety of graphic design positions in companies including graphic design firms, advertising agencies, corporate in-house departments, and web development companies. Of the alumni participants, one quarter are design firm owners.

While some of these alumni hold prestigious positions in major design firms, others do not. It was determined that any experienced graphic design alumni was qualified to answer students' questions. Students were not told of their mentors' job title or where they work, to avoid any tendency they might have toward judging the validity of a mentor's advice based on the mentor's prestige in the industry.

Methodology

Alumni of the graphic design program were located using the LinkedIn website. Of the alumni that were found using this method, the ones who had been out of school for at least two years were contacted and invited to participate. These alumni were asked to participate in our new online mentoring program with a beginning student in the graphic design department. Strict parameters were established: there would be three questions to answer, these would be spaced out across the semester, and the students could all read each response. Nearly all of the alumni who were contacted agreed to participate. These alumni were then added to the course's online discussion forum.

To encourage participation, it was important to promise the alumni that their contact information would not be made available to the students. This would prevent any concerns they might have about their offices being flooded with internship requests. Alumni were offered the option of providing this information in their responses if they chose to do so; most preferred the limited access that was offered.

Each of the 80 alumni mentors was then matched with a student in the lecture course. These matches were maintained for the duration of the project: students posed questions to the same alumni mentor each time. The matches were assigned by random selection; there were no additional criteria for how the matches were determined.

Students enrolled in the lecture class were required to participate in the alumni mentor initiative by posting three questions over the course of the semester to the discussion forum. The questions were scheduled at three different times of the semester to align with materials that had been recently covered in class lectures and readings.

Upon posting of the first 80 student questions, the alumni were sent a reminder to respond to their students' questions. This process was repeated for questions 2 and 3. Alumni responses varied in depth; a few wrote two sentence responses, while most wrote three to four paragraphs. In phase one, there were 240 questions and responses collected. The discussion forum was only accessible by students in the course and the alumni mentors. All students and alumni mentors were able to read all of the questions and responses.

Preliminary Analysis of Collected Data

Student questions were not open-ended; they were guided toward a range of specific topic areas, to prevent the predictable obsession with "how will I get a job?" questions (past interactions with students and professional designers has shown this obsession to occur if guidance is not provided). They were asked to formulate questions on the topics of design process, research, communication theory, branding, design business, and other topics relevant to the course itself.

The most common themes across the students' questions had to do with the design process and the process of branding. When asking about the design process, students showed the most curiosity about methods of ideation.

In addition to direct responses to the students' topics (listed above) other prominent themes within the alumni responses included client relations, problem solving, working within restrictions, listening as a design skill, and the significance of sketching. These responses can be grouped and studied according to the research questions previously established:

Research question 1:

The first question asked: Will experienced practitioners within the graphic design profession reinforce our beliefs about the need for abstract thinking skills in solving complex client problems? The alumni mentors consistently supported the notion of graphic design as a thinking profession throughout their responses. One especially interesting theme was shown in the alumni's frequent re-directing of the students' questions from those of a limited scope (for example, questions of software) to a broader focus on communication objectives. While they seem to empathize with the students' limited exposure to the profession, they repeatedly tried to broaden the students' current narrow definition of graphic design as a technical profession to one that is more about thinking and problem solving. An example of this occurs in the following exchange,¹ where the mentor attempts to de-emphasize technology in order to prioritize the fundamental thinking and problem solving skills:

- Q) What computer design programs do you find yourself using most frequently?
A) I often use these programs as a way to visualize the thought process and rationale behind the new services, products, and systems we're creating. The tools we use are going to change repeatedly through our careers. While it is important to have a small arsenal of tools that allow you to fluidly and intuitively express your ideas/concepts, to me it is by far most important to deeply understand the formal and communication components that underlie good visual design: e.g. color, typography, composition, etc. I think it is very easy for a young designer to become more focused on learning a new script, programming language, or software program and neglect to master the basics of good design. This can be a big gamble: software and technology will quickly become obsolete, understanding great design will not.²

Building on this answer, another mentor responds similarly:

- A) Marnie is right. While at Iowa State, take every effort to focus on learning the basics of good design - typography, hierarchy, composition, etc...And the best tool of all - learn to sketch...By forcing yourself to translate concepts and phrases into visuals, it will better prepare you as a designer to approach any project or situation, because in the end, that is all you are ever doing...It will be the best design tool you could ever learn -- and it will never be out of date.³

Likewise, in the following exchange, the mentor rejects the question of media, instead presenting a case for the importance of conceptual thinking:

1. To preserve anonymity of the participants, students are not identified throughout the paper. Only their job titles and the dates of their responses identify the alumni mentors.

2. Alumni mentor, design researcher. September 30, 2012.

3. Alumni mentor, multimedia designer. September 28, 2012.

Q) In today's Graphic Design careers, is it more important to have knowledge in web design or print media?

A) I think in today's design world, having a strong creative foundation of design is what is important. The vehicle of web design vs. print media have different challenges and are different media, but to be successful at either you need to first exercise and execute creative ideas. Communication and hierarchy principles apply to both media...I can't stress enough the importance of learning how to create strong conceptual ideas and being able to communicate the concept or story.⁴

In a similar exchange, another mentor plays down the importance of technical skills:

Q) I was wondering if you think it is more important for a successful designer to have a lot of creativity, or if it is more important for a designer to have a lot of technical skills?

A) Creativity is much more important. If you can combine the two that is the best of both worlds but I believe it is more important to first have the capacity for creative thought. Graphic design is a bit of an anomaly in the creative world in that the best designers can use both sides of their brain. I don't just see the code. I see how the code makes my vision come to life. But it always starts with the vision.⁵

Another mentor responding to a similar question has this to say:

Oftentimes, designers are more focused on the design look and not enough on communicating what is important in a compelling way. And they make false assumptions about what the audience already knows. Think of yourself as a problem solver more than a designer. Think big and be inspired by others who are doing great things both in the design world and out.⁶

Research question 2:

The second question asked the following: Does discussion with alumni help students to understand the significance of the curriculum in setting the groundwork for advanced communication challenges to come? Beginning graphic design students have pre-conceptions regarding the technology of graphic design; they think it is a methodology rather than a tool. This makes them skeptical about the value of sketching by hand, or any other activities that are done without technology. Many of the mentors offer reassurance that hand drawing is not an outdated approach. For example, one explains, "Sketching is a form of thinking and visual note taking...Sketches are a tool; they are not an end in themselves. Or put another way, it is not about the sketches, it's about the ideas."⁷

The following excerpts are from conversations addressing similar concerns:

Q) Before starting the first year of graphic design courses, I thought that I would be doing almost all, if not all, of my work on the computer.

4. Alumni mentor, design firm owner. October 7, 2012.

5. Alumni mentor, design firm owner. October 5, 2012.

6. Alumni mentor, design firm owner. October 8, 2012.

7. Alumni mentor, associate creative director. September 27, 2012.

A) I think the sketching you're doing is teaching your mind how to think visually while also communicating a message. You need to learn this in order to be a great graphic designer.⁸

Q) In your personal experience, do you start your projects with hand drawn sketches or do you sketch on a computer?

A) I almost always sketch out the project on paper first...It is important that in each project, you identify the overarching message that you wish to achieve. From there, hand sketches can quickly help identify which elements are best suited to achieve this.⁹

Q) Is there something that comes through working by hand that cannot be achieved through graphic renditions?

A) I think [sketching] is still a valuable process that every designer should learn to do and practice when possible. In present time, even with the technology available to create compositions and ideas quickly, sketching provides a way to expand the thought and creative development in ideas that may not come out if a designer goes straight to execution. It is a process that allows you to quickly test many ideas on paper so you can pull more out of your mind in a short amount of time.¹⁰

Students asked many questions about the design process, which had been covered in class lectures, and experienced first-hand in studio classes. They are most concerned about how to get started, and they hope to be pointed to an inspiration source outside themselves for this assistance. Their alumni mentors point back to the designer instead:

Q) From where do you get the best inspiration (websites, books, etc) for your designs?

A) I think if you can eliminate all preconceived ideas and get to the root of the problem it will give a greater foundation for the next step, which is the actual creative exploration. What is it supposed to do, what effect does it need to trigger, how can it better connect with the audience...If you allow yourself to quickly explore more creative directions, you can eliminate what is not working based on the root of the problem. Sketch, doodle, clip and create mood boards as much as possible early in the process to get to the root - after that begin creating as much as possible, as quickly as possible, as tight as possible (as in computer comps) to explore how it "could" come to life.¹¹

Other process questions are answered with a similar emphasis on the 'root' of the problem to be solved:

Q. Does the process or how you start a project depend on what you are designing?

A. In all scenarios...I'm thinking in terms of design from start to finish. This goes beyond "pretty pictures." So when you ask 'does the process...depend on what you are designing?' the process might change as I have to adapt to different customers or situations but I'm always going into any scenario, whether it's my own concepts or a customer's concepts, thinking in terms of a designer. That is to problem-solve

8. Alumni mentor, design firm owner. September 27, 2012.

9. Alumni mentor, graphic designer. October 9, 2012.

10. Alumni mentor, associate creative director. October 8, 2012.

11. Alumni mentor, design firm owner. October 7, 2012.

a situation, visually communicate what I've solved and make sure my resolution is the final product.¹²

Students are also curious about why they are expected to produce so many ideas for each project; the alumni mentors consistently support this expectation by explaining the importance of the iterative process:

Q) I feel like sometimes when I do more it helps but sometimes when I do the same amount it starts making it worse.

A) Design is about iteration. The reason why you are being asked now, to do what may feel like a ridiculous number of sketches, is to get you in the habit of iterating. Getting you used to putting things together, seeing the visual relationships that you are creating, breaking them apart again and trying something completely different...In graphic design, "it's all about the message." If you can't clearly see/feel/know the message immediately after looking at your solution - you're not done. When you can, you're done.¹³

Q) When working on a project, is there ever a point when it isn't helpful to go over your work and try to improve again?

A) Design is a strange beast. Unlike most professions, there is almost never a 'right' answer, only a range of hundreds, or even thousands of possible solutions of varying effectiveness. That means rarely we *might* have a great concept right away, but statistically that is not very likely at all—and the best execution of that concept will never come without fully exploring a range of solutions...Iteration is one of the most important elements of the design process...¹⁴

Q) I know everyone is telling us not to go with our first idea for a design...How do you convince yourself to move on from those ideas and keep coming up with more and better ideas?

A) Try to think of that first idea like you're covering your bases. If you've got a "safe" idea in the bag, then you've really got a license to try and push solutions into new and unexpected areas. That freedom can really help you grow as a designer and a thinker. *Have you asked all the right questions? What if you came at the problem from a completely different perspective?* You may still end up back at that first idea, but at least you'll have done your due diligence and challenged yourself.¹⁵

The following are mentor responses to questions about idea generation:

Q) What are some of the ways that you come up with ideas and where do you find your inspiration?

A) Probably the simplest way to put it — is to be a sponge. Keep your mind open and take in everything you can around you. Things you see, experience, hear about, listen to, etc. (try to get outside of your world of interests, too). When you brainstorm with a group, having a mental library aides in the give and take process of developing ideas with others.¹⁶

12. Alumni mentor, environmental graphic designer. October 2, 2012.

13. Alumni mentor, multimedia designer. October 2, 2012.

14. Alumni mentor, graphic designer. October 2, 2012.

15. Alumni mentor, design director. October 8, 2012.

16. Alumni mentor, creative director. September 28, 2012.

Q) I often find myself getting caught in routines. I was wondering if you had any tools or exercises to help you think outside the box and create more diverse designs?

A) First and foremost, we are looking to meet specific communication objectives. These serve as the foundation for the design solution...we work to gain as deep of an understanding about the client's culture. I'm not sure that is always "inspirational" but it is critically informative...¹⁷

Q) What are some activities, or some inspirational resources you visit when trying to trigger a brainstorm?

A) I think there are a million great places to find inspiration, but I've realized over time that I can't wait until a deadline or a specific project to use them...I need to make time in my schedule for inspiration every day. Like gathering nuggets of inspiration... I'm constantly getting sparks of ideas from things I see that take me in totally new directions. Movies. Concerts. Reading the New York Times. Simply keeping your eyes open in your daily life.¹⁸

Other conversations regarding the design process occurred; for example:

Q) Which aspect of the design process (if not all) would be the most important to "master" in order to create better designs both in the academic world and the professional world?

A) I would emphasize the beginning stages in setting up the entire process for success. Thorough development and meticulous technical creation are key aspects to any successful campaign but without a solid idea to push the design, it will always be lacking...You can't put form before function in the design world. I think that is a skill that is important to hone as you make your way into the professional world.¹⁹

Research question 3:

The third research question asked: can graphic design students better integrate their textbook knowledge of communication theory and methods through conversation with experienced professionals? Years of experience in the profession have given the alumni mentors strong opinions about what's really important in visual communication; these opinions are consistently shared in response to students' questions:

Q) What is the client's involvement in the design process?

A.) Clients are vital to the design process. Without them, you wouldn't have a job! The client's needs and budget set the parameters of the project...Building strong, good lines of communication with your client is how you ensure that they understand and are agreeable to the design you are doing for them.²⁰

Q. How do you personally go about starting a new project?

A. When approaching a new project...I have found that the most crucial step in the whole design process is the initial conversation with the client or account manager. Communication between client and designer is critical to understanding their

17. Alumni mentor, design business owner. October 28, 2012.

18. Alumni mentor creative director. October 7, 2012.

19. Alumni mentor, graphic designer, September 25, 2012.

20. Alumni mentor, design educator. October 2, 2012.

needs...You deliver design that speaks to its intended audience, which is your number one goal as a designer.²¹

Q. What steps do you usually take in this research stage of a project and how influential does this become to the rest of your design process?

A. I generally start by identifying some basic information to help me frame a project...Research is very influential to my design process. Research helps me identify and understand the parameters of a project and guides me in creating a design solution that is relevant – relevant in its representation of the client, relevant to the problem it's intended to solve and relevant to the intended audience.²²

Q. In real world situations where timelines, budgets and numerous opinions influence the outcome...do you feel your designs are improved or compromised by these constraints?

A. I consider constraints that come with all projects to be part of the inherent challenge that needs to be solved through your design and management skills...I don't think these constraints compromise a project, they just help inform what kind of solution is best.²³

Q. What questions do you ask in order to best understand their vision and how to make their dream a reality?

A. Helping clients realize their dreams is a multidimensional exercise in listening and offering professional advice and expertise...Listen to your clients. They are coming to you for your expertise. This doesn't mean you need to treat them like they know nothing, just work together and make an incredible team!²⁴

Q. In your experience do clients usually bring a lot of ideas to the table? How much do you factor in their vision?

A. Sometime factoring in their vision may mean reading between the lines a bit and always presenting your ideas that may have been inspired by their idea...It's our job to listen, rework, and make that idea better, while also presenting ideas that solve the problem they may not have realized could even exist.²⁵

Q. Do you think it is better to have more restrictions that the client puts upon you, or do you like more freedom?

A. Not all limitations established by a client are negative, sometimes they can be helpful to the efficiency of the design process and the effectiveness of the solution...These restrictions can force innovative solutions that may not have presented themselves with total creative control. I personally love the challenge of "making the desert bloom," so to speak, and I would say that some of my very best work has been projects with many limitations.²⁶

Sense of Community, Encouragement and Empathy

While not considered in the research questions, an additional observation can be made from reviewing the discussions: the alumni felt an immediate camaraderie with the students, due to their shared alma mater. They expressed this through encouraging

21. Alumni mentor, graphic designer. October 2, 2012.

22. Alumni mentor, creative director. October 2, 2012.

23. Alumni mentor, design firm owner. October 17, 2012.

24. Alumni mentor, senior designer. October 10, 2012.

25. Alumni mentor, design director. October 8, 2012.

26. Alumni mentor, senior art director. October 1, 2012.

remarks meant to bridge the gap between beginner and expert. One alumni mentor, for example, provides the reassuring remark, “You’ll learn, you’ll get to know polished from overworked...”²⁷ They remember what it felt like to be insecure in one’s abilities: “Just remember that everything takes longer when you’re first learning.”²⁸

In other comments, the mentors poke fun at themselves or find other ways to equalize the relationship, as expressed in the following excerpts from their responses:

A) It’s amazing how much of a badass designer I remember being in college, looking back at the work though doesn’t support my memories. It wasn’t bad, just crazy to see how much you and your design skills grow over time.²⁹

A) I saved a few things, but only...to remind myself that I’m always a work in progress, as my skills have grown/changed significantly since my college years.³⁰

As designers we all fantasize about showing clients something that’s amazing yet different than they wanted—causing them to drop to their knees in gratitude and write a blank check for all of their future work. That hasn’t happened yet. But occasionally you find some middle ground, and that’s progress.³¹

Even projects you love on the due date might be improved by a great idea you have the very next day. Don’t let this discourage you—embracing this process of perpetual improvement is the way a project and its designer achieve greatness. The best end products come from the best and most thorough uses of the design process.³²

Even in the rare situation when a student’s question drifts outside of the course lectures to ask, “does your work get in the way of your personal life?” the mentor offers friendly reassurance: “Do you really like what you’re doing? Are you having fun? Are you learning things? Then it doesn’t really seem like work, it just seems like life.”³³

Limitations of the Methodology

The study was limited to one university in the Midwest United States. Students didn’t yet have any studio experience with the topics they were inquiring about, and had only recently begun to learn of them in lecture class. This may have resulted in some of the alumni mentors’ responses being too abstract or advanced for the students to comprehend.

The use of only alumni as mentors presented some inherent limitations to the range of responses. Since all mentors studied in the same program (albeit over a 30 year range), their design philosophies and approaches may be narrower than the graphic design profession at large.

27. Alumni mentor, multimedia designer. October 2, 2012

28. Alumni mentor, design firm owner. October 21, 2012.

29. Alumni mentor design firm owner. September 30, 2012.

30. Alumni mentor, senior recruiter. October 8, 2012.

31. Alumni mentor, senior art director. October 1, 2012.

32. Alumni mentor, graphic designer. October 2, 2012.

33. Alumni mentor, design firm owner. October 28, 2012.

Implications of the study and future research

This is phase one of a larger research initiative. This phase validates the process of pairing early design students with a social network of alumni in the design profession. At this early stage, the benefits of an alumni mentor program of this type cannot be fully assessed, although the students do show a higher order of thinking than past groups. Phase two will examine future students of this course through a pre-test and post-test in order to assess the degree to which online mentoring and engagement affects the early design student's level of understanding of the design profession. Further progression of these students into the 3rd and 4th year courses will provide an opportunity to assess their abilities to integrate strategic thinking, design process and communication factors into their studio coursework compared with previous student groups. Additionally, the alumni responses will be assessed to determine how well the department's curriculum is aligned with contemporary practice, and the program's effectiveness in preparing broad-thinking professionals.

In future research, the mentor initiative could serve as a pilot for a more comprehensive alumni mentoring program, where advanced students would continue to ask questions of increasing sophistication of the mentors, as relevant to their advanced course assignments. A three-year sequence could then provide extensive data for assessing how well learning objectives are being achieved at each level.

Conclusion

Phase one has shown the Initiative to be one effective way to introduce design thinking and to promote the view of graphic design as a problem solving discipline. The mentor/student relationship provides unique opportunities to reinforce and validate the graphic design program's increased focus on strategic thinking. When experienced design practitioners reinforce the importance of design thinking, it seems likely that the students will more easily accept the broadening definition of graphic design. Their high regard for the mentors' opinions ensures increased respect for such things as ideation, iteration, sketching, process, and listening as important skills for graphic design. Professors can continually attest to the importance of these things, but their claims will never carry as much weight as an alumni mentor's.

Fortunately, after years in the graphic design profession, the alumni have concluded much the same thing: this is not merely a profession of form making; it is one of ideas and solutions. As described in one mentor's response to a student question, "You are correct in calling it the 'ideas' stage of the design process. However, ideas should be at the center of every step in the design process. It is our job to manifest those ideas into visually compelling solutions, but that solution is still about the idea."³⁴

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