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## Using concepts of authorship in graphic design to facilitate deep, transformative learning

Tara Winters

*“Authorship is only useful as a term to the degree that it opens up a space for thinking about design that transcends established and possibly limited definitions”*  
(Poynor 2003: 146).

This paper argues for the potential educational value in critically considering varied descriptions of, and claims to, authorship in graphic design as a means of encouraging students toward more sophisticated conceptualizations of the “design entity” (Davies & Reid 2001: 180). It describes how the form and content of debates over authorship can be used to support desirable educational goals of deep and transformative learning. I suggest that the critical discourse around definitions of authorship in graphic design provides rich territory for critical, reflective thinking, and challenging students to develop more critical dispositions in relation to their discipline.

## A G D A

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# Using concepts of authorship in graphic design to facilitate deep, transformative learning

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## **Introduction**

The question of what counts as authorship in graphic design remains a complex one. There is not, as yet, and may never be, any clear consensus as to exactly what conditions need to be met before a graphic designer can call themselves an 'author.' There are many and varied accounts, representing a wide range of perspectives, often passionately argued.

Design critic Michael Rock reminded us that in attempting to answer the question it depends on "how you end up defining the term and the criterion you chose to determine entrance into the pantheon" (1996: 149). Attempts to position the role of the designer, and to identify outcomes and ways of working that fit a particular understanding of the term 'author' have been central to a definition of authorship in graphic design. The site of the debate has presented us with descriptions of the kinds of product produced by graphic designers when they are working as authors, these include: theoretical and critical design

writing by designers; self-published/produced work; artist's books and typographic experiments. Typical roles designers are identified with when they work as 'authors' are that of writers, editors, collaborators, and translators.

The term 'author' suggests control over the starting point for creative work and a responsibility for the origination of content akin to the level of freedom and power an artist has over his/her work. Definitions of authorship in design are often synonymous with self-expression and content creation, with a designers' own subjectivity and personal convictions playing a central role in the development of their work. The rise of design practices described as 'critical' and 'conceptual' during the 1990s and beyond, evident across all areas of design, has some designers drawing inspiration from personal experience and narrative or cultural observation to create highly personal work. The desire for individual perspectives and subjectivity to play a leading role in the design process has long linked design to art. Claims to authorship in design that emphasise these conditions as a defining part of a design practice bring us close to the ongoing debate over interfaces between design and art.

The objective of this paper is to argue that a way toward transformative learning in graphic design education is to turn to this rich and varied discourse that now surrounds questions of authorship in graphic design as a means of fostering more sophisticated conceptions of the subject of study – a central component in encouraging deep approaches to learning.

Research has shown that conceptions of the subject of study, and of learning in that subject, are closely linked with the approach a student takes in their learning. The challenge for educators is to create learning environments that encourage students to adopt deep approaches to learning in support of critical paradigm shifts or "perspective transformations" (Mezirow 1991: 167).

I argue that debates around authorship in graphic design represent critical, theoretical, and practical terrain that offers learners access to important intellectual challenges. The lack of a yet clear consensus on the matter of authorship in design, and the presence of many and varied accounts and definitions opens up a host of challenges for designers to question existing conceptualizations of what graphic design is and does, and how it is practiced. This educational approach also serves to familiarise learners with the current contemporary climate in which graphic design is broadening its context and position as an increasingly open-ended, interdisciplinary, intellectual pursuit.

### **Deep & Transformative Learning**

University teaching and learning mission statements tend to emphasise producing graduates who are critical, autonomous thinkers. My own university includes in its graduate profile that a graduate is expected to have "a capacity for critical, conceptual and reflective thinking" (University of Auckland 2003: 1). Similarly the College of Fine Arts expects graduates to be skilled in "self-directed and reflective learning" as well as have "the ability to critically and constructively resolve problems and issues in their practice" (UNSW 2003: 1). Encouraging deep approaches to learning and transformations in existing knowledge are universal teaching and learning objectives in higher education. Critical and reflective thinking are essential components of both.

20 A deep approach to learning is now widely considered a valid and desirable pedagogical goal in any teaching and learning situation. While it is not the intention of this paper

to describe what a deep approach to learning in graphic design looks like as such, it is the purpose of this work to show the positive alignment of the discourse surrounding concepts of authorship in design with critical, reflective thinking by students.

An approach to learning describes the way a student approaches a particular learning situation, and is not a fixed characteristic of a student herself. A learner may adopt different strategies for learning in response to different teaching and learning contexts. The concepts of 'deep' and 'surface' approaches to learning originated with asking whether a reader searched for meaning beyond the surface of a text or alternatively memorized the material as it appeared in the text. Marton & Hounsell's (1984) early studies in approaches to learning drew out that a key feature of deep learning was an active and reflective attitude toward the text. Generally, a deep approach to learning leads to a personal transformation in the way in which a student understands the subject of study, requiring a critical interaction with the subject matter. Deep approaches to learning are characterized by focusing on the meaning, the bigger picture, on interpreting information and getting to the underlying meaning of themes, principles and applications. Biggs (2003) associates the verbs: theorise, analyse, hypothesise, and reflect, with a deep approach to learning.

Pedagogical research has drawn strong connections between the approach a student takes to their learning and their conception of the subject of that learning (see Marton & Säljö 1984 & Biggs 2003). The significance of the relation between the two in affecting the outcome of learning is now conventional wisdom i.e. a more sophisticated conception of the subject of study encourages a deep approach to learning, increasing the possibility of a deep outcome.

Some, though little, research on approaches to learning at subject level in design exists. Conceptions of the subject of study has been translated to "conceptions of the design entity" by Davies & Reid (2001: 180). Action research studies by the pair have confirmed a relationship between conceptions of design and conceptions of learning in design. They note: "there was a direct relation, in many cases, between students' conceptions of the design entity and their conceptions of, and approaches to, learning" (Davies & Reid 2001: 180). In their study they reported on the differences in students beliefs about what they should be learning in design. These range from a focus on acquiring specific skills they see as necessary for employment in the profession, which the authors comment is "based on somewhat limited assumptions about the professional world" to students who "see design as a personally fulfilling activity" (Davies & Reid 2001: 179–180).

Davies and Reid (2001) develop four qualitatively different conceptions of learning in design. At the highest level a conception of learning is described as: "Learning to innovate and change: Learning is understood to be discovering about themselves. The focus is on self expression, reflection and integration" (Davies & Reid 2001: 182). They describe a group of students who see their design education "as offering a transformational experience through which their world view is developed. For them, skills, meanings and communication are important factors in design but they also see design as a platform from which to explore their own perceptions of a complex world and modify them in the light of new experiences" (Davis & Read 2001: 180). Conceiving learning in design at higher conceptual levels will have a correspondingly positive effect on one's conception of the subject. More sophisticated and complex views of what design is, or could be, offer students a greater opportunity to use their design education in a more open-ended intellectual way. I believe

it is the role of educators to facilitate students in the process of developing more sophisticated understandings of the design entity through providing learning environments that encourage deep approaches to learning.

Similarly, the road to transformation in understanding requires that students engage in critical, self-reflective activity. Mezirow highlights critical reflection as significant: "We transform our frames of reference through critical reflection on the assumptions upon which our interpretations, beliefs, and habits of mind or points of view are based" (1997: 7). Transformation in understanding is achieved through a process of examining, critically questioning, validating, and revising our perspectives. "Learning occurs when an individual encounters an alternative perspective and prior habits of mind are called into question" (Cranton 2006: 23). Cranton also argues that "in teaching for transformation, teachers set the stage and provide the environment in which students can articulate and critically reflect on their assumptions and perspectives" (2002: 63). Although we cannot teach transformation, we might be able to teach *for* transformation.

Transformative learning theory tells us that to facilitate students to make these high level shifts in personal understanding, several conditions and processes need to be met including creating an "activating event" (Cranton 2002: 66). This event is used to: expose the limitations of current knowledge; identify and question currently held assumptions; encourage critical self-reflection; and to create an openness to new alternatives and perspectives.

### **Authorship as Activating Event**

*"In order to bring about a catalyst for transformation, we need to expose students to viewpoint that may be discrepant with their own... We need to encourage students to seek out controversial or unusual ways of understanding a topic" (Cranton 2002: 66).*

I believe that debates over a definition of authorship in graphic design provide a wealth of opportunity for engaging students in lines of inquiry that reveal controversial and surprising ways of conceptualizing graphic design practice, supporting broader understandings of the discipline. Further, by promoting learning through utilizing debates over authorship as a departure point for "design as inquiry" (Buchanan 2004: 9) the opportunity to move beyond deciding whether one or another proposal is right or wrong and instead using the content of such argument for personal, reflective practice presents itself. This can contribute to our understanding of what design is and does, and to our developing sense of our place within it.

In his discussion of the nature of design inquiry, Buchanan concludes that in the search for a single definition of design we have "reached a level of maturity that does not require a single definition", coming to realise that "battles over the correct definition of design are fruitless" (2004: 10–14). The search for a definition of the Designer as Author may be at a similar point as the notion of a definitive answer to the question has given way to broader issues of value and purpose. Buchanan adds "it is better to understand that definitions serve the purpose of shaping a particular line of inquiry and that the field will be vital as long as definitions come and go in the work of inquiry" (2004: 14).

22 The question of authorship in graphic design has certainly seen definitions come and go. In the last two decades or so we have witnessed a range of viewpoints advocating

(or denying) graphic design as a form of authorship from practitioners, theorists and educators. From the more fixed accounts of defining the conditions and/or parameters to be met (see Rock 1996 & Poyner 2003), to the more fluid notions of multiple roles and contexts which offer the opportunity to include degrees of author activity, (see McCarthy & de Almeida 2002a), to concrete examples from practitioners taking a philosophical stance *through* their design work. The theoretical and practical discourse surrounding the idea of design as a form of authorship provides ample ground for the critically reflective learner to utilize strategically in their learning as lines of inquiry (Buchanan 2001) and/or as activating events (Cranton 2002).

For example, McCarthy & de Almeida (2002b), present four major categories in which self-authorship in graphic design can take place, describing different roles for the designer based in: writing, editing, collaboration and interaction. Depending on which line of argument for authorship you use as a line of inquiry for critical thinking here, different sets of questions and challenges are raised. The category of writing is related to conventional modes of literary authorship, "where the originator of the project is responsible for generating its verbal content" (McCarthy & de Almeida 2002b: 111). This inverts the traditional story of content being established beforehand, with the work of the designer following from this, and invites us to reflect on the comparable acts of writing and design as creative endeavours. The role of editor sees the designer supplementing content rather than generating it, and work takes the form of "a compilation of ideas" (McCarthy & de Almeida 2002b: 112). The interpretation and re-presentation of original content, common to the process of editing, challenges a designer/author working under this model to reflect on the nature of translation and transformation that objects and images undergo through the act of selection and insertion into new contextual relationships.

The fourth category, 'interaction', presents the process of authorship as shaped by "the interaction between the work and the audience, creating a greater continuum of communication" (McCarthy & de Almeida 2002b: 113). In this line of thinking the idea of the designer as author revolves around carefully considering the involvement of the audience, the viewer and the market for the communication. This raises contextual issues related to the reception and production of meaning by an audience by negotiation with an author/designer. Attention to this issue of context takes on a new significance with the expansion of graphic design practice into more fluid and participatory forms of co-authored experience, such as those represented by digital, interactive media products where the viewer/user often plays a central role in the construction the communicative event. To what degree a designer is now the author of the work is brought into sharp focus here.

The site of the debate has also been a platform for proposing alternatives to the term itself, challenging the appropriateness of the word author to the activity of graphic design. Widely known examples from the last two decades include: Steven Heller's (1998) 'designer as authorpreneur'; Ellen Lupton's (1998) and Victor Margolin's (2002) 'designer as producer'; and Michael Rock's (1998) designer as 'translator', 'performer' and 'director'.

As a teaching strategy, I have used such proposals to activate critical debate amongst learners. Presenting various critical positions this material can serve to problematise previous understandings and/or to challenge assumptions. Theoretical reading can be set up to highlight contradictions and inconsistencies between accounts of authorship in design, while at the same time drawing attention to the general conditions of much knowledge in our area – that it is subject to constant revision. These kinds of learning

encounters encourage a responsiveness to new alternatives and perspectives and emphasise that challenges to existing knowledge can be a positive condition in learning, as has been stressed by educational research. Again at subject level in art and design education, critical writing has highlighted the importance of this idea: "Compared to many other subjects the constant process of critical interrogation, revision and even redefinition within art and design leads to an inherent instability that is seen as positive, dynamic and productive" (Danvers 2003: 54).

What is useful about considering categories of design activity that fit a particular model of authorship in design, or contemplating different roles a designer might take on in different circumstances, or indeed challenging the title of author itself in graphic design, is not that you might end up with a definitive answer on the matter, but where you go along the way. This is the spirit in which design as inquiry and deep learning serve to transform understanding. Recently a student in my own design class undertook a final year project investigating artist book-making. Acknowledging the issues around authorship that arise from truly collaborative efforts by artists, designers, writers and producers, a number of research questions were developed. Analysing the roles of these various contributors this student asked whether aspects of the creation and production of an artists book that involve the artists' hand have more importance or superiority over one's that don't. An intellectual journey followed that involved interrogating current utilitarian, cultural and commercial value systems related to the book as a commodity item, a journey that has opened up many more questions and prompted new personal research directions for this student.

### **Critical Thinking**

It is always our intention in higher education to have students thinking critically as well as creatively about what they do. Art and Design education expects that arguments and viewpoints received by students and staff will be actively challenged and interrogated. The nature of critical inquiry requires us to first clarify the issues, then to engage in the evaluative task of assessing the claims made via the arguments provided. Using concepts of authorship for generating critical activity to support deep learning involves examining the underlying assumptions and/or revealing contradictions or incompatibilities that may exist, as well as evaluating competing arguments.

Expressing personal points of view through ones work or engaging experimentally with materials, processes and concepts have always been popular avenues for claims to self-authorship in design and bear obvious resemblances to art and art practice. Personal expression traditionally equals art. Design critic Rick Poyner comments in a recent issue of *Icon* magazine: "some designers are increasingly inclined to use their creations as a vehicle for the kinds of personal expression and commentary that are usually seen as art's preserve" (2005: 60). Practitioners working at the interface of design and art, self-authoring project briefs and working from self-directed conceptual beginnings, are actively blurring boundaries between design and art.

For example, Dunne and Raby (2001) engage in what they call 'critical design', working from a research-design perspective creating hypothetical products aimed at stimulating discussion and debate. They are not directed by a client, but self-initiate ideas and make projects happen allowing greater authorial control over the direction and content of work. They talk of using fine arts processes but stress their work has most impact when received in the context of design. Hella Jongerius is described as a designer who "regularly

blurs the distinction between design and art" (Coles 2007: 97). Working experimentally with materials, techniques and processes Jongerius' unique product designs mix history, tradition, contemporary inspiration, industrial processes, art and craft. Her often self-initiated design work conceptually investigates functionality and explores the potential of useable objects to tell stories.

Tendencies in the practices of contemporary artists and designers toward each other's discipline have questioned the extent to which interfaces between art and design occur, challenging us to reconsider terms like *designart*. Designart is a term used historically by contemporary artists and art critics to describe art practices that engage with the disciplines of art and design simultaneously. During the 1990s the term came to the fore again, highlighted through exhibitions of contemporary art's involvement with design, such as: *What If?: Art on the Verge of Architecture and Design*, at the Moderna Museet in Stockholm, 2000, and *Against Design*, at the Institute for Contemporary Art, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, 2000.

Design projects and practices termed conceptual, critical and experimental, and negotiations over terms like *designart* offer approaches to critically reflecting on our own conceptions and expectations of design. The ways in which they inform and extend debates over authorship in design provides motivation for reflecting on our own personal disposition in relation to the fields in which we work, or work across.

Several versions of the argument for authorship in design rely on the premise that recognising the level of already existing agency by designers in the process of meaning making is the key to attributing authorship status to designers. Michael Rocks' three metaphors for the Designer as author, proposed near the end of his 1998 essay titled "Graphic Authorship" are: *The Designer as Translator*, *The Designer as Performer*, and *The Designer as Director*. Each heightens our awareness of the potential level of engagement a designer has with originally supplied content.

Under the *Designer as translator* model the designer clarifies, remodels, reshapes and expresses the form and the spirit of original content. The *Designer as performer* has the designer re-contextualising original work, transforming content, and providing a "physical expression" (Rock 1998: 156) particular to a certain reading/interpretation of the work, just one of an infinite number of possible expressions. *The Designer as Director* claims a central role for the graphic designer in the shaping of meaning from given content on large-scale projects where it is possible "that the meaning can be manufactured by the arrangement of the projects elements" (Rock 1998: 156).

These models draw our attention to the complexity surrounding personal, subjective, and cognitive interests at work in giving form to content and raise questions about the level of neutrality possible by designers in the process of designing. It has often been the baseline of these arguments that graphic designers, by definition, are required to strive for neutrality while doing the work of expressing a client's message. Poynor comments that "a design cannot fail to be informed, in some measure, by personal taste, cultural understanding, social and political beliefs, and deeply held aesthetic preferences" (2003: 120).

Reflective analysis comes when we engage in questioning our previous understandings. What is of use here is that this content can be taken as a point of departure in reflecting on ones own work. As a self-reflexive act, this line of inquiry can have a powerful effect in helping us come to recognise how much of ourselves is in the work that we do. A challenge to our beliefs, assumptions and perspectives prompts us to question our existing beliefs,

values and understandings – processes inherent to transformative, self-education. What is also significant in turning to concepts of authorship in order to provide activating events in support of transformative learning is that in contrast to more generic topics in design studies such as communications or cultural theory, the specific topic of authorship asks designers questions about their relationship with their work at a personal, intimate level. Questions over agency, creation, origination and ownership that debates over authorship bring to the surface are heartfelt issues.

With changes to our profession brought about by substantial technological shifts (the impact of digital technologies for example), we have witnessed designers reflecting on authorship directly in relation to the work that they do. Lupton's (1998: 159) concept of *The Designer as Producer* is a notable example here. The direct relationship between what designers do in their own work, or say about their work or the work of other designers in regards to concepts of authorship can increase the motivational context for developing a learners own independent philosophical position as a designer.

### **Conclusion**

The existing body of criticism in graphic design is young in comparison to other disciplines. The body of critical discourse that surrounds the question of authorship in or by graphic designers represents one of the few discipline-specific areas of critical voice in which graphic designers have often spoken up to propose, argue and defend a personal, philosophical stance in relation to their practice as designers. Debates over a definition of authorship in graphic design represents terrain where designers have challenged existing interpretations of what it means to be a graphic designer, and what graphic design can or might do as a cultural product. It has been a forum where designers have challenged existing formal and theoretical conventions, questioned distinctions between design and art and faced up to challenges from critics and colleagues. Evidence of this exists through the things graphic designers have created, how they operate as practitioners, and by the processes they employ in their work.

The scope and variety of competing attempts of claims to authorship in graphic design represents a valuable resource for educators. A careful analysis of the dilemmas and contradictions, as well as the opportunities and challenges, that concepts of authorship in design present us with offer productive 'activating events' which can be used to expose the limitations and assumptions in our existing knowledge. This self-reflexive process attracts a learner to begin to formulate his/her own questions and research directions. Concepts of authorship offer us the opportunity to engage in critical and reflective modes of thinking as we take part in the evaluative task of assessing arguments while adding to our own knowledge.

*"The education of a design thinker must instill more curiosity than it quells, spawn more problems than solutions"* (Fost 2004: 11).

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