Visible Language
Special issue on 'the future of design education'.

Communication design education: could nine reflections be sufficient?

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Abstract:

Situation: Graphic design education is subject to substantial changes. Changes in professional practice and higher education aggravate insecurities about the contents and structure of courses, assessment criteria, relations between practice, research and theory, and teaching methods.

Assumption: Graphic design education (visual communication design education) needs to change to accommodate these changes.

Approach: There are many possible starting points to tackle the 'wicked problem' of visual communication design education. The starting point for this article is professional practice. Through the observation of practice, and interviews with practicing graphic designers, a set of common activities and approaches was distilled. These commonalities – the things that all graphic designers seem to have in common – are visualized in two diagrams.

Results: The two diagrams can be used as a basis for a critical review of current education in visual communication design, and indicate a motivated and testable development for the coming years.

Introduction: what are the problems?

There are a number of issues and trends that appear increasingly prominent in discussions about graphic design education. Some of these appear in the literature (Bennettt and Vulpinari, 2011), while others only seem to be expressed in the corridors of educational establishments.

There are two external developments that force a rethink of graphic design education.

a. The first external development is the change in professional practice itself. Increased use of digital technology, tighter economical control, and globalization are three factors that directly influence day-to-day graphic design practice.
b. The second external development are the fundamental changes in higher education. Changes in funding (a continuously changing mix of fees, government support, consultancy fees, and grants), organizational structures (integration of art schools into BA/MA structures, mergers with more traditional unversities), increasing numbers of students, decreasing numbers of staff, and increasing requirements for qualifications of staff, provoke a state of flux.

The consequences of these external developments are exacerbated by insecurities within graphic design education in the following five areas.

a. *Course contents and structure*. The substance of graphic design education, its structure, and the sequence in which it is taught should always be part of educational discussions. However, because there is no generally accepted overview of professional practice, this discussion is rarely based on reliable data. It is therefore hard to establish if the structure and sequence of a curriculum of a BA or MA-course provide all the essential topics that are necessary to practice afterwards. It might very well be the case that important parts of professional practice are not covered, or that some parts are over-emphasized if they are compared with their relevance in practice.
b. *Assessment criteria.* The criteria for assessing the activities of students are frequently unclear in character and meaning. This has an effect on enrolment procedures, project assessments, and for degree examinations.
c. *Research*. Research and practice are rarely integrated. Evidence based arguments, application of validated design methods, detailed recording of processes, and publications of results are rare, and are not very often taught.
d. *Theory.* The underpinning of commonly held beliefs in both graphic design practice and in graphic design education is poor. As a consequence, questionable opinions remain unchallenged and form part of education for a long time.
e. *Teaching methods*. Due to a reduction in staff-student ratio, the relations between teachers and students are under pressure. Alternative teaching methods need to be considered, developed, tested and implemented. Unfortunately, very few experiments are currently undertaken and little progress is made at a very slow pace.

The external developments and the internal insecurities suggest that it is necessary to reconsider some fundamental assumptions about graphic design practice and graphic design education. This reconsideration is not new. The discussion that it is necessary to change graphic design education goes back a long time and fits within a wider discussion about the education of professionals. Donald Schön noticed about 25 years ago the need for a new approach to educate professionals (Schön, 1987).

It is however remarkable that a profession that prides itself to be change-driven, visual, and communicative is so poor in changing its education, visualising its educational problems, and communicating in a clear way about these.

2. Two diagrams.

Approaching the abovementioned issues in relation to graphic design education has all the characteristics of a 'wicked problem' (Rittel, 1972). And although Rittel suggests that it is not possible to provide 'definite description', it is worthwhile to develop a preliminary version of a description of 'visual design practice' as a starting point for discussions.

A description of visual communication design?

The following description is based on preliminary results of recent research (August 2007 - May 2011) undertaken in the Netherlands. The outline is constructed from the results of an ongoing research project that aims to describe 'visual design practice'. Visual designers - who operate under a range of titles like 'graphic designer', 'information designer', 'interaction designer', 'web designer' – provide the data. The research uses observations of practice and depth interviews to find out how practitioners really work (Van der Waarde, 2009). This description is being tested, discussed and will be updated according to subsequent findings.
The research so far indicates that visual designers seem to follow two main patterns: 'considering visual configurations' and 'professional reflections'. The consideration of visual configurations is specific for visual designers. The professional reflections are more general. Below follows a brief description of both patterns.

a. 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 the beholder.

They 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 is called 'a concept'. Considering all three activities at the same time is called 'concept-development'.

These three activities can be further detailed as follows:
Activity 1: Considering visual elements.
There are only four kinds of visual elements: text elements, image elements, schematic elements, and 'inseparable combinations'. Visual 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,

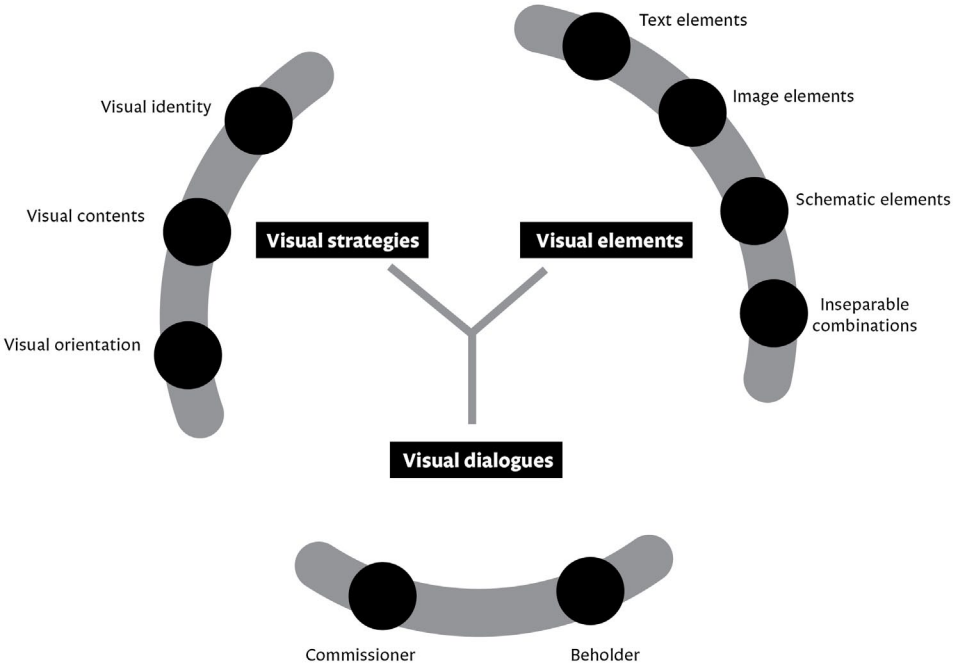

Diagram 1: Concept development: Graphic designers develop visual concepts through a simultaneous consideration of visual elements, visual strategy, and visual dialogues. This process aims to combine these three forms of visual argument into a single, all encompassing 'idea' or 'concept'.

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. Designers either use these as complete elements or redesign these as complete elements. In the digtial realm, these four kinds of visual elements are considered in combination with sounds or movements.

Activity 2: Considering a visual strategy.
Visual strategies combine three aims: identity, representation (contents, message), orientation (structure). In most projects, one of these aims is dominant. However, all three need to be considered. The first aim of visual 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. This format/structure represents the structure of information. And the third aim is to make it possible for a reader/user/beholder to navigate through the information. People must be able to orient themselves in order to start reading and to decide how to continue. Visual designers always have to consider a combination of these three aims when they develop a visual strategy.

Activity 3: Consider the dialogue between commissioner and beholders.
The third activity of visual designers is to consider the positions of commissioners in relation to the people they want to communicate with. Visual designers make these positions visible.

All three activities are considered together, and all influence eachother continuously. Diagram 1 illustrates this. 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 makes a reader looks less competent and makes a commissioner look paternalistic.)

The three activities are directly related to three 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. The results of the interviews with professional graphic designers indicate that graphic design practice can be partly described by referring to argumentation theories. This is not surprising if a main aim of graphic design is to enable communication between commissioners and beholders.

b. Nine professional reflections.

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

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

Reflection 2: Planning and 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 a commissioner. Presentations must provide arguments why a specific visual configuration was developed and why this configuration would be beneficial for the commissioner. Such a presentation must be considered carefully to contain all the relevant arguments to persuade a commissioner and make an assessment possible. The same arguments can be used in more public discussions afterwards when a particular configuration needs to be defended in the media, in design-contests or in portfolio's.

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. Also the benchmark tests, as they are described by Sless (2006) belong in this reflection.

Reflection 5: Modification for production. The production, distribution, and implementation must be considered. The opportunities and limitations will influence a visual configuration and need to be taken into account during the process. It is likely that production facilities, distribution channels, and implementation strategy will influence a project.

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, for information about medicines, the relations between governments, industry, doctors, insurances, pharmacies and patients provide a context that needs to be used as a basis.)

Reflection 7: Consider problem. Within a particular context, a designer focuses on a specific problem. Selecting a specific problem from a range of possible problems needs careful consideration. For example, 'visual information about medicines for patients' is a problem within the European health care 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, esthetic, ethical, sustainable are examples of different angles to approach a problem. 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.

Professional behaviour is characterized by a swift consideration of each reflection, and frequent switches between these reflections. A design process does not seem to be a linear activity of a number of subsequent and recurrent steps. It is more like a 'web of reflections' in which the sequence of considerations is determined by all sorts of influences such as experience, subject knowledge and skills. [This is based on the ideas of Donald Schön (1983, p 102) in which he describes a 'web of moves'.]

The starting point in this 'web of reflections' is not set beforehand, and this starting point might differ per project. Any starting point is acceptable and could be used: it is likely that any start leads directly to the consideration of other reflections. Diagram 2 shows this 'web of nine 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. However, in each project of graphic designers, it is possible to point to these reflections. 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. The diagrams make it possible to define 'a professional' as someone who is capable of considering all reflections together.

This preliminary description of two patterns - considering visual configurations & nine reflections - seems to cover the research findings of the investigation into the activities of visual designers in the Netherlands until now.

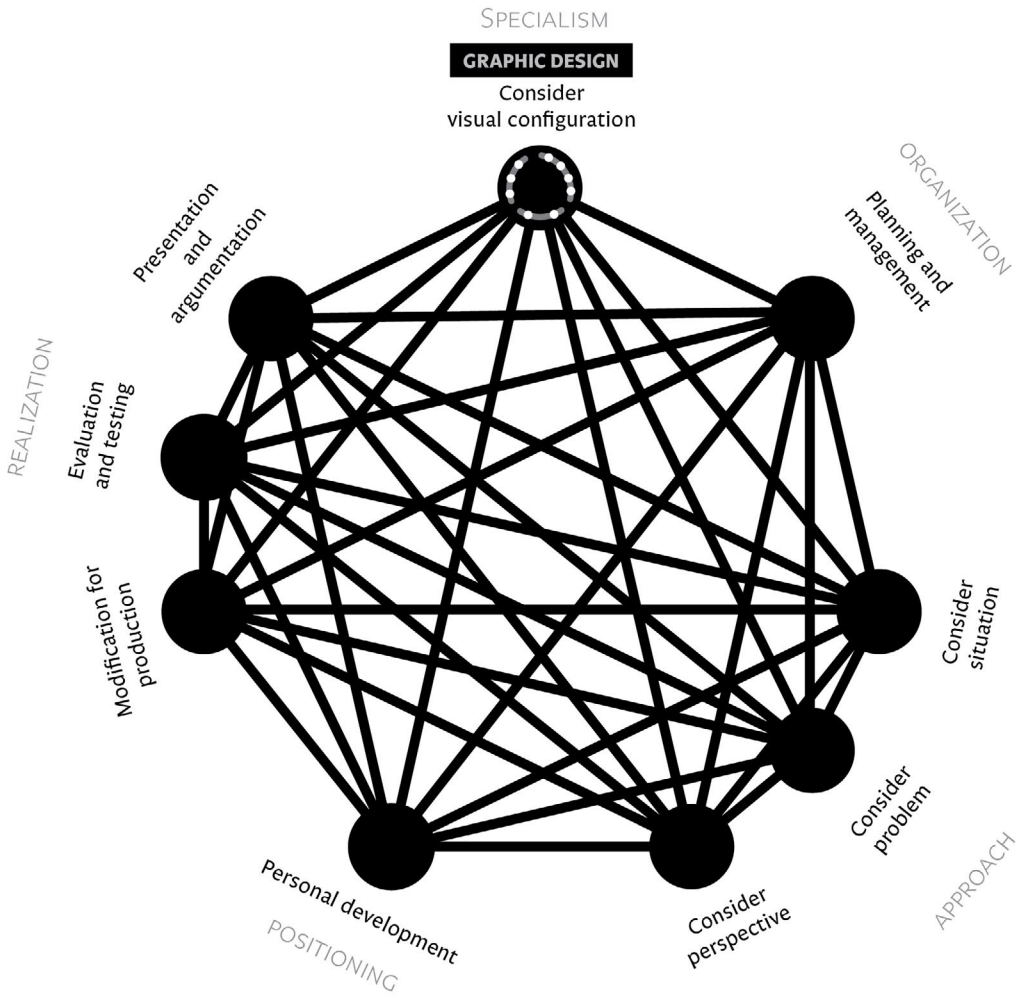

Diagram 2: Nine professional reflections: The 'web of reflections' shows the activities of graphic designers that are necessary to make the development of visual concepts possible.

3. Effects on education.

The two diagrams described above could provide a methodical basis to discuss graphic design education. They provide a structure to approach some of the problems that are mentioned in the introduction. Preliminary experiments with the implementation of these diagrams in education are positive, but more experiments are necessary to make sure that modifications can really be seen as improvements.

A brief revisit of the five areas that are mentioned earlier shows how both diagrams could be applied to these discussions.

a. *Course contents and structure.* The diagrams could provide a motivated and gradual development of a three-year BA-curriculum (see diagram 3). It brings students in contact with the fundamental issues of the profession in relation to the other issues. The limited time and continuously increasing contents of a course can be reviewed beforehand. The diagrams can be used to differentiate between the focus of courses on BA and MA level. This could make the distinctive position of courses clearer.

b. *Assessment criteria.* All reflections can be assessed separately using criteria and evaluation methods that are appropriate for each reflection. Aesthetics has its place, but it is also essential to assess for example project management (reflection 2), presentation (reflection 3) and testing skills (reflection 4). The results of some initial experiments show that it is possible to discuss the visual elements, visual strategy and visual dialogue with students separately and in combination. Each can be marked on its own merits.

c. *Research.* The three types of research – practical research, practice based research, and academic research – are directly integrated into the nine reflections. Practical research is essential to approach a practical situation or project. Practice based research is essential to provide evidence for classes of situations, and academic research is necessary to further our understanding of situations. All three types of research could be done in all nine reflections, but it depends on the purpose of the research how much and which type of research is required.

d. *Theory.* The diagrams indicate which theories are relevant for practitioners. The nine reflections each have their own theoretical background and so have the three visual activities. Some initial pointers are the literature about elements (typography, photography, illustration), strategy (visual persuasion, marketing, information design, identity design, communication strategies), dialogues (describing different relations between commissioners and beholders). Literature about the visual dialogues – how commissioners and beholders interact, enabled by visual materials – is

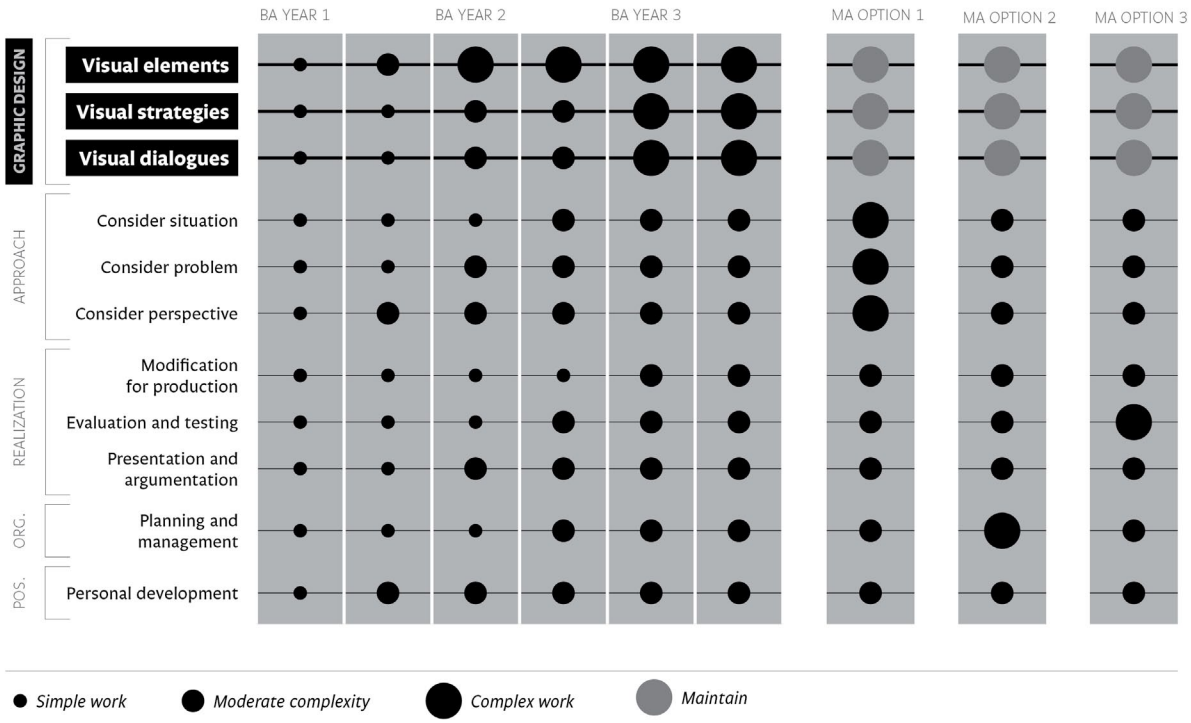

Diagram 3: Curriculum structure: The description of graphic design practice into nine reflections offers the opportunity to build a curriculum that introduces professional practice in a progressive manner. This description is independent from genres, media and tools. The focus of a BA-course is to learn to consider visual elements, visual strategies and visual dialogues in a coherent way. An MA-course can - apart from focussing on a specific medium (packaging, books, diagrams, type-design) - focus on different reflections. The diagram shows three examples: a focus on the observation of situations/problems/perspectives (option 1), a focus on planning and management (option 2), or a focus on evaluation and testing (option 3).

still scarce. However, there is plenty of literature about the eight other reflections: project management, observations of situations, problem detection, selecting a perspective, presentation techniques, testing and evaluation, implementation, and personal development. The currently prevailing dominance of art-history and art-philosophy needs be be curtailed in favour of theories about the abovementioned topics. It is clear that this is a very substantial amount, and it is unlikely that this could all be covered in three years.

e. *Teaching method.* The diagrams make it possible to relate the teaching method with the educational aims of the different reflections. For each reflection, it is possible to determine a combination of training and learning. The diagrams make clear that the dominance of a master-student model needs to be challenged and replaced by a range of teaching methods that suit the different reflections.

f. *Ethical questions.* In addition to the five points that were mentioned in the introduction, the diagrams can be helpful to discuss ethical questions. Each reflection incorporates an ethical component that needs to be considered in every practical project. These are questions about visual elements ('Am I allowed to use this typeface?', 'Could it harm people if I portray them like this?', 'Does this chart really reflect all data?'), visual strategies ('Is this a suitable identity for a commissioner?', 'Is the information contents correctly represented?', 'Does the structure lead or mislead the beholder?') and visual dialogues ('Does a design really enable an appropriate dialogue between commissioner and beholder?', 'Which beholders are excluded by this format?'). The same approach seems to be applicable for questions about the eight other reflections.

It is clear that graphic design education must change, probably radically and probably fast. Both diagrams might be part of the discussion about these changes. Still, it is essential to be very careful, and experiment and test alternatives thoroughly first before implementation.

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