

The graphic design mix

Anne Nicholls explains why theory, skills and experience are equally important to successful graphic designers



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Leonardo Da Vinci, Rembrandt, Van Gogh and Picasso. All household names, thanks to Dan Brown and TV historians like Simon Sharma. But do the names Neville Brody or Tom Eckersley mean anything to you? Probably not, unless you are immersed in the world of graphic design. However, you may well have seen their work. What about Harry Beck? Harry who? Anyone who travels in London will be familiar with his work because he was the designer of the London Underground map. And while we are on the subject of the London Underground, did you know that there was a man called Edward Johnson who created the London Underground Font and the famous logo?

It's the problem solving approach that is at the core of graphic design. "What we teach students is a set of behaviours," says Mike Bradshaw, Dean of the School of Graphic Design at London College of Communication (LCC). "It's not just about logos and how to design them. Graphic design is more about communicating with people. An important part of what graphic designers do is conveying information and making it easier for people to digest. But it's also about creating new ways of making people's lives better."

So what exactly is graphic design? Essentially it's a form of visual communication that uses text and/or images to present information, or promote a message. But the past ten years has seen the convergence

of different kinds of media, so that it is increasingly hard to slot graphic design into clearly defined categories. Branded objects and information environments are all now part of this subjects rich landscape of exploration and application.

“The design and media industries are so diverse now that graphic designers find themselves working in a vast range of different areas - in journalism, curation, film, television, spatial design, architecture, screen printing and performance. Graphic designers are also working as critics, visualisers and social commentators. Some are working in sound design,” says Jamie Hobson, principal lecturer in graphic design.

Design touches every aspect of people’s lives. It embraces a range of skills including typography, image development, page layout, illustration, digital production and many more. Graphic design is traditionally applied to flat surfaces and static media like books, magazines and brochures. Probably the earliest examples are the Egyptian hieroglyphics. But since the explosion of the new media, graphic designers find themselves working with an array of electronic media as well.

The core skill that all graphic designers possess is the ability to create visual solutions to problems. But they don’t necessarily have to be skilled in drawing.

One former student on an illustration course couldn’t draw very well in the classical sense. But he is now working in experimental design with type and electronics on projects within film, advertising and spatial design.

As well as mastering technical skills, graphic designers have to understand the needs of businesses, organisations and individuals. This involves a broader palette of skills and knowledge. Graphic designers, for instance, need an awareness of human behaviour and what motivates people to action. It is important to have a basic understanding of sociology, psychology, economics, physics, ergonomics, materials science and many other areas, together with an insatiable curiosity.

“A background in an area seemingly unrelated to design can be extremely useful,” says Mike Bradshaw. “We have postgraduate students come here to study design having had careers in areas like finance or health. Some want to change direction in their career; others are already working in design-related jobs within organisations and want to hone their skills. Being able to bring a wider range of skills and experience to the job of graphic designer is a huge asset.”

So how should a student embark on training for graphic design?

Students leaving school have several options. One is to take a Foundation course at a college and then apply for a BA degree. Another is to take a Foundation degree (normally two years) at a college or university and then progress onto the third year of a BA. Both kinds of foundation course are a good way of helping students to decide which aspect of design they want to specialise in, but some students may have sufficient work in their portfolio to go straight onto a BA degree course.

The purpose of a foundation course is largely diagnostic, providing opportunities to explore different areas of design. Some students at the end of the year may opt for graphic design; others may decide to specialise in typography, print making, surface design, spatial design, digital design or other areas. Most BA Honours degrees in Graphic Design also provide options or “pathways”, such as advertising, typography, illustration or information design.

“Graphic design courses vary from institution to institution. But the core of a BA Honours in Graphic Design is enabling students to develop a visual language and a critical approach to design. We expect students to challenge design orthodoxy. Learning to question convention and explore alternatives to traditional approaches is at the heart of what we do,” says Mike Bradshaw. “Our courses designed to teach people to visualise ideas and the confidence to express them through images. The emphasis is on process rather than product. What we are looking for from applicants is potential.”

It's important to study the course information carefully to make sure there is a balance between theory, skills development and work experience. Although one of the aims is to produce people with the practical skills that employers are looking for, a well-rounded graphic design degree programme would normally include a study of visual culture and theory, together with an opportunity for students to carry out research.

So a training in graphic design can open doors to a whole range of careers. Maybe James and Louise, who are featured below, will become as familiar as Constable or Caravaggio.

Case study: James Medcraft

The day after he completed his degree course in Graphic and Media Design (specialising in typography) at LCC James started work at United Visual Artists where he had freelanced during the course, producing graphics for the U2 world tour and MTV channel. During his industrial attachment year he worked with companies such as BskyB, RSA Films, Dazzle Films and John Brown Citrus Publications. Talking about the course he says: "On the typography pathway we have learnt so much more than typeface recognition. We have been taught to think about ideas. I design to communicate core ideas and messages to aid understanding. Concise unambiguous communication is at the heart of design".

Case study: Louise Pearson

After graduating with a BA in Graphic Design, Louise went to work in Nice as a freelance designer where she has built up a portfolio of clients. She says: "I still go back to the fundamentals of the course when I undertake a project. It has not only given me the confidence and opportunity to be a freelance designer, but also the basics, which never go out of fashion. I learned to be analytical in the understanding of visual information, thereby creating relevant and effective communication solutions adapted to individual briefs. Projects involving the creative process, an understanding of visual hierarchy, the communication of information

through simplifications, research and analysis are the timeless points of reference that guide me everyday in my work."

The author is Head of Marketing and Communications, London College of Communication. LCC is the largest of the six colleges that make up University of the Arts London. It has around 9,000 full-time and part-time students and its wide range of higher education courses includes photography, film and TV production, journalism, animation, media design, sound technology, graphic design, digital design, illustration, design for advertising, information design, design for the moving image, publishing production, digital media production, book arts and crafts, book binding and surface design, enterprise and management.