

ART DIRECTION AND ART CRITICISM IN THE GRAPHIC DESIGN CLASSROOM

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Introduction

The graphic design classroom is a place of study and learning about the processes, vocabulary, information, knowledge, and philosophy of graphic design. Through instruction and practicum, graphic design students develop the skills necessary to create aesthetically engaging art that communicates a message to an audience. There are many methods that an instructor can use to reach this goal. In this paper, I will discuss two methods, art direction and art criticism. In short, art direction is a way of guiding students through design fundamentals, while art criticism helps develop critical thinking skills. Both methods have benefits and detriments to the student and classroom, and the student can benefit by the application of both methods concurrently.

Environment

Instruction in the graphic design classroom is accomplished through an integration of lecture, demonstration, exercise, research, discussion, and assessment (figure 1). Lecture is the transfer of knowledge from an instructor to a student using verbal and supporting visuals. Demonstration displays the performance of an action to help students learn and understand. In exercises, students learn through the application of the current material and previously learned knowledge. Repeating the application of subject knowledge helps initially difficult material to become automatic. Through research, a student learns by self-instruction and applies this knowledge to the subject matter. In

this context, any reading of text with the goal of student self-learning is considered research. Where lecture is primarily an instructor transmitting information in one direction, discussion is a multidirectional conversation between all classroom stakeholders. Discussion allows for students to learn through interaction with each other and also to ask questions of the instructor. In the graphic design classroom, assessment can be considered a form of learning as it often entails a critique. As used in this context, critique is an evaluation that describes the strengths and weaknesses of an implementation with the goal that a student will learn from this feedback and make corrective adjustments accordingly. In actual practice, these methods will be mixed and employed together, often fluidly.

Graphic design subject matter is an amalgamation of aesthetic form, marketing, technical skill and knowledge, and problem solving (figure 2). Aesthetic form is important in that the physical result of a graphic designer's work tends to be visual in nature. Marketing concepts are used to teach audience, message, and brand concepts. Due to limitations and processes that are used to convert a mental form into a physical result, it is necessary for a graphic designer to have technical skill and knowledge. Finally, graphic designers require problem solving skills to be able to apply their knowledge to infinitely diverse projects.

Art Direction

In the graphic design industry, art direction is an essential duty performed usually by an Art Director or Senior Graphic Artist. One of the functions of art direction is the application of critical thinking skills to develop a visual solution for a project that is being worked on. Another function

of art direction in industry is to develop an aesthetic solution that communicates a message to and engages an audience to help fulfill the project's goals. To these ends, an Art Director's job is to develop critically thought out visual metaphors and lead graphic artists in the implementation of the visual design.

As applied to a graphic design classroom, art direction can be regarded as an instructor giving students guidance on design fundamentals. Guidance may include art direction pertaining to form, discourse on personas and scenarios, and design best practices (figure 3). Form focuses on the grammar of the graphic design aesthetic, applying terms like size, texture, position, color, and shape. Personas and scenarios are used to understand members of the target audience and how they will use/respond to the work. Design best practices are generally accepted industry methods for solving specific problems.

Through art-direction-as-guidance, an instructor is essentially transferring graphic design knowledge to the student. This is beneficial to the student for multiple reasons (figure 4). First, art direction helps foster a rapid acquisition of foundational information and methods for application thereof, which quickly gives the student the tools needed to apply what they are learning. Having the ability to implement ideas and apply theory from instruction makes it easier for a student to commit classroom instruction to memory. Secondly, having an understanding of the grammar and tools of graphic design gives the student a foundation where they can learn on their own. Through this, a student can begin to have meaningful dialogue with others and also connect personal research to what they have already learned. Lastly, art direction helps teach graphic design best

practices, thereby reducing the amount of foundational information and material needing to be redeveloped through the student's own cognition. This is especially useful in that the student learns the subject's generally accepted faux pas, so that they can be avoided. In summary, art direction as applied to the classroom is beneficial in that it teaches students the fundamental structure of the subject.

Although art direction is beneficial to student learning, it can also be detrimental. For starters, by giving students a set of generally accepted methods and solutions to apply to problems, critical thinking by the student is minimally necessary, and thus is developed accordingly. Additionally, it is possible for the student to treat the elements and principles as solidified facts that are non-questionable. As stated earlier, in industry an Art Director applies critical thinking to a problem. When art direction is being utilized as a tool in the classroom, the teacher is the de facto Art Director, and as such, retains the job of "critical thinker". One affect of this is that a teacher-as-art-director may guide a student on what to do or how to apply a method, but the critical thinking that led to the final decisions may not be given or made clear to the student. Another affect of the instructor-as-art-director is that the subject authority is vested in the instructor, which dominance effectually impedes the student from thinking freely. Because of these issues, the student's critical thinking abilities are not developed. At best, the student learns to rationalize the information and methods garnered, applying them as needed to solve problems in a standard way. This leads to multiple issues. First, students are not prepared to handle situations that they have not been trained for. Secondly, since students apply preconceived solutions, mimesis is inherent in this system. Furthermore, since the focus is on learning industry standards and not critical thinking, original

development will be subordinate to the mimicry of pre-existing work.

Art Criticism

Art Criticism is another method that can be used for learning in the graphic design classroom. Art criticism teaches how to look at, explore, and evaluate art through multiple pre-defined theory systems. Some systems used in Art Criticism are Formalism, Biography, Psychoanalysis, and Structuralism. Formalism deals with formal elements like shape, color, size etc. Biography is interested in applying the influence of the artist's life and experiences to evaluate a work.

Psychoanalysis focuses on the effects of the conscious and unconscious mind on art. Finally, Structuralism deals with the structure of a system as determined by the relationship between sets of binary opposites. As shown through these examples, Art Criticism can be considered as a set of standard systems for analysis and interpretation. More generally, Art Criticism can be applied to anything visual.

Art Criticism is applied to the graphic design classroom in a couple of ways. The first of which is the creation of dialogue using critique. Critique is the process of evaluating a work using Art Criticism methods. In the classroom, critique typically can be teacher evaluating student, teacher evaluating outside work, student evaluating other students, student evaluating self, or student evaluating outside work. Evaluation can be written, as is the case when grading, or verbal, as in class discussion. Another way that Art Criticism can be applied is by using its methods to analyze and interpret the client, the goal, the message, the users, etc of a project. By evaluating the parts of a project through the use of multiple criticism theories, a student can gain insights into a problem

from diverse perspectives.

Using Art Criticism in the classroom benefits the student in a number of ways (figure 5). The most notable of which is that through the use of critical analysis, students learn how to develop unique solutions to fit problems, allowing for original work. This is a byproduct of the development of critical thinking skills formed by evaluating, especially evaluating from multiple perspectives.

When multiple perspectives are given, decisions need to be made in regard to the most valuable interpretation for a problem. Another benefit of using Art Criticism in the classroom is that it provides students with a common foundation to evaluate each other and outside work, allowing for richer discourse, which gives opportunity for increased learning. Furthermore, when students apply art criticism theories to thinking about their projects, deep development of metaphors, symbols, and themes can occur, which will enrich their work beyond what can be expected from applying generally accepted industry symbols.

Like art direction, the use of Art Criticism in the classroom also can be detrimental to the graphic design student. One issue that occurs is when art criticism is used as the only feedback method with students to supplement their course materials. For example, if a student is having difficulty with basic formal elements, it may be difficult for the student to understand a critique using Art Criticism's Formalism. This difficulty is a result of the student's limited vocabulary and grasp of the material. Another issue that can occur is that critiques can be unclear, indistinctive, or allusory. An unclear critique is an issue in that the student may not be able to interpret the critique itself, and thus could not use it. A more adverse result of an unclear critique is that a misinterpretation of the

evaluation by the student is possible, which in turn will detract from learning. An allusory critique is disruptive in that it appears to say one thing, but underneath its superficial meaning lays the actual idea that the critic is attempting to transfer, though veiled. If a student is not aware of the veiled meaning, or is aware but does not know how to utilize the critique, the critique then becomes a detriment to the learning process, as the student either does not know that the meaning exists, or know how to respond to the unspoken issue. An indistinctive critique is more neutral than harmful due to its not communicating anything valuable or informative for evaluation purposes.

A deeper concern in regard to using Art Criticism to teach critical thinking skills is that the theories themselves limit thinking to the constructs of their respective systems. Because of this, students are at risk of developing pseudo-critical thinking skills. For example, if a student takes a set of theories and applies them exactly the same way to everything, they are essentially applying a set of standard processes generally without discernment of application. In turn, this shortchanges critical thinking in that the student is relying on their mastery of certain techniques, rather than questioning and developing answers individual to the problem at hand. Thus, the theories used in Art Criticism need to be used as guides to aid in understanding. Furthermore, students need to apply critical thinking to considering the theories themselves, as theories are inherently not infallible or perfect.

Another issue is one of self-fulfilling critique. This is an issue where a student applies critical method after the fact to explain why they did what they did. In terms of Art Criticism, this may not be a paramount issue because the student still critically analyzed their work by applying Art Criticism theories and methods. However, by matching what they produced to theories after-the-

fact, the student essentially is rationalizing the work, not critically thinking about it. Nonetheless, it is feasible that a student may need to think creatively enough in this process to have used critical thinking to define symbols, metaphors, themes, etc.

Partnering Art Direction and Art Criticism in the Classroom

Since both art direction and art criticism approaches are insufficient to transfer the needs of the graphic design subject to a student, partnering them with other methods could prove beneficial. The main deficit of art direction, when applied to the classroom, is that it inhibits the development of critical thinking by placing an emphasis on information and the rational implementation thereof. However, art direction's main benefit is efficient transfer of the foundational building blocks of the subject. Art criticism, in contrast, inadequately transfers foundational subject information and skills, but is substantially useful in developing critical thinking skills. Thus, the use of both art criticism and art direction together can benefit from the strengths of each, while diminishing their respective unfavorable effects (figure 6). This partnership is also advantageous because a base understanding of the subject is needed in order for the student to apply the critical thinking skills needed by art criticism.

In partnering art direction and art criticism, it is necessary to determine when each should be used and to what extent. As previously stated, critical thinking needs foundational subject matter for its application. Because of this limitation, a student's early instruction should begin with art direction, supported by an art criticism approach. The foundations of art criticism will also need to be taught and explored during early development. Since the student will be learning great amounts of

information about the graphic design subject, concurrently having to learn art criticism theory may overwhelm the student or pull-focus away from the main subject matter. To mitigate this, an instructor can exhibit art criticism theory in lectures, critiques, discussions, etc., while not directly teaching it. After the student has become more proficient in the subject matter, art criticism can be increasingly introduced. Eventually, once a student has a significant grasp of the graphic design subject, art direction can be sublimated to art criticism. Through the asking of questions instead of the giving of information, students have more opportunities to participate in thinking. Thus, giving art criticism the predominant role in the classroom propels the student to develop critical thinking skills.

Conclusion

Two approaches that can be applied to the graphic design classroom are art direction and art criticism. Art direction is beneficial for instruction due to its ability to transfer subject matter knowledge efficiently. Art criticism can be considered a useful tool for the graphic design classroom, due to its ability to help develop critical thinking skills through its application.

However, both art direction and art criticism have shortcomings that limit their effectiveness. Since the main use of art direction is to transfer the graphic design subject's foundational information and rational methods, the student learns to apply the information methodically to their projects, thereby effectively not significantly developing critically thinking abilities. In order for art criticism to be utilized effectively, the student needs to have an understanding of the subject's foundational information. Since both art direction and art criticism methods are inadequate in teaching graphic design alone, partnering them with each other mitigates their individual shortcomings and utilizes

their benefits. Through this relationship, a student learns not only the principles of graphic design, but also how to critically utilize the strengths and limitations of those principles in

application.

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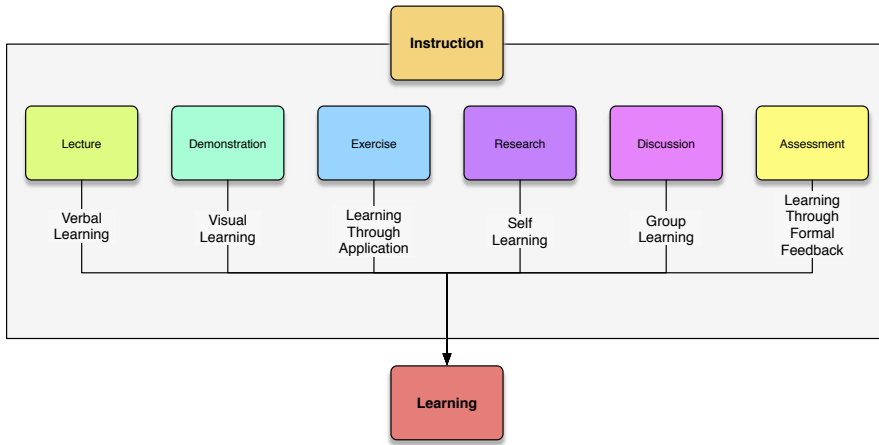


Figure 1. Instructional Methods

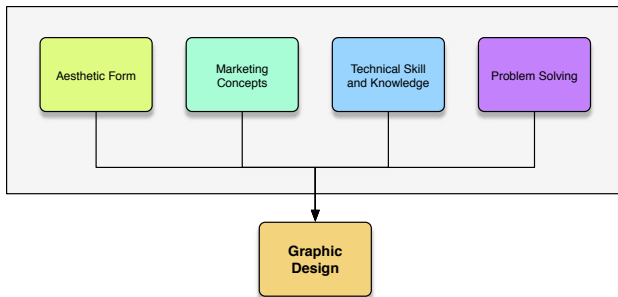


Figure 2. Graphic Design Components

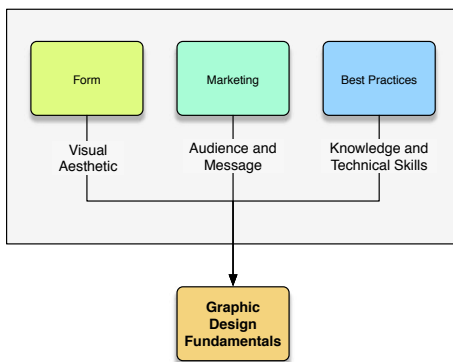


Figure 3. Graphic Design Fundamentals

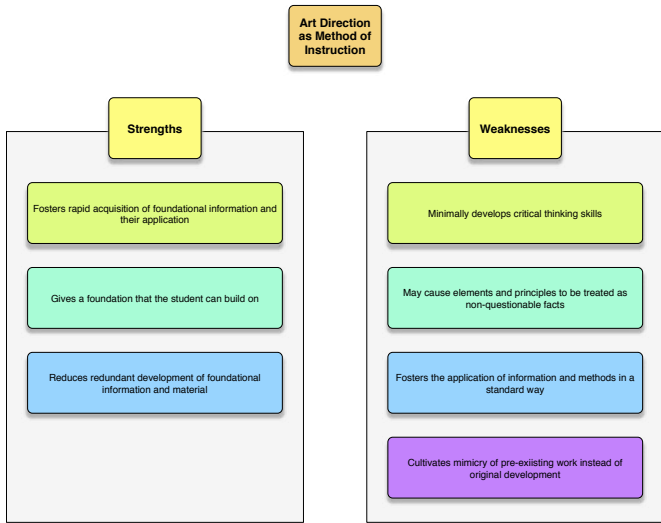


Figure 4. Strengths and Weaknesses of Art Direction as Method of Instruction

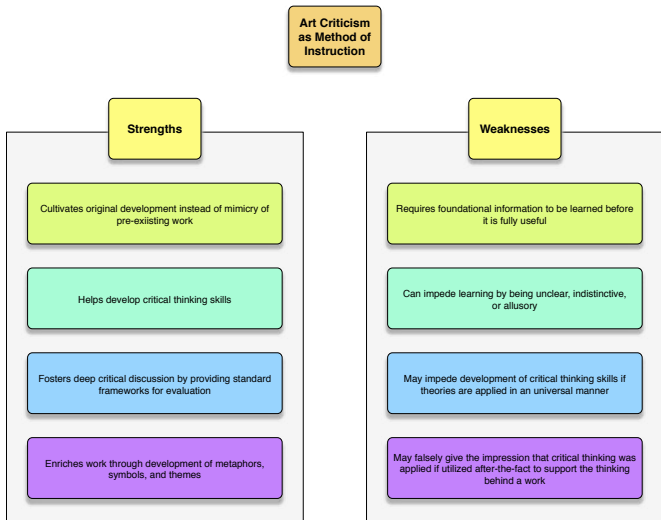


Figure 5. Strengths and Weaknesses of Art Criticism as Method of Instruction

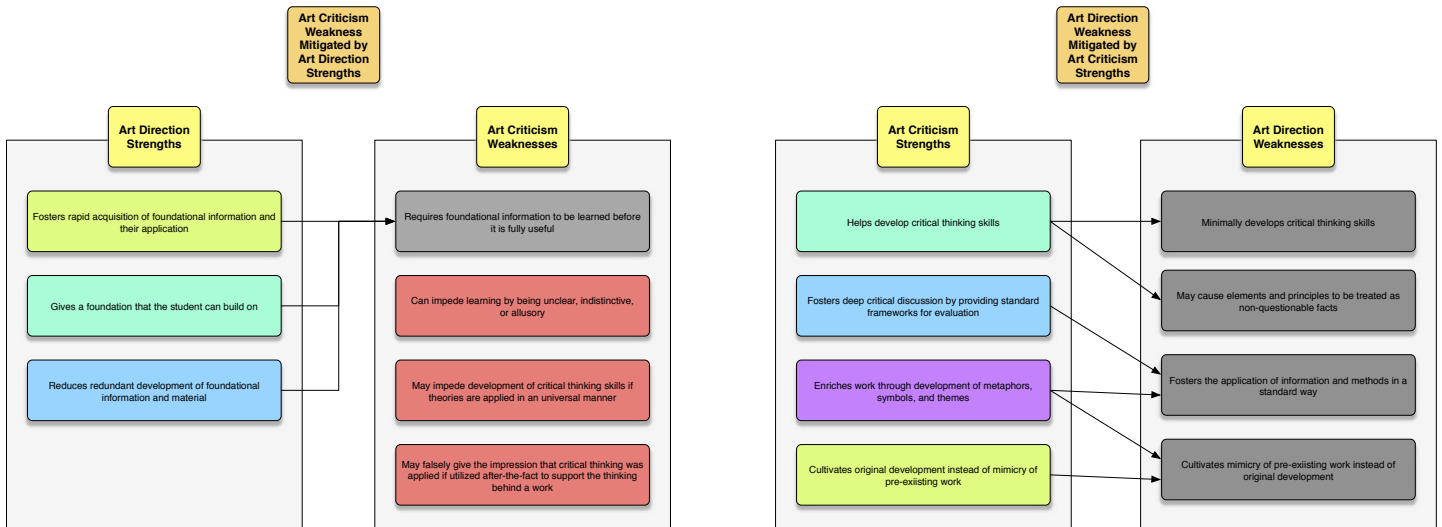


Figure 6. Mitigation of Weaknesses Through Application of Art Direction and Art Criticism