Sven Ingmar Thies (ed.)

Teaching Graphic Design

Approaches, Insights, the Role of Listening and 24 Interviews with Inspirational Educators

Birkhäuser Basel
‘Listening transfers responsibility to the students.’

Sven Ingmar Thies teaches Graphic Design

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Strategic Design
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INTRODUCTION

What does this book intend to offer?
This book provides the opportunity to get to know various approaches and opinions on design education and to examine one’s own position from a new perspective. It hopes to inspire awareness for options and actions in class in order to enable students to gain maximum experience and insight. Ideally, it will persuade educators to try out something new and contribute to making learning even more enjoyable for teachers and learners alike.

The book pursues the following four goals:
- to create an overview of potential teaching parameters
- to listen more consciously in class
- to receive feedback for one’s own teaching
- to foster more spatial variety.

The chapters focus on the following questions:
- What is it we are teaching? – Introductory thoughts
- How do we enable learning? – In-depth considerations
- How do others teach? – 24 interviews
- What are their project briefings like? – 12 examples

Why write a book on teaching design?
I think the main reason is because we all ask ourselves similar questions. What was it like, for example, when you first walked into the class you were going to teach? What did you expect of yourself, and what did the students expect of you? Looking back on several years of teaching experience, would you now walk into the same room with the same attitude? Has your teaching style changed? Is the institution you teach at changing its requirements? Have new challenges arisen from design practice or from society?

Just like everyone else, I started on the other side of the classroom as a pupil on my first day at primary school. Back then, seated in the second row, I was curious and excited, but felt insecure at the same time. On my first day at university, I experienced the same three emotions again, this time sitting in the second-to-last row. And then suddenly it was me standing on the other side of the classroom as the teacher of a university class. Again, on my way into class, feelings of instinctive curiosity, pleasurable excitement and – at least initially – slightly inhibiting insecurity accompanied me. At the same time, those three companions of mine served as an incentive to do my job well.
Many weeks before I walked into the university building as a teacher for the first time, I had already asked myself how I would teach. *What I would teach*, the subject and the goal, seemed clear, as I had been able to choose those myself. But *how I would teach* was not at all clear. I only knew that I wanted to share the passion I felt for designing with my students and to find a way in which both they and I could learn something new. Was there a *perfect* way to do that? Which methods would be successful? What do others do? And what do people from other cultures do?

These questions still linger on after ten years of teaching, which is why I decided to write about my professional experience and ask questions in a wider context.

To that end, I interviewed 24 specialists from China, Germany, Great Britain, Japan, Austria and the USA, many of whom have accumulated teaching experience beyond the borders of their countries. And I spoke to many students. I conducted my first interview in December 2019 and my last one in January 2023. During that time, the Corona pandemic not only affected teaching methods, but left its mark on this publication project as well.

This book is conceptualised and written from the perspective of a practising designer and committed educator; I teach graphic design with a holistic approach in the Class of Ideas at the University of Applied Arts Vienna. Design is becoming increasingly important as a means to deal with social, economic, ecological and political issues and find solutions for them. It is against this backdrop that I describe my work as a teacher and conduct interviews with various other teachers. Essentially, we all recount our personal experience.

**Who is this book aimed at?**
Above all, teachers. At the same time, however, it is inextricably committed to students and to people who strive to enhance their personal development.

In that sense, then, the content of this book focuses on the *how* in teaching without excluding the *what* and the *why*, because ultimately all three of them are dependent on and influence each other. The subject of scrutiny is not the structure of a curriculum or individual courses, but the collaboration between teachers and students. After all, we do learn from one another.

Seen from that perspective, listening is instrumental to collaboration in class. It is one of several ways to actively accompany students and support them in their endeavour to drive their personal development. Moreover, the potential of listening is transferable to professional practice: for example, when you, as the agent, listen to a client’s briefing or a designer listens to a colleague in day-to-day agency life.
The specialist focus here is on graphic design. Since the *how* in teaching can be regarded as interdisciplinary, however, people from the fields of design strategy, industrial design, game design, design theory, design research, sensory design, didactics and cognitive psychology were interviewed as well. That included a wide array of experts ranging from a Dean of Academic Strategy and heads of institutes to class-leading professors and a lecturer responsible for university courses. All of them have one thing in common: the desire to allow their students to experiment, gain experience and develop their own potential.

**Does this book intend to pigeonhole or to classify?**
No, on the contrary. Its intention is to enable comparison and deepen insights. It wishes to describe the passion for teaching and learning.

It aims to provide inspiration for learning.
I truly hope it does.
GRAPHIC DESIGN

Let’s start with the world we move in: graphic design.
In search of a definition

Do you work as a graphic designer? Do you teach communication design? Are you a professor teaching a class for graphic and information design? Or are you starting to study visual communication next semester?

Of course, the list of questions could go on and on – as could the names for the discipline. Some extend the sphere of activity in order to realign the name with the action involved. Others denote a specialisation and become new disciplines.

From a historical point of view, graphic design originally referred to designing two-dimensional printed material. Over time, however, a greater range of media needed designing. With package design, a third dimension surfaced. At some point, it became evident that services also required design. And now, everything connected to the virtual world is opening up further dimensions.

Due to this continuous expansion, the wish to rename graphic design has come up again and again, which seems understandable at first. After all, a new term seeks to capture and reflect the latest developments. At the same time, however, it seems a bit like inventing new professional titles so that every single employee has an individual position to show on their business card. In the end, though, that only points to prevailing hierarchies. Does it reflect modern practice? Why insist on new nomenclature when technological change gives rise to new media and forms of communication, but the substance remains the same? Graphic design has embraced such changes up to now and responded to current societal, social, political, economic and ecological requirements.

Moreover, a new name would face the almost irresolvable contradiction between a definition that needs to be precise and differentiate clearly, and the dynamic development of content and meanings, which creates ambiguity. In his reference to culture theorist Raymond Williams’s book *Keywords*, Professor for Design History Jeremy Aynsley² points out that, just like many other terms, graphic design has its own history, and its use and meaning are subject to change over time.

So graphic design does not need a new name. However, it must retain its readiness to change constantly and to interact with other disciplines.

Etymologically, the term ‘graphic design’ has two roots: ‘graphic’ stems from the Greek word ‘graphikē’ (téchnē), which means the art of painting and drawing, while ‘design’ comes from the Latin word ‘designare’, meaning to intend or designate. Painting and drawing allow something new to take shape, even if it sometimes means reproducing what is seen. On further reflection, graphic design could actually stand for the ability to express something new.
In order to express something new, one must have the will to change. This enables a critical approach to given facts or to an assigned task – so that one can ultimately understand it. Then the ideation process can begin. Only afterwards does the final result obtain its form – a design – through realisation.

Essentially, then, graphic design aims to change, understand, ideate and realise. These four activities can be regarded as fundamental to graphic design.

**Graphic design aims to change**
The driving force behind every designer is to change or to improve a situation, a phenomenon that is aptly described by social scientist and Nobel laureate Herbert A. Simon in his book *The Sciences of the Artificial*: ‘Everyone designs who devises courses of action aimed at changing existing situations into preferred ones.’ He then goes on to explain that, regarding the intellectual activity involved, there is no difference between someone producing material artefacts, someone prescribing remedies for a sick patient, or someone devising a new sales plan for a company or a social welfare policy for a state.

The difference between these exemplary actions practised by people from other professions and those of a designer is that design, like graphic design, relies on individual attitudes and methods to enable change. Hence, ‘the combination of imagination (visioning) and the ability to present things (visualisation) is considered the core of all practices in design.’ This definition of core competences is from the book titled *Designing Design Education*, which is the result of an international research project on the future of design studies. Social scientist Ekkehart Baumgartner comes to a similar conclusion in his essay ‘The Thinking Hand’ in the same book. Designers are perceived in their workings because ‘the designer can design both in a creative and in a thinking vein informed by knowing reality’, which makes designers unique compared to other professions. Bryan Lawson, who studied architecture and psychology and taught architecture, compares the approach of scientists to that of architects thus: while scientists focus on discovering rules, architects are obsessed with achieving the desired result and trying it out.

**Graphic design aims to understand**
Before any change is possible, graphic designers must understand the purpose of the task in question. And in order to understand something, it is not only necessary to penetrate the relevant subject matter, but to question it as well. ‘Critical thinking’ is not only critical towards a given task, but also in relation to one’s own environment, attitudes and actions. Graphic designers challenge other people, their ideas and goals. That is why they need to understand all kinds of tasks and have a genuine empathy for their fellow humans.

In search of a definition
Graphic design aims to ideate
In graphic design, goals are often described as ‘solutions to problems’, but I prefer to use the term ‘idea’. An idea may well solve a problem, but puts a stronger emphasis on conceiving something new. Graphic design aims to enhance the existing or even to create something previously unimaginable. This creative process is comparable to that of other design disciplines. Graphic designers analyse (think), produce ideas (conceive) and revise (rethink) in order to assess whether their outcome or fledgling idea might already have its justification. That process is reiterated as often as needed to reach the defined goal and allow the final result to take shape.

Graphic design aims to realise ideas
Graphic design aims to implement what was developed as an idea. During implementation, the reiterative process of continuous reconsideration and revision comes into play again until the idea assumes its final form. Giving form to an idea requires expert knowledge and a commitment to excellence. Graphic design aims to launch the idea with the greater intention of making it perceptible, impactful and, ideally, generate change. Accordingly, graphic design employs means of communication that appeal to as many senses as possible, as in the case of holistic design. To find the right way to achieve this, graphic designers use open-ended methods that frequently require visualisation tools.

Communicating
In all four basic activities of graphic design, designers require the ability to communicate comprehensibly and clearly. This has twofold significance: communication is designed for those who perceive the final result. At the same time, communication is also an essential part of the design process: communicating with all those involved in the process on their way to the final result. This approach is gaining ground in interdisciplinary and inter-cultural teams. Finally, two additional competences, genuine curiosity and intensity, are required – here the latter stands for in-depth involvement with all other participants as well as with the task itself.

Taking responsibility
Depending on the problem, the objective is to contribute to the cultural, social, political, economic and ecological development of our society. This is where graphic designers step in and assume responsibility. Graphic design is always at the service of humankind.
Design practice

Design practice has a twofold meaning: it describes what designers do, or practise on a daily basis, while also alluding to design as a practice in the course of which something is created. In this sense, graphic design is also a process that generates knowledge and produces results based on findings acquired in the process. In this way, ideas are realised.

Design practice as a creative process

Applied practice also aims to change, understand, discover ideas and realise them. Designer and educator Victor Papanek, who is notably associated with socially and ecologically sustainable design, says, ‘Design is the conscious and intuitive effort to impose meaningful order.’ This applies to both the creative process and the act of giving final form to the idea. Here, ‘giving form’ encompasses everything that is intangible or immaterial, thus also virtual things or services.

Design practice as a profession

Daily practice can perhaps be best clarified with an example:

The alarm goes off at 7 am in my hotel room. Outside it is pitch black and raining. The workshop begins punctually at half past eight. It is part of a brand development process consisting of two parts, starting with a summary of the jointly formulated brand purpose. This is done by two brand consultants from the partner enterprise that invited me to participate. I am to play my role in the second part. We call it design intervention. It involves collaboratively developing a feeling for the meaning of holistic design, which can range from a website and the design of seminar rooms to the behaviour of all staff members in order to establish a consistent experience. So today’s session is not about developing a design, but rather agreeing on the course of action and decision criteria. The client is a leadership and management academy.

Upon our arrival, we – that is, three external participants including myself – are joined by four client representatives: two CEOs, the head of marketing and a tutor.

After about two hours, a break with fruit and refreshments offers an interesting opportunity to talk about private matters, tea and enthusiasm for brands. Open questions and answers help create a pleasant atmosphere.

After that the design intervention begins. Meanwhile, the rain is drumming on the floor-length windows of the conference room. We begin with a walk around the building. Do the orientation system’s pictograms guide us clearly? What is the atmosphere like when you enter the large classroom?
Do we all perceive the same noises and smells? What at first seems a bit strange to the four people from the academy then leads to an increased sense of awareness. Design is much more than an external appearance. Design is always experienced.

Everyone gathers again in the conference room to consider the appearance of other educational institutions. Later on, assessment criteria and a procedure for the design process are established in a playful approach. Lively discussions that also invite contradiction alternate with clarifying sketches and numerous memos on a large wall. Listening to each other carefully, we are able to find the best-suited terms. This participative approach to encountering internal and external participants on an equal footing is maintained in the later design process. For there is no need to persuade anyone of anything that has been achieved in a collaborative effort.

At the end of the day, something has been created: a shared understanding – for the task, for the common course of action and for one another.

This example shows that, depending on the project dimensions, graphic design is mostly part of a greater process requiring a variety of expert opinions from different people alongside continuous harmonisation. At the very least, the project team will consist of a client and a graphic designer. While the final result itself is always about communicating content to a wider audience, personal communication and interaction pave the way towards achieving it. However, that process cannot be planned or guided throughout – on the contrary: a situational approach is prerequisite to engaging all of those involved and enabling them to become a team. Since decisions have consequences for others, designers must have a sense of responsibility.

The same applies to teaching.

Design education

The objective of design education is to prepare students for their future job as designers. However, since practice is subject to constant change, design education must remain open-minded towards all future questions and leave no room for any kind of forces that might restrict independent critical reflection and academic work. In that context, studying graphic design is a way to enhance oneself in the discipline. Embedded in a wider educational context, its supreme goal should be to foster one’s individual personal development.

On the other hand, the nature of education is influenced by the society, culture and community of which it is a part. Rector of the University of Applied Arts Vienna, Gerald Bast, views education against the backdrop
of digital transformation, which is seen as a cause of additional insecurity and uncertainty in our society. Education should therefore respond to complexity and mutual dependencies in society, politics, economy and environment. For him, the fact that artificial intelligence, digitisation and robotics are increasingly shaping our world requires people to face the challenge and develop hitherto inconceivable connections using creative cognitive processes. Intellectual, intuitive, social and emotional processes are therefore crucial in order to bring something about. In that respect, Bast believes that ‘a new “holistic thinking”’ would be necessary.8

Change affects many aspects of our lives, including our attitudes and needs. However, graphic designer and co-founder of brand consultancy Wolff Olins, Michael Wolff, is convinced that some things do not change: ‘And yet all people's need to be well-treated, loved and respected is still the same as it has always been. With all this change, design is still intended to serve, satisfy, improve life and delight people.’9

Bast and Wolff emphasise the importance of interpersonal skills. These very skills are an essential ingredient of education as a social process, which has a huge influence on society while also being an intrinsic part of it. Education thus has both small and large-scale effects.

A brief glance at the big picture reveals that not everyone has access to education. India-born Dean of Academic Strategy at Central Saint Martins in London, Rathna Ramanathan, comes from a region where many people cannot afford books. On a critical note she asks, ‘How can we claim that we make knowledge accessible if we can't even make knowledge affordable?’ Ramanathan has worked out a hypothetical solution by viewing the problem from a different perspective. She calls for a radical change of mindset: Couldn’t there be different copyrights depending on the type of publication? Printed books would cost something in that case. But the same digital texts would be available online for free.10

Key competences
Changing one’s own perspective leads to insights and allows new ideas to emerge. And ideally it leads to a change of what has already been recognised as worth changing. The World Economic Forum has listed the ability to solve complex problems, think critically and be creative among the top ten professional skills of 2025.11 These are competences that are still being learned, tried out and applied in graphic design study courses, including the ability to use solution-oriented methods whatever the thematic content. Hence, design education also enables people to learn how to learn. And in the process, our discipline changes us as a person, but we change the discipline as well.

These theoretical considerations lead to the question of how to teach graphic design in practice.
TEACHING