

Design Literacy

Framing the Reading

Jane Smith wrote this research paper as a third-year UI/UX design student at the University of California, Davis. This paper was part of her UWP 101(Advanced English Course) research paper, where she addresses what is 'Design Literacy' and how it is being practiced by designers. For this research project, Smith interviewed a UC Davis design professor who earned his Ph.D. in Art History from Boston University and has been working on this field for more than two decades. Moreover, she also surveyed seven design students and alumni from three different universities in California.

Reading

The field of Design involves several academic disciplines. As the word, 'design' itself includes; Web Design, User Experience/Interface Design, Motion Design, Graphic and Interactive Design, Architecture, Industrial Design, Fashion Design, etc. Each of these fields requires practice in literacy based on their individual demands. For this research project, my focus is on the upcoming designers where I will discuss the different methods in which design literacy is practiced. There are three major literacy practices studied in this field. First, learning how to communicate with users and understanding their experience. Second, being competent in visual language (having a basic knowledge of form, style, and color). Third, being able to read and write programming languages (HTML/CSS). These are the three main

literacy practices that are crucial for every designer to understand before entering the professional design world. This research project will investigate how one can practice literacy in the field of Design, followed by an analysis describing the three important literacy practices studied in this field.

Learning how to communicate with users and understanding their experience.

As a designer, learning how to communicate and understand user experience is the foremost and crucial analysis to be conducted and considered. Most of the time, designers tend to create art works in their own artistic style in which they are comfortable, rather than focusing on what the audience actually desires to see. In the book *'The Design of Everyday Things,'* Don Norman states how lack of communication and understanding leads the designers to create "bad" design. "Design is really an act of communication, which means having a deep understanding of the person with whom the designer is communicating" (Norman 1988). However, the 'bad' design in this context does not represent the designer's failure, but it represents the designer's 'learning experience'. We need to understand that "To fail is to learn: we learn more from our failure than from our success" (Norman 1988). Also, Don Norman is an expert in both technology and cognitive science, he understands the point of view from both designers and developers' sides. Thus, he thinks that we should always keep "Positive Psychology" and positive psychology is when we remove the word 'failure' from our vocabulary and replace it with 'learning experience'. Doing this helps the designer to be motivated and creative.

Moreover, a great example of how communication plays a big role in understanding is, imagine someone asks you to make a sandwich but doesn't give any details on what kind of sandwich they would like. Now do you make 'chef's touch' classic sandwiches with ham,

tuna, sausage, or just salads with mayonnaise? Do you add tomato, peanut butter or cheese? You wouldn't know as there are so many ways to make a sandwich. Yet they somehow expect you to know that they want roast beef and tomatoes. Taking this in the context of design, if the designer is unknown to the users want, it will just be a waste of time taken to conceptualize and design countless of ideas for the designers as well as for the users. In the article "*Importance of communication of Design*" Julia Fulton states,

In the marketing world, graphic design functions both as a product that both agencies and in-house marketing departments provide to a company, as well as an activity for communication and design teams involved within a project. Therefore, it is essential that your teams communicate with one another as they embark on the journey to create marketing projects and materials that speak to your audience. Without a doubt, there is a lot of planning and exchanging of ideas when it comes to design work.

Graphic design plays an overall vital role in enhancing the communication and marketing activities your tech company participates in with others. Good designs will set you apart from your competition, but great designs will also help your business convey a message of credibility and professionalism.

No doubt that effective communication is important in design. It would be worthless if the design is aesthetically pleasing, yet with no clear message or representation. Thus, effective communication among the design, audience, and designer themselves is very important.

Being competent in visual language (having a basic knowledge of form, style, and color).

Visual design focuses on the aesthetics of a site and its related materials by strategically implementing form, style, typography, color, and other elements. These are the

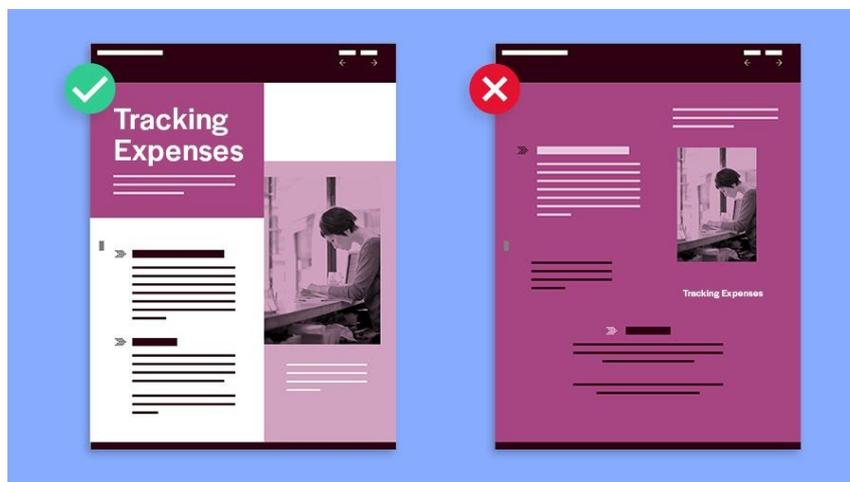
basic design literacy that one must know to become a successful designer. In the survey, I questioned, what were the three important design practices that have helped them grow stronger. The majority of the answers were having a good knowledge of typography, color theory, and the wisdom of design principles.

In the survey, Ziyang Jian, a UC San Diego Media Design, alumni shared how typography plays a huge role in the design world. Jian stated that visual hierarchy— (Hierarchy, a use of placement, font, etc. to show importance) knowledge is vital. When it comes to designs, texts usually take a better chunk of design itself unless it's just a conceptual illustration. Texts carry the information that designers are trying to convey to the audience mostly in commercial and industrial fields. Having typography knowledge allows designers to make a design aesthetically pleasing, inviting people to read what's been written. Especially, it makes design legible and accessible to the general audience who might not have a background in art. When a creator designs a page or an art work, their pivotal goal is to deliver an expression, an idea without bringing confusion to the viewers. If the audience has a hard time understanding a traditional or legible art piece. If they can't comprehend where to focus and where the piece is going, it's more likely that the design/layout is missing a clear visual hierarchy.

Similarly, color is another huge part of the design. It influences viewers' psychologically and mentally, as it has great practical meaning. It creates depth, adds emphasis, and helps organize information. Good use of color can emphasize, deemphasize, and help the visually impaired people to access information better. In the survey, Sabrina Kwong, a San Jose State University Media/Graphic Design, student stated, "Color has a strong psychological and emotional response to its viewers and can become a strong way to make others notice the design." Color overruns every aspect of our lives. Every day we

encounter colors that make us happy and the colors we are indifferent to. So as a designer, having a solid understanding of color and its usage is very important.

In the Image attached below, we can see how the use of ‘type hierarchy’ (having clear heading and symmetrically balanced body paragraph) and a balanced ‘color’ choice can make a striking impact in the design. You can see for yourself on the comparisons of the designs on the left and right. On the left, the design feels lighter, as the viewers can easily focus on a block at a time and understand the implications. While on the right, the design feels heavy and congested, confusing the users where the information motions.



Moreover, design principles are another foundation of design literacy. It refers to contrast, Gestalt—(Gestalt, use these principles of how people perceive objects to guide how users interpret your design), unity— (to establish harmony), hierarchy, pattern, repetition, movement, space, balance, etc. It guides designers to create excellent art pieces and pages. Comprehending and allowing the usage of all the design principles can effectively make you a successful visual designer.

Being able to read and write programming languages (HTML/CSS).

As everything is evolving around us, the demand for being knowledgeable in every aspect of your field is also increasing. If we look at the recent context, the knowledge of programming language is highly demanded for designers. Sushant Singh Rajput, a student topper who was majoring in Engineering and minoring in Performing Arts from India, stated in an interview that, 65% of the kids who are going to kindergarten now will work in the field of technology in the future. Also, in the next five to eight years, the coding language will be as important as international students learning English. I believe this statement to be true because if we look at this idea in the context of a job internship now, it is very competitive and only those with higher skills get the job. So, with the ever so evolving world and its needs, we have to adapt and comply with its demands. Also, now schools and colleges are offering coding classes such as "Coding for Designers". These coding classes are designed in a way where the designers can learn HTML and the basics of JAVA, and do not have to learn a high programming language such as Malbolge and C++.

Moreover, in the Treehouse article on "*Why Designers Should Code*" they provided us with some valid reasons for why coding for designers is essential. They stated that "Many people view code as a restriction to a designer but when I learned to code I found it liberating... it opened up a whole new realm of creative possibilities. Basically, learning code made me a much better Web Designer." I believe that coding as a designer gives the creator a chance to reiterate their design, to make it even better during the process of coding because you understand that there are extended possibilities. The more you know coding and designing together, the more you push your creativity further. It's not only in the matter of extending your creativity, but you will start to face challenges which can make your design skills more complex, which will only allow you to grow your horizon. Learning new skills or software is like when you first learn to crawl, walk, and run. It becomes a habit and you don't

think of it, you can further that creativity by learning how to dance, do gymnastics and so much more.

Furthermore, In the survey, Lijun Yue a UI/UX designer, who graduated from UC Davis shared how she struggled during her internship. Yue struggled during her internship because the arguments between her and the developer about what would and wouldn't work were amazing. This argument often occurs because the designers do not have an idea on the limit of developers coding their design. Hence, when the designers design something vast and difficult, it challenges developers and with that misunderstanding an argument can erupt. Therefore, if you are a designer who doesn't understand the labor of coding, by learning how to code, your designs will be communicated well and deemed possible for the time you have planned. The results will be satisfying and will definitely be executed in the way you want them to.

Professors Response

I interviewed a UC Davis design professor, Dr. James Housefield, who earned his Ph.D. in Art History from Boston University. He's been teaching at the University of California, Davis since 2008 and he is a phenomenal design professor. I conducted an email interview where I asked Prof. Housefield three questions, from which one was "How is literacy practiced in the field of design?" However, the professor responded first by defining "What is design literacy?". He stated that before defining design literacy "it is important to recognize that there are differences between design literacy in society and in the studio (design practice). Because design studies emphasize both society and the studio, both literacies are relevant." Following that Prof Housefield also stated that one who achieves design literacy will be able to analyze their design and consider what its salient characteristics

are and how it came into being (process!), how successful it is as a design, what makes it successful, whether it is adequately functional and accessible to all, and what ethical questions it raises.

Further, my next question to professor Housefield was “What literate practices can help one to be successful in the field of Design?” He responded that the observations and conversations are the basic tools for practicing design literacy. The more analytical the observations, the better they will be at guiding the designer’s understanding. Conversations erupt through basic research interviews to identify needs and opportunities, to understand how audiences encounter and use design, and to guide the cyclical process into making new iterations.

Lastly, I asked, “Can you give some examples of literate practices that have helped you become successful?” His response to this, specifically for me and the upcoming designers is a must to understand. The response was as follow:

Looking broadly, empathetically, deeply, and constantly can improve a designer’s ability to see and understand. By breadth, I mean going outside of one’s own comfort zone, habits, and culture. Breadth takes work but we have many tools at our disposal to help us, from museums and libraries to videos and the internet. Looking empathetically requires seeing designs through the eyes and experiences of others, which again means getting outside one’s own silo and engaging in conversations with deep and close listening. Looking deeply is close analysis and repeated analysis. Although first impressions will always guide us we have to look beyond, perhaps discovering social contexts and histories that are not immediately apparent. Constantly means always being aware that designs are all around us, and we must interrogate them actively. As a practitioner, the essential practices include having a

process that one follows. That process demands multiple iterations, rigor in research, and consistent documentation. Designers will inevitably improve their practice through any means that improve their listening and communication skills.

Recommended Courses

While design is something that can be taught to yourself from online media. Yet, to get into a professional field of design, taking courses from professionals and understanding and gathering their experience would be different from online classes. I would like to recommend some courses that were essential for me and will surely be essential for you. This can also open the door for your better learning. The following are the courses I have taken at UC Davis and it has helped me grow stronger.

Coding for Designers

Most of the design schools and colleges offer coding courses. I highly encourage you to take at least a basic coding course because learning code opens up a whole new world of job opportunities, or even if you're looking for freelance gigs or permanent employment. As a UI/UX designer I have taken "*Coding for Designers*"— (coding with Processing Programming), and "Interactive Media I/II"— (HTML/CSS) courses which has helped me design my web portfolio page and have opened doors for many job offerings.

Design Aesthetics/Experience

I encourage upcoming designers to take courses related to design aesthetics and experience. As a designer, we should be able to understand the depth meaning of design aesthetics and experience. "*Design Aesthetics and Experience,*" asks us to question

experiences, with examples that range widely from dance to Disney, from the design of concerts to the Whole Earth Festival, to the design of exhibition spaces and narrative environments. What can we learn from the built environment and design of embodied experiences that can be applied to the development of new spaces of virtual reality including apps and games?

Communication

Similarly, most of the students majoring in Design also minor in Communication. Although it is not required, yet, I think taking a communication course can help designers overcome the fear of being in front of many people. As communication is part of the three major literacy practices studied in the field of design, I highly recommend you to take communication courses to boost your communication ability. Taking an example of my own experience, I am an immigrant and with English being my second language it keeps me in a danger zone of not being able to communicate fluently as a native speaker. However, while I was in the community college, I took communication courses which helped me overcome my fear of being in front of many people and putting my opinion without any hesitation.

Conclusion

Design is multidisciplinary, yet being competent in the skills you need for your specific area can help you lead in the right direction. With the knowledge of the basic design principles and the three areas of design literacy, you can be accountable for dealing with any design problems. As a designer, we are not only designing things but also solving design problems. If we look around, we see that our daily life is inundated by designs. So, it is on our hands as designers to build a sustainable and productive design. Additionally, technology

and design are in constant demand. Each passing year the technical tools and media are getting better. Therefore, we should always be up to date and open to change. We should accept the new challenges and deal with them with a modern approach.

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