

INTRODUCING DEVELOPMENT EDUCATION INTO PRACTICAL DESIGN CURRICULA

Alan Costello

Introduction

This article discusses some of the professional concerns of a vocational college tutor in the process of integrating development education issues into graphic design and digital media programmes at Ballyfermot College of Further Education in Dublin. The article highlights some of the difficulties faced when introducing development education into pre-existing design modules and presents some of the briefs given to students that introduce aspects of development education in a relevant and transparent manner.

Some initial concerns

As a college tutor the primary commitment is to the fulfillment of one's professional obligations to the student. Students in further education programmes in a vocational college often intend to progress to degree level study (with advanced entry where possible), while other students intend moving directly into employment, a less certain objective in the current economic climate. The relationship that exists between the tutor and the student is such that the realisation of the student's educational and career goals must be one of the tutor's principal concerns. Equipping students with the hard and soft skills necessary for the attainment of their goals is of primary importance. On the Higher National Diplomas in Graphic Design and Digital Media (each of two years' duration), emphasis is given to the development of skills in a wide range of industry standard computer applications and developing the student's sensitivity to form and function in a broader sense through a wide variety of realistic and challenging projects. Traditionally development education is rarely a feature in the education of these students.

In the context of graphic design and digital media one must first ask whether development education can be integrated into the curricula at all without detrimentally affecting the primary goals of these programmes. The next question is how development education might benefit the student in the context of their chosen design-based specialism. If development education is to be integrated into courses such as the Higher National Diplomas in Graphic

Design and Digital Media it must not vie with the primary function of these courses. Indeed, it must add a positive dimension to the students' *design* education, if this is the tutor's remit.

Introducing development education into practical design-based curricula

The development of specific technical skills to a requisite level is intrinsic to graphic design and digital media courses at third level. In some instances the sole purpose of an exercise or a project is the transmission of technical skills. In many instances the introduction of development education issues at this stage would serve to detract from the job at hand. In these instances there is little room for development education. However, as these courses progress and as the students become more confident in their technical abilities, opportunities do exist for exercises and projects that allow for the introduction of development education issues. Graphic design and digital media projects at this stage usually require the solving of conceptual, informational and/or presentational problems, often with respect to a client, whether real or hypothetical. The acquisition of soft skills in the form of research, concept development and participation in class discussions, critiques and tutorials allows for development education issues to be discussed where relevant to the content or the context of a given project. It is in the formulation of these projects that development education issues can be written in as either content or included in a broader, more contextual sense.

'Mother Tongue' poster competition

The International Indigenous Design Network (INDIGO) is an International Council of Graphic Design Associations (ICOGRADA)-led initiative of the International Design Alliance (IDA). An explanation of the rationale behind the INDIGO network, as quoted from their website, states that:

“The notion of indigenous and local design [...] often includes themes of colonization, migration, politics, language, history, identity and conditions such as the economy and natural resources. To address this notion and to further explore its meaning and interpretation throughout the world INDIGO was born. Through its participants and projects, INDIGO seeks to gain some insight into what makes design distinctive to its home, the connections to the place where it is made and for whom it is made”.

Recently INDIGO ran the ‘Mother Tongue’ poster competition. This competition required students to produce a poster in a given format that responded to the following text:

“Language is not only a product of human life – it is a pre-requisite that humans require to form relationships. As a fundamental form of expression, language binds us together. A language can be visual – made up of complex ideas of truth deeply rooted in symbols, custom and imagery. Mother Tongue is about the power of language – verbal and visual, formal and informal. First language. Native language. It honours languages at risk of being lost in our globalising society and those that have survived the forces of colonisation”.

For graphic design and digital media students this exercise presents an interesting challenge. Firstly, there is no discernable client. Secondly, there is no specific communication ‘problem’ to solve. The question then is how best to present this exercise/project to students in a manner that the students can see its relevance to their ‘design’ education?

In a professional context visual communication problems can initially lack form and/or clarity. Meetings are often required between clients and designers to discuss the nature of a given job. At this stage goals can be identified and strategies developed. The ability to develop a thoughtful solution or sensitive approach to a broad and perhaps initially ill-defined problem is a valuable skill. Through group discussions, class presentations and individual tutorials students get the opportunity to consider the various subject areas inherent in ‘Mother Tongue’ for themselves; they partake in dialogue and begin to identify strands that both interest them personally and ‘answer the brief’.

Presenting the project in this manner allows the student adequate room to consider the great many issues alluded to in the text of the brief, and affords ample time for the discussion of these ideas in class. From a practical perspective the student’s analytical and conceptual skills are developed, their capacity to articulate their understanding of the issues implied in the text is tested and their presentational skills are refined. In this project the tutor has handed responsibility for learning back to the student to a degree.

During in-class discussions and presentations the tutor can deliver information on aspects of development education, can challenge student’s preconceptions and misconceptions, and can encourage refinement in the

student's research techniques, encouraging a more sophisticated analysis of relevant issues. This is as much a challenge to the tutor uninitiated in every aspect of development education as to the student. However, if an open and informed climate can be created in the classroom much can be learned from each student's interpretation of the project, the range of issues implicit in the text, the variety of approaches considered and the research presented.

While in no way unorthodox in design teaching generally, this approach runs parallel to the 'critical literacy' discussed by Vanessa Andreotti (2006), in which an understanding of development education and change is promoted:

“without telling learners what they should think or do, [but] by creating spaces where they are safe to analyse and experiment with other forms of seeing/thinking and being/relating to one another. The focus is on the historical/cultural production of knowledge and power in order to empower learners to make better informed choices, but the choices of action and meaning [...] are never imposed, as the 'right to signify' is recognised and respected [...]" (Andreotti, 2006).

Furthermore, this open, dialectical approach to class discussion is based upon:

“[...] the strategic assumption that all knowledge is partial and incomplete, constructed in our contexts, cultures and experiences. Therefore, we lack the knowledge constructed in other contexts, cultures and experiences [...]" (Andreotti, 2006).

It may even be helpful from a development education perspective if this dialectical approach is made explicit during class discussion.

Other projects this year that have provided access to development education issues for graphic design and digital media students at Ballyfermot College of Further Education have included 'World Day Against Death Penalty' (www.posterfortomorrow.org) and 'Water Is Life' (www.posterart-waterislife.com).

Conclusion

Fundamental to the role of the graphic designer is dialogue: principally the dialogue between content and form, and words and images. Graphic designers

operate at the point where meaning is engineered and content takes shape. As a professional graphic designer one can claim to have developed a sophisticated approach to the presentation of information and consequently the construction of meaning (without putting it too grandly). However, one cannot also expect to be expert in the area of development education. Informing oneself in this regard is an on-going project. In introducing projects such as those above and working closely with the students one hopes that these projects can at least contribute to the creation of ‘informed and engaged citizens [...] best placed to critically address complex social and economic issues linked to development’ as suggested in Irish Aid’s Development Education Strategy Plan for 2007 – 2011. If we can achieve this aim, whilst fulfilling our primary professional obligation to our students, our efforts will not have been in vain.

References

Andreotti, V (2006) ‘Soft Versus Critical Global Citizenship Education’ in *Policy & Practice: A Development Education Review*, Issue 3, Autumn 2006, pp. 49-50.

Alan Costello is a tutor in graphic design, digital media & illustration at Ballyfermot College of Further Education (CDVEC). He has lectured at the National College of Art & Design (NCAD), the Institute of Art, Design & Technology (IADT) and Coláiste Dhúlaigh (CDVEC). He is a freelance graphic designer & researcher.