2015

Designing Social Change: Inquiry-based Practice & Teaching

Donald Tarallo

Bridgewater State University, donald.tarallo@bridgew.edu

DESIGNING SOCIAL CHANGE: INQUIRY-BASED PRACTICE & TEACHING

DONALD TARALLO
BRIDGEWATER STATE UNIVERSITY
BRIDGEWATER, UNITED STATES
DTARALLO@BRIDGEW.EDU

ABSTRACT

This paper shares an exploratory and inquiry-based graphic design project and the resultant pedagogic approach that offers arts and design educators ideas on teaching to instigate positive social change. The author summarizes a year-long fellowship project where he worked as a change agent in service to a partnership of six non-profit, after-school arts programs in Providence, Rhode Island who are organized as the Providence Youth Arts Collaborative (PYAC).

The intention of this project was two-fold. The primary effort was to investigate ways graphic design can be strategically used to seed interest and empower youth to make positive choices with how they spend their time after school, such as enrolling in a free PYAC member Arts program. The second aspect was to use design to strengthen the visual identity of PYAC in order to unify their voices and improve their offerings.

The design process and the visual outputs are presented as a model for teaching at high school and college levels that cultivate awareness of the social power of visual communication and a civically engaged process. Systems thinking and theoretical models of social change are discussed in support of the project intentions.

From the printed word to Graphic Design

Since the birth of Typography in the middle 1400s, religion, politics, and industry have utilized the power of the printed word and image to benefit their communication needs. Over time, a sophisticated commercial art evolved to service those needs, which was later termed *Graphic Design*. Graphic Design shapes visual culture and can be part of society's problems as it may be used to fabricate artificial need and desire. It also holds potential to benefit the greater good because it has the power to shape how we perceive our environment and therefore how we live. Design education equips students well to meet the demands of commerce, but it could better nurture its potential to influence the greater good. For that to happen there needs to be teachable alternatives to the dominant commercial and client-driven practice model. As educators we can offer alternative models that cultivate a critical involvement with the practice to enable students to transform their world.

The graphic designer Jan Van Toorn writes extensively on the need for a change in the design practice. He claims that graphic design has reached a point that it no longer has room for "emancipatory engagement". He explains the practice as "imprisoned in a fiction which does not respond to factual reality beyond the representation of the culture industry and its communicative monopoly" [1]. He asserts that designers must oppose this monopoly through critical practice. If designers were more involved in the initial planning of projects (upstream), rather than production (downstream), then there would be more opportunities to serve the greater good. Traditionally designers work somewhere in between marketing (upstream) and production (downstream) [2].

This essay summarizes a project carried out to extend the design process upstream and to work in a strategic and civically engaged manner. Tim Brown of the design firm IDEO popularized the designer-as-strategist concept with the term "Design Thinking". He defines this as something unique a designer can offer at the planning stages because design is an activity that is "human-centered" and it "relies on our ability to be intuitive, to recognize patterns, to construct ideas that are emotionally meaningful as well as functional" [3]. Design education fosters empathy, analytical problem solving, and intuition. Introducing more strategy to visual education is a logical step to empower students to critically engage with their world through their hands and minds.

The project and the process
The Providence Youth Arts Collaborative was an ideal community to explore designer as strategist for social change. Their offerings are one of many positive and negative choices that lure youth for their free time after school. The community also needs them: a rough statistic offered by PYAC was that there are twenty seven thousand Providence public school students and twenty-two K-12 Arts teachers [4].

The design process and resultant visual outputs were guided by the inquiry question: *How can graphic design improve the credibility and visibility of the Providence Youth Arts Collaborative so that they can increase their offerings to youth and encourage youth to enroll in an after-school program?* This inquiry-based approach is not common in design education, which typically models a client and a designer-in-service scenario. In contrast, a civically engaged inquiry-based approach leaves room for questions and discovery as students search for support to reinforce their ideas on how to deal with systemic problems that cannot often be premeditated and must be worked with over a long duration of time.

To fully understand design in its social context, I involved a range of viewpoints to give all stakeholders a voice in my process. The inquiry methods were interviewing, surveys, workshops, meetings, and work critiques. I interviewed students and the PYAC mentors to learn their thoughts on effective communication channels and a suitable design tone. I held workshops with a high school student at New Urban Arts (a PYAC member) and a former student from my university. I attended monthly PYAC meetings where we brainstormed and critiqued ideas. My design team (the two students) and I read case studies and theories concerning social change. These activities aided us in our design decisions by providing feedback,

72

expectations of impact, and theoretical support. A useful model of social change was *Diffusion of Innovations*, which studies the process of how an innovation is "communicated through certain channels and adopted over time among members in a social system" [5]. Those who embrace the innovation are divided into groups according to the time they embrace it: innovators, early adopters, early majority, late majority, and laggards. According to this model opinion leaders and peer-to-peer networks are the most effective change agents. Utilizing this well-established model, we designed outputs that exert an influence over time and through the change agents. To integrate this model into our design process we defined the current PYAC students and mentors as the innovators and early adopters with peer-to-peer influence and as potential opinion leaders. Guidance counselors were also considered opinion leaders.

In the workshops with my design team we created social system maps (education, peers, cultural, recreational), which helped to identify effective openings (see Fig. 1) within the systems where design outputs can assist change agents to attract youth to PYAC programs.
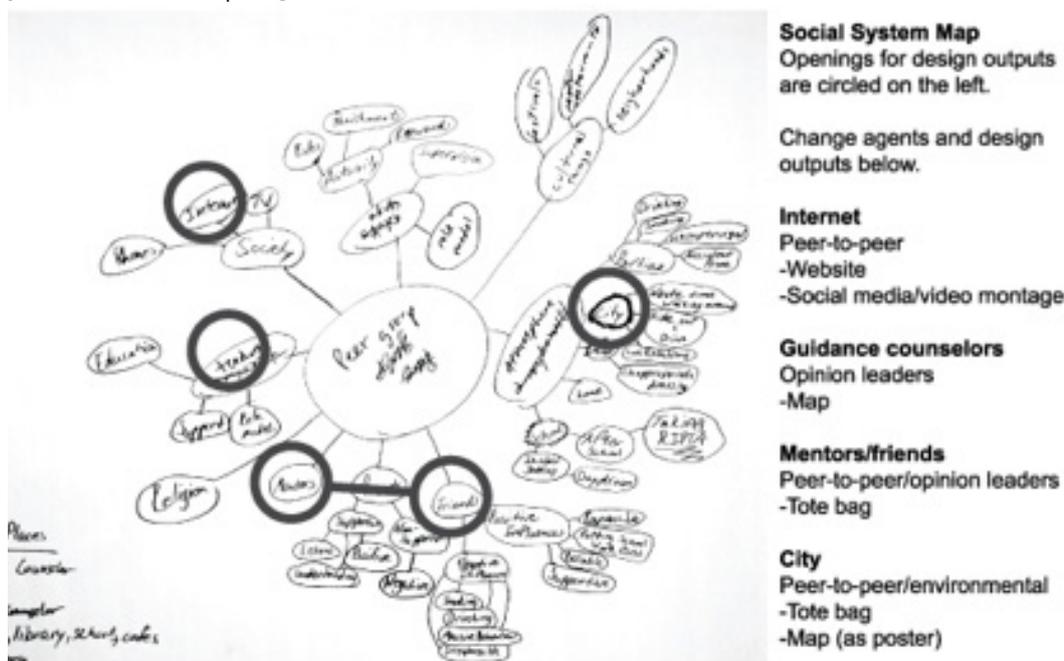

Fig. 1, social system map, "openings" circled, agents and outputs on right

The visual outputs

I surveyed the PYAC members at the beginning of the design process to learn what they thought was an appropriate visual tone for the work. The keywords derived from those surveys included; urban, loose, serious, playful, not centralized, and transparent. These words along with the *Diffusion of Innovations* model drove the mood and method of the design outputs described below.

The primary elements of the visual identity are the visual language and the logo. The logo I designed represents the six members of PYAC through the use of six dots, which are connected by gradient-filled lines forming a network that expands into space to create a metaphor for idea exchange. The star suggests that their unity is greater than their individuality.

73

Fig. 2, visual outputs, visit the website at: www.pyac-ri.org

Together with my design team we created an icon family to represent the PYAC's offerings. The icons communicate on a purely visual level and are core elements to the visual identity.

The website was an intensive editing process to choose images that appeal to all stakeholders (youth, members, nonprofits, and funding agencies). It provides information about PYAC offerings for potential students. To utilize peer-to-peer influence and guide people to the website, we decided tote bags would be effective as they can be a reusable and wearable object by innovators and early adopters. To engage with the audience, the tote bags carry a question: "What Can You Do?" which is surrounded by the words; music and theatre, film, visual arts, and dance.

Informal interviews with about thirty youth at New Urban Arts, led my design team to conclude that social media is a prevalent means through which youth receive information. Considering this, I made a video montage that tells a diverse visual story of all of the PYAC offerings and others successfully engaging in an artistic activity. This resides on the website and on a social media outlet for peer-to-peer sharing and viral influence.

We designed a map that charts the PYAC member locations in the city and describes their offerings. It doubles as a poster and a hand-out. It was sent to guidance councilors and PYAC members with the intention to utilize both peer-to-peer and opinion leader influence. It was printed on paper made of 100% post-consumer content and with low toxicity inks. The map is a form of empowerment as it informs youth of free arts opportunities. It has received much praise from PYAC and the Providence public school system. Based on meta-analyses of similar outreach campaigns the intended effect of this project on the Providence public school youth community is expected to be 5% or less [6].

Toward an alternative teaching model
The following reflections are offered to those interested to bring similar work into their classroom. Designing for the greater good benefits from holistic considerations in a process that addresses larger macro concerns of community and social improvement and micro issues of environmentally friendly materials. A clearly defined and realistic set of objectives that state the desired change in the beginning of a project will help focus and guide the work. Systems mapping will help develop an overview of the social terrain and to identify openings for influence and intervention with graphic design. Community engagement throughout the design process ensures the work maintains its purpose and provides a forum for feedback.

Define a point-of-view to approach the objectives from a position. Students would benefit from a four-part process of reading, writing, interviewing, and making. They are mutually dependent for ideas to develop in critically informed ways. Design for change to unfold gradually over time. Peer-to-peer influence and opinion leaders have proven benefits of influencing change [7]. Surveys are a valuable form of feedback and measure both before and after the design work.

Choose methods and materials that are ethically produced and environmentally sound, such as recycled and sustainably manufactured papers and ink without toxic metallic components. The printing industry is the third largest producer of waste [8] so there is a lot of potential to minimize any environmental impact in the production aspect of the work. Low toxicity plastic like #2 (HDPE) is a good choice and has a high recycling rate, while #3 (PVC) is one of the worst both in toxicity and recycling [9]. Plan ahead to avoid overnight air shipping as it contributes to five times more CO_2 emissions than ground transport [10].

Conclusion
This project adds to the ongoing conversation on the social value of art and design with hopes that sharing my process will further extend this project's mission. It offers an alternative thread to weave into the fabric of art and design education. Expanding the definition of the design process to include upstream and community engagement is a needed alternative in the practice and could be an integral component of high school and undergraduate visual education. This alternative method coupled with grant writing skills would provide students with tools to start self-initiated projects and lead to new models of community-based design practices.

Design is a social art. We use it to shape how we live and understand the world around us, and we are shaped by it in return. By teaching art and design in ways that deal curiously and critically with our world, we can empower students to change it.

Acknowledgment

References
[1] Van Toorn, Jan. "Design and Reflexivity". *Visible Language. New Perspectives: Critical Histories of Graphic Design 2* (1994): 319

[2] Dougherty, Brian, et al. *Green Graphic Design*. New York: Allworth Press, 2008. 46

[3] Brown, Tim. *Change by Design.* New York: HarperCollins, 2009. 4

[4] PYAC meeting. November 13, 2012

[5] Rogers, Everett M. *Diffusion of Innovations.* New York: The Free Press/Simon & Schuster, [1962] 1995. 5

[6] Snyder, Leslie B. "Health Communication Campaigns and Their Impact on Behavior". *Journal of Nutrition Education and Behavior* 39.2 (2007): s32–S40

[7] Klein Weinriech, Nedra. *Hands-On Social Marketing, A Step-by-Step Guide to Designing Change for Good.* Los Angeles: Sage Publications, 2011. 109

[8] Berman, David B. *Do Good Design, How Designers Can Change the World.* Berkley: New Riders, 2009. 131

[9] Dougherty, 145

[10] Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development 2001, International Energy Agency (OECD)."Good Practice Greenhouse Abatement Policies: Transport." 2001. <http://www.oecd.org/env/cc/2345641.pdf>, last accessed: March 7, 2013