

Design Education In Progress

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by Gunnar Swanson

A Fall, 1997 email conversation between Gunnar Swanson (in Duluth, Minnesota) and James Souttar (in London). Swanson then headed the graphic design program at University of Minnesota Duluth and Souttar then taught at Central St. Martins. We were originally asked to write one article each—one on theoretical investigations in typographic education and the other on applied investigations in typographic education.

[Gunnar] My first question on our writing about “theoretical investigations in the study and understanding of typography” and “the value of applied investigation in the study and understanding of typography” is just what those phrases might mean. How do “theoretical investigations” and “applied investigations” differ in typography? Is there a theory of type (or many such theories)?

We designers use a lot of academic terminology differently than do, say, physicists. We talk of “experiments” when we mean playing around. A scientist would not consider something an experiment unless she started out with a hypothesis (based on observation or on the analysis of current theory), set up a reasonable, verifiable, and repeatable method of testing that hypothesis, and then went about doing so under controlled circumstances. Our “research” is often modeled more after the mad scientist in cartoons, randomly mixing chemicals and then drinking it to see

what happens. (By the way, I don't mean to cast aspersions on the value of playing around. It's a central requirement in the arts but does it correspond better to the observation phase mentioned above rather than to experimentation?)

When we say "theory" it often refers to post structuralist social writing that came out of literary theory. This doesn't seem to apply to our "theory" vs. "applied" problem. What sort of "theory" is there about graphic design and/or typography or is there a more fruitful way of looking at these questions?

[James] I was trying to conceive what a 'theory of type' might be like. Type quickly resolves to language, and it's there that I would look for the underpinnings of theory. But I'm reminded that Saussure forsook written language to concentrate on the spoken, and those linguists who followed him did likewise. So there isn't really a comprehensive body of theory on 'visual language' to which we can turn. Then is there a body of theory that relates to the purely visual aspect of type? But there are dangers in treating letterforms in the same way as other marks. 'Letters are things, not pictures of things' as Eric Gill wisely observed. There is, of course, an empirical basis for typography—the mechanics of reading, for instance—but I would be cautious about dignifying this with the word theory.

Much, I think, depends upon how we interpret 'theory' and 'experiment.' I agree that, in comparison with a modern, scientific model, typographic experiment lacks a conceptual framework and investigative rigor. But we are not engaged in a scientific enterprise: there is nothing to discover and nothing to prove, except in a personal sense. However, I think that if you look for an earlier meaning of these things, you will find something closer both to what we do and what we need. The original Greek 'theoria' means seeing. And the kind of theory that is useful to us, as typographers, is that which enables us to 'see' what we're doing. Likewise, 'experiment' springs out of the same root as 'experience'—and understood in this context, is much more relevant to typographic experimentation. Furthermore, the close connection between seeing and experience should be a cue for us to seek closer links between 'theory' and 'experiment' in design education and practice.

Interestingly, this [post structuralist literary theory] started by being critics' theory—and in its current incarnation in graphic design, it is predominantly used as a way in which critics talk about designers' work. I think it is important to be able to explain one's work—to enable others to 'see' it in the light of a body of ideas they may not currently be aware of—but there has to be a congruence between theory and practice. Here we have a theory here that is not only a hand-me-down from lit. crit.—but one that typographers (particularly typography students) have great difficulty interpreting (except in the most obvious and prosaic ways, for instance in

equating 'deconstruction' with the physical dismemberment of type).

My own starting point in investigating type was to begin with Goethe's 'Don't look for anything behind the phenomena; they themselves are the theory.' Which is easier said than done. To be able to 'see' a phenomenon as its own theory requires a subtle rearrangement of our interpretative faculties—a grasping for what one sees as a meaning, and not just for some abstract 'meaning' of what one sees. This is, of course, the route Heidegger used in his 'Way to Language'—and there are many similarities. Which brings us full circle back to the issue of language as a theoretical basis of typography—but, in this case, not the mechanistic linguistics of Saussure or Chomsky, but the subtle journeying towards language of the Phenomenological tradition.

[Gunnar] Your last comment pretty much blows any chance of dividing the “theoretical investigations” and the “applied investigations,” doesn't it? Since typography is a phenomenon of use, how would we go about separating the theory from the application?

The nature of theory and analysis is normally the separating of the inseparable. We talk about form and content or meaning and context, all the while knowing that, as the song goes, “You can't have one without the other.” Is there some distinction we should be looking for between the theoretical and the applied or is that a dead end?

Am I just getting into a semantic rut with this? Should we get back to the original questions and rephrase them? Since we're talking about education, do our questions make more sense if we phrase it as the educational value of playing around with type and the educational value of pretending that something is a “real” graphic design job?

[James] Bear in mind, though, that I'm coming at this from the point of view of having been brought in to try and 'integrate' critical theory and studio practice at CSM—so 'separating' theory from practice doesn't come easily.

I suppose I take a fairly simple and naïve view of it. When someone sits down and 'does' typography you can say 'they are arranging and rearranging letterforms' or you can say 'they are creating visual meanings.' I'm in favour of an approach which doesn't see these as different perspectives, but as dimensions of each other. To try to get a better take on all this, I sat down to re-read Wolfgang Weingart's (1972) 'How Can One Make Swiss Typography' in octavo 87.4. I remember being profoundly bored at one of Weingart's lectures, but I did remember that he was a great exponent of mechanical exercises. I wanted to know whether there was an approach to typography (and, indeed, to teaching typography) that was focused on 'applied investigations.' Weingart gets about as near as one comes to that, but I was surprised by the extent that he feels obliged to wrap it in theory (mostly, in this case, derived from Communication Theory).

So I'm wondering if one can talk about 'applied investigations' without reference to theory?

(As a bit of an aside to this question) one of the things that interests me about the theory/practice question is the issue of whether a theoretical framework really influences one when one is working, and how. I'm not talking about the 'conscience of a Calvinist' that haunts one's every thought and judgment—but the kind of theoretical background that comes from reading a few books and/or listening to some lectures. Does this half remembered intellectual model actually inform the less conscious decision making of design practice, or is it an irrelevance? So I suppose what I'm asking is whether theory and practice aren't more separate than we suppose.

[Re: rephrasing the question as the educational value of playing around vs. pretending that something is a "real" graphic design job?] I don't think so. I don't know what 'educational value' means any more—so don't get me on that one!

'Playing around with type' clearly has benefits—apart from the prospect of a serendipitous solution to a design problem, it makes one aware of a greater range of possibilities (especially if someone else is there to suggest exercises that wouldn't normally occur to you).

But I think there's an interesting question lurking beneath the surface here. Why is it that we are fascinated with type, and love to play with it? If typography was just a matter of encoding-transmitting-decoding a message, with as little noise or redundancy as possible, typographic play would be (in Spock's immortal word) 'illogical.' This question rears its head again in the vexing question of why we need more typefaces (I'm leaving Weingart out of the 'we' here). But we do. In fact we will value playfulness above—and to the detriment of—the effectiveness of the message (and sometimes our clients will even let us!). There must be something fundamentally human that expresses itself in this playfulness—with its search for novelty and its sometimes deliberate flouting of the 'rules.' Perhaps this leads us back to a theoretical dimension, too?

[Gunnar] As is often the case in our conversations, I think your aside may be precisely to the point. When I talk to a client (or the few other people who ever ask) about my work I have pretty precise reasons for everything I did but I certainly don't do most of my design as some sort of complex syllogistic game like chess. I start out with specific problems to solve but don't necessarily design straightforward answers to the problems. When I'm done I have no trouble explaining why it is precisely the way it is. Does this mean I'm a pathological liar who is so good at deception that he even convinces himself or are theory a practice linked at least subconsciously?

If the latter is your choice, the question that remains is what sort of theory

feeds application, especially application that will widen our horizons.

Becoming aware of a greater range of possibilities certainly has educational value. That may be the single greatest value of education as far as I'm concerned. There are a couple of aspects to this. One is the urge to take things apart and see how they work. Getting back to the point of all this—education and typography—one advantage of school is having a safe haven where you can take things apart (intellectually and physically) without the threat of most of the negative repercussions. I think that part of the delight we take in playing with type is in discovering the complexity of the human mind. Type seems at first glance to do a few things in a straightforward way but when you tweak it you discover it's an enormously resilient system. Human understanding is very complex. (If it weren't, we'd know what design theory and typographic theory are and we could explain them and move on.)

Another aspect is the delight in that resilience. It's always fun to stress something beyond what should be the breaking point and have it keep working. There's also something to taking a very old system and making it do something new. It's not even the neurotic quest for novelty—there's just something about the power of knowing that you've gone past what was the horizon and there's still someplace to go.

[James] There seems to be an interesting—and somewhat unexpected—relationship between theory, intention, working methods and post rationalization. I used to be a cynic about this, but I'm coming around to a view that the conscious part of the design process could be the least important. That is, that there is a wealth of tacit knowledge that we don't know we have which manifests itself in our work without us being aware of it. Or at least, can manifest itself—if we give it a chance.

But this does raise the question of where all that theory goes. Does one have to be aware of the theoretical implications of what one does, when one is doing it, for one's work to have any theoretical significance? If so, it makes liars and hypocrites of us all. But if one doesn't—is the theory nothing more than reading significance into something that never really had any? I think there must be a third solution, but I'm damned if I can put my finger on it. . .

*As this relates to education, I came across an interesting perspective from the cognitive sciences. This comes from a book called *Hare Brain, Tortoise Mind* by a psychologist called Guy Claxton—and which so far tops my nominations for 'book of the year.' Apparently a researcher from the Learning Research and Development Center at the University of Pittsburgh called Jonathan Schooler wanted to see if too much deliberation could actually impede mental functions—including memory,*

decision making, intuition and insight. He first of all tested this in relation to simple choices (in this case, people's preferences for one of five jams). His subjects were asked to rate five jams (unknown to the subjects, already judged to be 1st, 11th, 24th, 32nd and 44th out of 50 by a panel of experts). Some subjects were told to think carefully about their reactions and preferences—and to explain the reasons for their choices. Others were left to their own devices. The findings showed that those who were asked to analyze their reactions disagreed most with the experts, whilst the others made choices that corresponded much more closely.

In a parallel experiment, another group of subjects were asked to choose which of five posters they wanted to take home. They were similarly divided into two groups, one of which was asked to defend their choices. In a follow up a few weeks later, it was discovered that those who deliberated most were significantly less happy with the decision they had made than those who had chosen intuitively. Like the deliberating jam tasters, the analytical group was more independent than the others—but considerably worse at making choices about what they really liked.

Schooler then went on to study university students, who were similarly asked to make choices about second year programme options. Again, those who reflected carefully were more likely to change mid-stream than those who didn't—and to switch to more popular options. Claxton's conclusion is: 'In choosing a picture, or a jam, or a course, there are many interwoven considerations to be taken into account, not all of which are (equally) verbalisable. When the decision is made in an intuitive way, these considerations are treated in a more integrated fashion, and those that are hard to articulate are given due weight—which actually may be considerable. However, when people are forced (or encouraged) to be analytical, the problem is deconstructed into those considerations that are more amenable to being put into words. Thus the way the predicament is represented to consciousness may be, to a greater or lesser extent, a distortion of the way it is represented tacitly, and decisions based on this skewed impression are therefore less satisfactory.' [Guy Claxton, *Hare Brain, Tortoise Mind*, London: Fourth Estate, 1997, pp. 86–87]

This suggests to me that teaching designers to be analytical about their work—whether by making reference to a critical theory or by having to articulate what they are doing—could in fact be devastatingly counterproductive. But it also suggests that we are amenable to the education of a less verbal form of knowledge—and that it is there that we should probably be concentrating our efforts.

What do you think?

[Gunnar] I can't tell you how many times I've said to my students that our work is often smarter than we are. One of the ways designers come to understand problems

is by designing. It is not just that designing provides time for meditation—the process helps us sort things out. In many ways it parallels my (and many people’s) reason for writing—to find out what I think.

A few years ago I designed an identity program for a photographer. We worked out communications criteria for the design. I designed based on the criteria. When I showed her my work she said “You captured what we said perfectly and we were wrong.” We started over with new criteria. This was a fairly straightforward case of our coming to a new understanding through visual experience. When we design we come to small new realizations about our work—factually and formally—constantly.

Consider learning a tennis stroke or skiing turn. A beginner might be stressed with details of racket direction or unweighting and one might conclude upon brief experimentation that analysis and direction harm rather than help. With more practice, however, we discover that the analysis is internalized in the action. One discovers whether saying “up” to oneself increases top spin or whether raising the left hand to catch the racket accomplishes the same thing better. (Apologies to left-handers. That was pretty dexterist of me.)

Continuing to beat a dead metaphor—it is also true that specific directions are not the only way to get someone to improve a stroke or a turn. “Tricking” or pushing someone (or oneself) into the right movements trains the muscle memory. Clearly not all design comes from the practical march toward an obvious answer. I think we’d agree that most of the best design comes from squinting a little, seeing the problem not so clearly.

Back to jam tasting—I’m not sure what makes someone a jam expert, but I’d be willing to bet that those “right” answers that were the goal came from analysis and, if you will, jam theory. I’m sure there’s a standard series of questions about fullness of flavor, level of sweetness, balance, texture, aroma, lack of off flavors, etc. that an expert jam taster goes through. They’re presumably meant to add up to an approximation of a good jam experience.

Telling a group of people to think before they answer but not telling them what to think about apparently doesn’t help enhance judgment. Making jam eating into something cerebral might even get in the way of a visceral reaction. But this hardly argues against jam theory. It argues against a demand for thinking in absence of jam theory.

Clearly the “putting it into words” part is a problem. Partly because we don’t have words for some things so we don’t consider them in verbalization. In design classes we use terms borrowed from literature and semiotics; we talk in terms of types of metaphors. So we find ourselves trying to explore these ideas in design. What if we invented words for the stuff we do all the time? Maybe writers would then spend their time trying to do the verbal equivalent of spatial arrangements or patterns

of light and dark or tensions between directions or any of the other things we do.

I guess I should try to bring this back to our ostensible topic(s)—the experimental and the practical in typographic explorations. There is clearly a great value in doing things “from the gut.” This can be either “experimental,” “practical,” or both. That doesn’t preclude analysis and theory. Some of our theory won’t be neatly quantifiable. Asking whether words or letters want to be closer or farther or a particular place draws blank stares from beginning students and may never make its way into a “how to” guide but that doesn’t mean the questions aren’t part of a coherent body of thought.

Maybe what is so often called “experimental” but is completely unlike scientific experimentation should be considered to be the equivalent of the observation that precedes experimentation. A star gazer’s painstaking notes allow another astronomer to formulate a hypothesis to test. Maybe formal playing should be seen as that kind of prelude to thought. Just because raw observation and theoretical thought are not usually simultaneous, that hardly devalues one or the other.

[James]: I still think we are unnecessarily hung-up about the lack of ‘scientific’ rigour in our work. In a sense, that was what ‘Design Methods’ was supposed to address—that bizarre attempt in the 60s to make design explicit and procedural. And I’m not convinced it achieved that much, except to convince those of us who came later that what we did could not be adequately explained with reference to flow charts. Perhaps the bogey of scientism lives on in information design, where form still follows function into dismal desiccation. But I hope that, in practice if not in principle, in the broad field of graphic design we’ve left this stage behind.

In my opinion, we’ve spent a lot of time looking for theory in the wrong places. Like Mulla Nasrudin searching for his key under the street lamp (when he’d lost it in the house) ‘because there is more light there,’ we’ve sought theoretical models for typography in the brilliance of a range of academic disciplines from information theory to literary criticism. However, the ‘key’ to typography isn’t to be found in the lecture theatre or seminar room—but in the comparative darkness of a mind where ideas well up from unseen springs. In a sense, science is in this same boat: the ‘scientific method’ provides an admirable model for how science should be carried out in the bright light of day, yet conveniently ignores the intuitive, creative leap that is behind breakthrough discoveries. But scientists can make worthwhile careers without recourse to the erratic genius of the paradigm shakers. Turning in worthy but uninspired work is much more difficult for designers.

We’re also still embarrassed by this idea of ‘play.’ I suspect that we feel it unacceptable for a designer to admit to playing—although many of us probably spend a great deal

of time engaged in it. Play has connotations of immaturity, profligacy, irreverence—Piaget et al. notwithstanding. Certainly in a commercial context it is better for us to pretend to be ‘professional’—to be focused, organized, managing our time efficiently and economically—than to confess that we ‘fiddle about’ as much as we do. As yet there isn’t a body of knowledge that properly understands how ideas are incubated, but when there is I’m certain it will dignify the notion of play. I always think of Carl Jung taking off from his practice and making sandcastles by the lakeside—what great but invisible wheels were turning in his mind as he did so.

I look forward to a theory that says it’s okay to look within ourselves for answers to what it is that we do when we design with type. We’ve been bombarded with so many theories that tell us that the secret lies somewhere else—from deconstructed, ‘reader centred’ approaches to constructive, ‘user centred’ ones. Typography has become one of those subjects where everybody else knows best—again, I’m reminded of Nasrudin beset by family and neighbours when his house was burgled. ‘Why didn’t you lock the windows?’, ‘Why didn’t you check the door?’, ‘Did you have to go out?’. Eventually, he was able to get a word in. ‘It’s not all my fault!’ ‘What do you mean, it’s not all your fault?’ ‘Well, what about the thieves . . . ?’ Sometimes we just need to recognize that we’re using an inherently imperfect medium in an inherently imperfect world.

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