

Assessing the importance graphic designers place on learning about social contexts related to consumer cultures.

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Abstract

This paper is based on a recent ethnographic study in which a cross-section of graphic designers was interviewed in an attempt to discover how significant knowledge of social contexts was to their practice. The study sought in particular to understand their perceptions about relevance of knowledge of consumer culture to graphic design practice. The findings contribute to a better understanding of the knowledge bases that graphic designers draw on and see as significant to their work. The data is of interest to design educators who place importance on an understanding of social contexts in relationship to graphic design thinking as well as those from the business sector placing importance on graphic designers' understanding the cultures of consumption related to marketing and brand development. Different ways of acquiring knowledge are explored, as a means of understanding the generation of knowledge about social contexts implicated in the practice of graphic design.

Introduction

Graphic design practice in New Zealand has increasingly called for greater knowledge of the social contexts that inform contextual processes, as the relationship with marketing has developed, yet no formal research studies have been published to provide insights into how graphic designers amass the cultural capital needed to assume their mediation role in a position between the consumer and client. There are instances of exemplary graphic design firms whose case studies, particularly in brand identity development reflect sophisticated understanding of related markets and consumer audiences (Poland, 2006, p. 60), but little has been published to analyse how these or any other New Zealand graphic designers have accumulated the requisite knowledge to work at this level. A difficult question exists concerning whether designers are actually involved in doing largely practical work not requiring significant theoretical knowledge or whether the reverse is true. Have graphic designers not recognised their reliance on contextual knowledge derived from cultures of consumption? Is it implicit in their practice and unrecognised? The paper investigates these questions, sets out the research approach and presents a summary of the responses of graphic designers in the study. Finally the data from the study is analysed using Bourdieu's model of field.

Background

The ongoing changes in the requisite knowledge for practice in the graphic design field in New Zealand mark a transition from the early years, when graphic designers, apart from those advertising agency backgrounds, typically had a high reliance on studio based design processes and often less affinity with business and marketing, to more recently, where for many in graphic design, it has become necessary to move into partnerships with those versed in business strategies and the external environments to business. With the changing knowledge base for graphic design has come an increasing expectation of the tertiary educators responsible for designing programmes for a significant segment of those entering the graphic design field, that other contextual knowledge is required of those studying graphic design. Design education at a degree level has largely moved from a “portfolio” approach where emphasis was placed on technical knowledge and presentation for employment, to courses that offer more theoretically based tuition (Bill, 2004).

The social setting of design

The academic design community has developed strong arguments and advocacy for understanding the contextual base to design (refer Margolin 1995; Julier 2000; Sparke, 2004, for example). The output of design studies and design history is increasingly drawing on ideas within sociology to understand and explain the social contexts in which design is consumed. A central argument, related to Forty’s (1985) contention that designers are only one party in the bigger picture of design innovation, has been that increasingly, designers need to recognise that they both reflect social contexts and mediate them through design (Bourdieu, 1984; Julier 2000; Barnard 2005). Much of the discussion centres on designers’ abilities to understand consumer cultures, and aspects of fashion and lifestyle arising from them, and in particular, in the way in which consumers select products and choose lifestyles to provide distinction (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 6).

Parallels in business thinking

In business strategy, there is a legacy of linking knowledge of social contexts to innovation (Drucker

1985, p. 106). Hunger and Wheelen (1998, p. 53) similarly stress the importance of organizations “scanning” the socio-cultural forces of the external environment before formulating business strategy, as a means of coping with the complexity and on-going change. While awareness of external social environments is a well established aspect of business strategy, notwithstanding the interrelationship between design and business, the graphic design field has been much slower to recognise the value of this knowledge to their professional field.

Sources of knowledge about the social contexts that inform practice

In academic discourses about design, arguments suggesting the importance of reflecting on practice (Schön, 1983) are now well established (Scrivener, 2000) and these ideas have relevance to design practice. Much of this thinking takes as its theoretical standpoint, the ideas about tacit knowledge from Michael Polyani (1966). It is the internalisation of knowledge related to experience in these concepts that explains both the implicit knowledge in design practice and importantly the knowledge inculcated outside the studio but expressed implicitly in concepts. Besides the knowledge generated within practice, designers share knowledge accumulated outside the firm (Nonaka & Takeuchi 1995, p. 7), external activity that contributes to innovation within an organization. In fact Claudia Eckert and Martin Stacey (2000) refer to shared reliance on cultural references to generate design ideas arising from discourses of practice. Others (Wenger, 1998, p.47) argue that practice always has a social aspect to it. In addition to the knowledge brought into a design firm through the backgrounds of those within it, designers can benefit from the insights of design ethnography, particularly related to brand development, from external sources (Sherry 2002). These sources knowledge provide an explanation of how graphic designers may learn about lifestyle, fashion, and style related to consumer cultures and wider social contexts in the seemingly external world.

The study

The research set out to establish the significance of implicit learning through experience or explicit knowledge through research and open sharing of information related to the requisite contextual

knowledge needed for graphic design practice. The research in the following section of the paper aimed to see whether arguments suggesting the importance of understanding the social contexts of consumer cultures, advocated in academic discourses about graphic design, or contextual studies at tertiary-level education seemed relevant to the graphic designers in the study.

A sociological approach was adopted involving seeing the data through Pierre Bourdieu's concepts of *habitus*, *social structure*, *practice* and *field*. Bourdieu's concept of habitus emerges from his reflections on the questions of instinctive action informed by social structures. It is a methodological term, concerning the way that dispositions of mind and body have been acquired and what the effects of practices informed by those kinds of structures are. It links to the concept of *field*, which refers to structured positions and interrelationships in which "various forms of capital are distributed" (Bourdieu, 1991, p. 14). Field is applied to professional interests and the *position-taking* within them (Bourdieu, 1989, p.88). The knowledge that graphic designers have gained through habitus and experience enables them to build up cultural capital to be in a particular position in the graphic design field.

The case studies explored the contrasting practice of graphic designers in different positions in the graphic design field and the related cultural capital relative to practice. Participants included two recently graduated graphic designers with different career paths, the principal of a large graphic design practice, a graphic designer in a web-technology based design company, a senior graphic designer with over thirty years experience, a sole practitioner and a creative director from a medium sized publishing company. By using case studies, the research has been able to show interactive relationships between graphic design and the wider social context by analysing designers' practices in applying contextual understanding to achieve effective practice. Graphic designers were asked to reflect on their professional development over time, describing their personal backgrounds, lifestyle, family backgrounds and cultures of their firms. Designers were asked about the relevance of economic, political, legal and aesthetic aspects of social contexts to their conceptual processes. The

research looked at forms of external knowledge brought into practice and the influence of the needs of the business sector on the graphic design community as well as the social impacts of each designer's work. The figures on pages 3 and 10 are a summary of the responses from the graphic designers in the study.

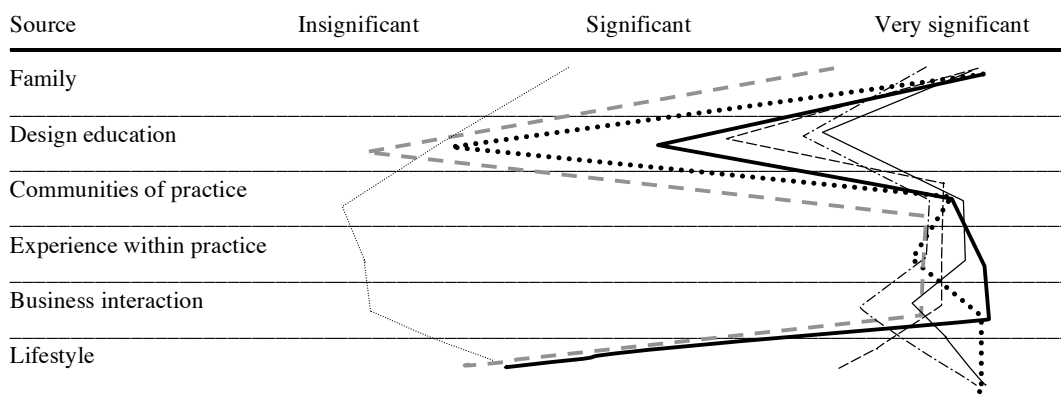
Sources of contextual knowledge

The diverse cross-section of New Zealand graphic designers in the cases provided examples of differing ways of bringing knowledge of social contexts into practice and varying recognition of the significance of knowledge of social contexts to graphic design practice. While interaction within the social setting of the firm characterised their practice, many had difficulty in recognising contextual knowledge that they had brought to their work or that was located and built up within the habitus of the firm. In addition to the practice knowledge openly shared, the cases showed the implicit knowledge arising from experience in the firm reflecting an internalised “feel for the game” (Bourdieu, 1990. p. 63). The interests of graphic designers in the study can be seen in the way in which knowledge generated through external lifestyle experiences could be related to their work. Whilst designers may not be able to describe how knowledge of social contexts is implicit in their work, some understanding of these values came through the work and was seen through considering the dispositions of the graphic designers and the habitus of the firm. In some instances, the social basis of practice was expressed in a shared reliance on cultural references to generate design ideas. Designers could identify source knowledge from previous other designs and external cultural references brought into problem solving. In the study, their knowledge was to varying degrees, a reflection of how they had created their environment or their working place and the discourses of the communities of practice to which they belonged as well as the cultures that influenced them. The responses suggested that in contrast to dedicated investigation of the lifestyle, social issues and political-economic concerns, the contextual knowledge implicated in practice was at the level of implicit knowledge inculcated through others in the firm, through personal experience or from professional networks. There were widely variable values placed on understanding how lifestyle and taste could inform conceptual values in graphic design.

Implicit knowledge about social contexts

In each case the family habitus is significant in the inculcation of values and life history that could be seen to affect each individual’s attitude about their social worlds. The more experienced designers in the study drew least on the cultures of their design education on their implicit knowledge of social contexts, because of the largely practical craft education they had experienced or of the absence of any design education. The influences of their communities of practice, their personal work experience and business interaction all provided modes for understanding external social worlds of consumer cultures and related social contexts for most of the designers. The picture is different for lifestyle values where the senior designer, for example, was able to draw instead on the contextual understandings of his staff in the habitus of the firm, while the web designer declared absorption with technology. Graduate B had had no employment in a design firm choosing instead to freelance.

Figure 1: Sources of implicit knowledge about social contexts



Designers in the study

Code for Figures 1-3

- | | |
|--|-----------|
| 1. graphic designer 30 years experience | ————— |
| 2. Creative director of a large graphic design practice | |
| 3. Graphic designer in a web-technology based design company | - - - - - |
| 4. Graphic designer in sole practice consultancy | - - - - - |
| 5. Art director from a medium sized publishing company | ————— |
| 6. Recent graphic design graduate A | - - - - - |
| 7. Recent graphic design graduate B | |

Explicit knowledge about social contexts

The patterns in Figure 2, show the contrasting importance graphic designers placed on acquiring explicit knowledge about social contexts, from their education. The creative director of a large design firm and the web designer had little or no design education, respectively, while graduate B showed little interest in the contextual studies from her design education. The two creative directors placed importance on gaining contextual knowledge from a number of sources including through reading, through the culture of the firm, from lifestyle, from business articles and via marketing knowledge. The sole practice designer had previously worked in a publishing design office as an art director but in her present position was no longer privy to the exchanges from other staff with different backgrounds and interests. The contextual knowledge previously accessible from the field of business was now more limited in her sole practice consultancy. Graduate B could only tap into work cultures and the field of business indirectly and professed little motivation to read anything that may offer insights into the contextual knowledge that could be linked to the design projects she worked on.

The variable explicit sources of knowledge of social contexts and in particular the understanding of consumer cultures tended to be from a number of sources. It arose out of the necessity to have an informed brief, from knowledge provided by client marketing departments, knowledge exchanged in the firm, from the library resources available or from dependence on the internet. The web-designer showed how an active search for knowledge about consumer cultures, lifestyle and social contexts outside information supplied by a client and distinct from any implicit knowledge could be unimportant for his needs.

The knowledge about consumers and social contexts from marketing and research was easier for graphic designers to identify. Most designers could comment on the importance of having information to enable them to understand consumer contexts related to marketing aspects of their work. However, there was a heavy reliance on accessing this data from client marketing departments or by working in

a team capacity with other consultants who could provide these resources. Very few graphic designers were working for firms that had set aside budgets for dedicated ethnographic studies of consumers related to work in brand development.

Knowledge of consumer values

While learning from the practice of others continues to be important in graphic design firms, graphic designers increasingly need to know more about both the markets to which their work is directed and the social contexts of consumption. For some designers, audience centred design demonstrates the value of information about consumers and society and in particular, of knowledge of human factors as an integral facet of brand development. The cases have shown how cultural capital includes not only the social knowledge learnt in liberal studies but also the knowledge from the field of business.

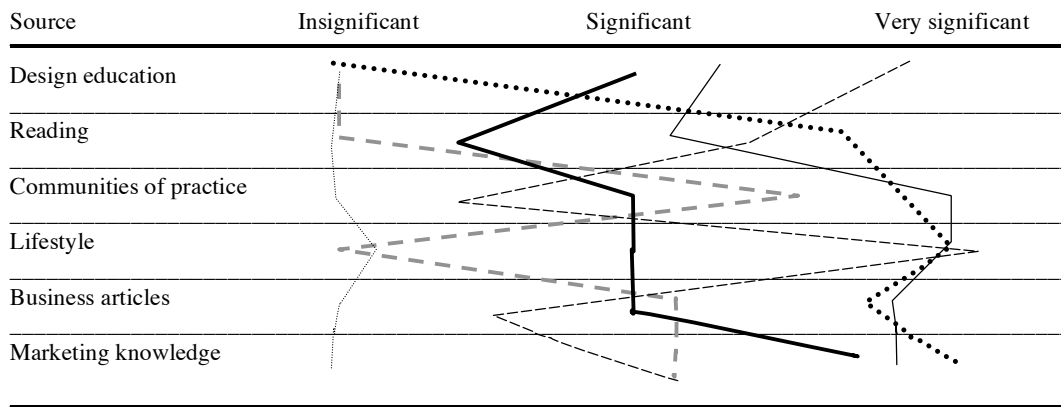
Increasingly, the business field and the marketing information related to it is a recurring source of information for contextualising design. In some cases the designer's knowledge of consumer cultures had been gained through individual lifestyle while for others marketing knowledge seemed a more relevant source. Designers working in brand identity tended to be particularly conscious of the value of audience research to their work.

Research knowledge

There are diverse approaches to using and accessing social knowledge in graphic design practice. The case studies revealed the varying values placed on formal research. Some designers recognise the value of external research to provide social research information. Increasingly, graphic designers need to be part of a consultant group rather than relying solely on theoretical information coming from their own practice. The knowledge needed to understand the values that consumers employ to animate the world of goods was not seen to come from dedicated research in partnership with social scientists or research organizations, for many in the study. Instead there was a heavy reliance on understandings from their own lifestyle and personal backgrounds or from the client's own resources. Graphic design is maturing to the point where that kind of input is now becoming much more appropriate to studio

practice. This serves to extend the knowledge base of graphic designers and is significant to their understanding of consumer cultures and the wider social contexts.

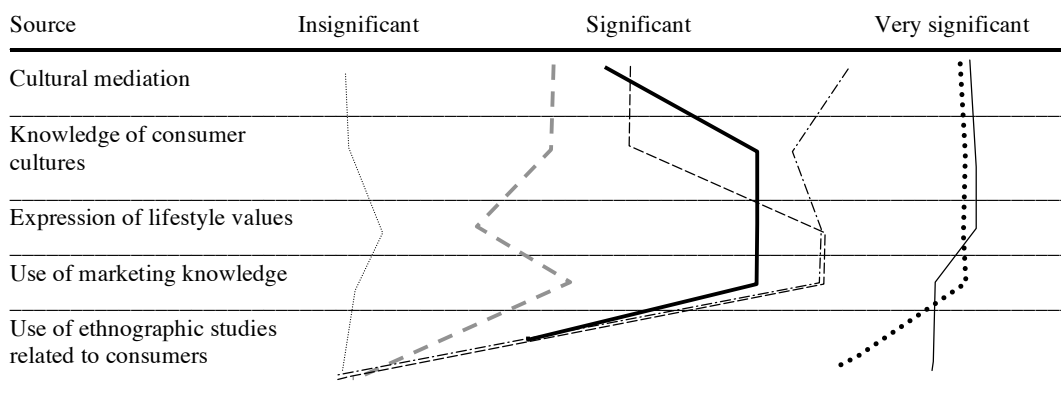
Figure 2: Sources of explicit knowledge about social contexts



Expression of knowledge of social contexts in practice

Figure 3 shows differing importance placed on needing contextual knowledge in creating design concepts. The explanations for this are complex. The two creative directors ran totally different firms. One was in magazine publishing and the other brand identity. Both placed high importance on understanding consumer values, mediating them and being responsive to their audiences. They formed communities of practice within the firm, drawing heavily on the backgrounds and interests of their staff. At other extreme Graduate B worked in isolated social space, had not been able to draw on consumer knowledge from her clients or to develop a methodology that included seeking out contextual knowledge that could inform her concepts.

Figure 3: Expression of knowledge of social contexts in practice



The graphic design field

The field of graphic design consists of positions that the graphic designers within it assume. To take these positions requires a knowledge base that is built up in various ways reliant on varying cultural capital. The requirements of the field of business and the social world impinge on what designers need to know for practice. The relative value of the knowledge held in the field affects the competitive position graphic designers are able to take and affect the dynamics of the field.

Field dynamics and position taking

The varying positions that were taken by designers in the cases suggest that there are shifts in dynamics within the graphic design field. These variations are reflected in the knowledge deemed to be significant to practice in each case, but knowledge requirements are not static. They need to continuously reflect the needs of designers to retain their position in the field as the needs of the field change. The research showed how designers were able to distinguish their expertise from that of ‘non-designers’ where graphic design was reduced to simple production or mainly based on computing knowledge. The study showed how graphic designers’ ability to design with efficacy in a particular situation reflected distinguishable cultural capital.

Cultural capital for participation in the graphic design field

As well as highlighting the sources of graphic designers’ cultural capital for participation in the graphic design field the cases have indicated that designers were predominantly more concerned about keeping up with developments in the field of business than on reflecting on the knowledge inculcated through family, lifestyle and practice. The study was able to show how personal and implicit knowledge while unrecognised was of importance in enabling designers to hold a particular place in the graphic design field.

The case studies provided a means of investigating each designer’s design sources, by looking below the professional design mythology of style to find the social contexts that inform designers’ work, and

also to be aware of the contextual issues and beliefs within the profession. However, style also reflects social contexts, it is not exclusively something formal¹, and is powerful in enabling the construction of personal identity (Friedman, 1990). Those possessing knowledge of cultural contexts and the related consumer cultures, lifestyle and taste could distinguish their work from designers with predominantly technical backgrounds. Others were reliant on this knowledge from sources external to their own knowledge, including marketing and consumer research in relationship to understanding social contexts.

Mediation role

Knowledge of social contexts is implicated in designers' need both to know about the field they practice within and having that responsibility towards the consumer cultures they interact with. Where designers placed importance on understanding audiences, they were able to mediate the consumer experience, with an awareness of the way in which as Sherry (2002) expresses it "consumption is co-created by marketers and consumers". Graphic designers knowledge of social issues is expressed through their concerns for conservation, sustainability and social responsibility (Grant, 1999).

Contextual knowledge also provides a resource for the creation of metaphors that form the basis of graphic designers' ideas. It raises the question of the designers' use of source material both within and outside their graphic design experience. It suggests a need for broader knowledge bases to have more comprehensive resources to draw on as well as more appropriate resolution to design problems. The cases have shown how graphic designers' implicit knowledge arising from their dispositions and experience is often shared within the group, and equally, the designer's dispositions are constantly being modified by the external impacts of lifestyle, popular culture and media.

¹ 'Formal' here refers to visual form.

Conclusions

Design educators and graphic designers alike benefit from recognising the relevance of knowing about the social contexts that inform graphic design practice. The changing practice needs in a field itself in a state of change point to an ongoing need to ensure that knowledge of society and in particular the cultures of consumption are seen in relationship to design practice and education. Design firms within the study could demonstrate how recognition of the significance of this knowledge could assist them to enhance their cultural capital for practice and consolidate their position in the field, distinguishing them from those less endowed. The study also highlighted the significance of the implicit knowledge brought into firms through the backgrounds of staff and the value of these diverse backgrounds.

The research has raised a number of questions for design educators. Can a value be placed on studies of the social contexts that inform design? How important are studies of cultures of consumption to design practice? How significant is this knowledge to graduates or experienced designers? The cases suggested that whilst the value of contextual studies may not have been adequately recognised by the graphic designers concerned, this knowledge has become increasingly important for graphic design practice. However, design educators need to ensure that contextual studies are ‘contextualised’ in a theory practice relationship. Just as arguments suggesting that design history taught as a subject isolated from studio practice, can become a study in itself rather than a resource for design thinking (Julier & Narotsky, 1998) studies related to wider social contexts need to be constantly linked to the problem solving, avoiding a divide between theory and practice.

The links between visual thinking and theorisation have only been touched on. In the same way that debates have raged over an assumed primacy of content over style (Kalman & Jacobs, 1993; Poyner, 1998) the appropriation of knowledge of social contexts into practice should not necessarily be seen to exclude concerns for the visual values of design. Both are, like style and content, interrelated.

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