Word and Image: Designing a Learning Community

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Abstract
The Word and Image Learning Community linked an introductory interior design studio and an introductory literature class to create a learning environment to enrich both students’ practice of design and their experience of literature. Classroom strategies and assignments encouraged design students to bring their visual strengths and technological skills to their study of literature and to bring reflection and interpretive skills to their studio work. Students were encouraged to pay particular attention to connections between their developing graphic and spatial vocabulary and the language of literary analysis and to combine visual and verbal communication in their assignments.

The Structure and Goals of the Learning Community
We envisioned the Word and Image Learning Community as a learning environment designed especially for students whose primary work is with graphic images and the design of physical spaces and who need to develop their skills in critical reading, writing, and reflection. It consisted of two sections of a first-semester design studio, ID 2750, and an introductory literature class, English 2123. All students were enrolled in both the literature class and the design studio. Instructors for the design studios and the literature class coordinated syllabi and assignments for the two classes.

Students entering the design curriculum often do not understand reading and writing as processes that inform their design work. Although design students usually have well-developed visual acumen and experience with graphics technology, introductory General Education literature classes rarely encourage students to bring these skills to their reading and analysis of literary texts. The goal of the learning community was to create a dynamic cycle of critical thinking, discussion, reading, writing, and design application that would enable students to recognize connections between their work in the design studio and their work in the literature classroom.

Process and Sample Assignments
Since the first-semester design studio teaches students a basic design vocabulary, the linchpin of our interdisciplinary collaboration was language, specifically, the parallels between the language of spatial design and the language of literature and literary analysis. These parallels were highlighted for students in the comparison of two texts: the first, a brief passage from Francis DK Ching’s *Architecture -- Form, Space, and Order* about the power of a three-dimensional form to “articulate the volume of space surrounding it and [to] generate a field of influence or territory which it claims as its own” and, the second, Wallace Stevens’ poem “The Anecdote of the Jar,” which in remarkably similar language describes a jar which, placed on a hilltop, “took dominion everywhere.”

In the literature class, students began with a basic vocabulary for describing and analyzing poems. Finding that proportion, scale, balance, harmony, unity, and variety are principles of poetic structure as well as of physical structures led students to see that poems are also designed spaces and that design principles hold them together and link one idea to another. Throughout the semester, students connected their design studies and their study of literature in a series of coordinated assignments that required them to bring their reading and writing into their graphic and spatial studio projects.
Reading contemporary poet John Taggart’s *Pastorelles*, students considered poems as aural and visual spaces. The class read the poems aloud and also paid particular attention to line lengths, repeated sequences of words, and the use of white space on the page. Again, drawing on Ching’s definitions from their studio exercises, the class considered similarities in language and structural principles readily transferable from spatial design to the structure of poetry. Ching’s definition of rhythm, for example, proved particularly useful for thinking about repetition as a structural device in Taggart’s incantatory poems. Ching’s definition reads: “The repetition of elements in space and time…not only creates visual unity but also induces a rhythmic continuity of movement that the viewer’s eyes and mind can follow along a path, within a composition, or around a space.” Students then wrote essays in which they analyzed repetition, rhythm, and metamorphosis in patterns of verbal images in a poem or sequence of poems and discussed the ways that these motifs created rich visual images for readers and contributed to meaning.

This assignment was followed by a studio project in which students rendered their own interpretations of their chosen Taggart poem in a short video. Many of these videos proved to be powerfully imagined interpretations that demonstrated a level of engagement and sophistication not usually seen in General Education introductory literature classes.

In an essay on the ways that students process images and verbal text in educational materials, Jennifer Wiley cites several studies that demonstrate that students’ “active construction of a runnable mental model” significantly improves their comprehension of any dynamic system. Wiley writes too of “the sense of intimacy and intensity” that students experience when they recreate in their own imagination scenes depicted in literary texts like novels and poems. Students’ video renderings of Taggart’s poetry were just such mental models. To create them, students were forced to examine Taggart’s language and imagery and to find corresponding images of their own, not to illustrate the poem so much as to illuminate their understanding of the texts. In the process, students arrived at innovative, personal, and often striking readings of the poems that in initial class sessions had seemed weird or inaccessible to them.

The studio project evolved in stages. First, students were asked to divide their poem into seven distinct parts, which would become their seven sequences for their film. Next, they produced a storyboard of eight blocks, their seven sequences and one title/introduction sequence, including as much detail as possible. Students then gave each of the seven main sequence blocks its own eight-block storyboard, which required students to further explore and visualize the sequence. The storyboard proved to be a critical step in the process of translating word to image, providing structure and rigor for students who were eager to film without any idea or framework for their film, assuming they could begin filming and fill in the storyboards once they had all their footage. Before the filming got underway, students learned the rudiments of Microsoft Movie Maker. In the studio, students critiqued the first versions of each other’s films before they created a second version. Critique and revision allowed students to become actively involved in others’ projects and developed their skills in articulating design principles.

These first stages of the Taggart project immersed students in their developing spatial vocabulary and the language of literature. Next came a series of exercises through which students learned to abstract, deconstruct and reconstruct shapes, forms, and volumes from three dimensions through two-dimensional manipulations and back to three dimensions again. Students abstracted stills from their film into figure/ground or positive/negative imagery using the lines and shapes contained within the frames. The stills were to have characteristics that could be developed from two-dimensional initial shapes into three-dimensional forms or spaces. For example, the circular opening of a guitar in the still has the possibility of becoming a tube or tunnel in space when extruded in the third dimension. Simplifying the forms gave students an opportunity to re-evaluate the composition and structure of elements within their designs. The exercises were designed in part to analyze the space-time relationship, to apply and build on the foundation developed in the previous project.
stages, and also to demonstrate how powerfully students’ critical reading and writing can inform and energize their design work.

**Results**
The following excerpts from students’ reflections on their semester’s work suggest some initial results of the learning community:

“Although poetry can be very complex and hard to read sometimes, the important concept that I gained from studying word and image in poetry is that a poem in itself is a design.”

“Being able to talk about your work is one of the most important things to be able to do in becoming a successful designer. Designers create ideas that can be seen visually but they have to be able to explain them clearly to the client. With the writing completed in this literature class, I think I have learned to clarify my ideas through the use of words.”

“This assignment challenged us to look deep into the poem, and translate these elements into a different medium. At times the ideas in poetry can seem obscure, and the ability to grasp the hidden layers and textures of meaning will be invaluable thinking skills in working with clients in the design field as we translate their ideas into design elements.”

We believe that the synthesis of principles from these two disciplines enhanced students’ performance in both classes. Like the nineteenth-century stereoscopes, the dual perspectives of the learning community produced a merged vision with depth and dimension absent in separate classes. As critical reflection on their reading of literature stimulated students’ imaginations in the design process, visual and spatial representations of complex ideas encouraged students to deepen their readings of literature.

Among students’ learning outcomes were 1) more sophisticated strategies for reading literary texts; 2) improved analytical skills; 3) improved communication skills; 4) enhanced command of design skills and strategies; and 5) practice in transferring acquired skills from one task to another and from one discipline or course of study to another.