Empathy is the mental habit that moves us beyond thinking of people as laboratory rats or standard deviations. If we are to “borrow” the lives of other people to inspire new ideas, we need to begin by recognizing that their seemingly inexplicable behaviors represent different strategies for coping with the confusing, complex, and contradictory world in which they live.

- Tim Brown
CEO and president of IDEO
About the Discipline of Design

Graphic Design

Graphic design is the art and practice of visual communication. Designers use color, typography, images, symbols, and systems to make the surfaces around us come alive with meaning. Today, the field is shifting and expanding in unprecedented ways, as new technologies and social movements are changing the way people make and consume media. Public awareness of graphic design has grown enormously over the past two decades through the desktop computing and Internet revolutions, which have also fueled tremendous growth in the profession. Graphic design is the largest of the design professions, representing more than a quarter million practitioners in the United States.

Classroom Connection

+ Discuss with students how the above chair simultaneously supports and challenges the stated definition of Graphic Design.

The language of postproduction speaks of sampling rather than appropriation, sharing as opposed to owning, formats instead of forms, curation (i.e., selection) over creation, and context as the prime determinant of form rather than content. It is a culture of re-: remix, reformat, reshuffle, reinterpret, reprogram, reschedule, reboot, repost, recycle.

—Andrew Blauvelt
Design Director and Curator at Walker Art Center
About the Process

Design Thinking

Design Thinking is as much a mental process as it is a practical application of skills. Widely used by designers to solve the problems of business, the five stages of Design Thinking (Discovery - Interpretation - Ideation - Experimentation - Evolution) can be applied to discover solutions to issues both big and small.

Design Thinking is a heuristic process, encouraging moving forward by trial and error, risk taking and experimentation. By fostering a free and unencumbered exploration of ideas, design thinking looks to explore all possibilities while making certain that unrealistic or problematic solutions are quickly swept aside allowing practical alternatives to grow and develop.

At its very core Design Thinking is user centered, focusing not on a particular end result, but instead encouraging the designer to use empathy (understanding the intended audience) to arrive at possible solutions. Through careful observation, exploration and interview, designer’s focus in on an essential need. The discovered need may be different than the initial perception of the issue.

While a series of stages, Design Thinking should not be thought of as a lock-step procedure. Instead the five stages can be depicted as a cycle, allowing the user to enter the process at any step along the way, and encouraging further thought and reflection upon completion, as with any cycle there is no end, instead further refinement can be explored.

In the age of self-publishing and social media, the author function has splintered and multiplied. Society has changed, and so have the means of composing, consuming, and spreading the written word. “Author” is now a role that anyone can play.

—Ellen Lupton
curator of contemporary design at Cooper-Hewitt, National Design Museum
Discovery
Understand the Challenge
A challenge (often referred to as the design brief) should walk a fine line between too specific (limiting flexibility and creativity) and too broad (ignoring practical constraints or limitations). All challenges should be easily understood and actionable. Challenges should focus on underlying needs rather than problems, and should not include potential solutions.

Prepare Research
Create a wish list of individuals who could provide insight on your challenge (include outliers, while knowing your intended audience is essential, exciting ideas often arise from interviewing those outside the field or scope of the initial project). Determine topics - what information are you seeking or still need to learn about your challenge?

Gather Inspiration
Collect information, interview, and take notes. Remember that careful and candid observation can often provide as much, if not more, information than as interviewing. Use an empathetic mind, place yourself in the role of your audience.

Interpretation
Tell Stories
Capture ideas quickly and concisely. Rather than treating your findings as raw data, frame it as stories. Take a holistic approach and remember that your subjects are people.

Search for Meaning
Search for trends and themes - clustering related information together. Look for contradictions or surprises. Organize disparate ideas, focusing on how they may overlap or interact.

Frame Opportunities
Try different methods to visually represent your gathered information (ex. Venn diagram, relationship maps, flow charts, etc.). Transform insights into action by asking “How might we?”

Ideation
Generate Ideas
Brainstorm diverse and wild ideas (now may be a good time to invite others into your group). Ignore limitations, and refrain from judgment, instead focus on exploring all opportunities. Build on each other’s ideas. Cluster and group like ideas, keep a visual record.

Refine Ideas
Reexamine ideas based on reality. What is plausible and what is unrealistic? What ideas may evolve into practical solutions and which need to be reevaluated? Select which ideas get the team most excited. Determine why. Review the initial challenge and needs. Which ideas are the most promising?

Experimentation
Make Prototypes
Turn ideas into reality quickly and cheaply. Focus on the essence of the idea rather than refinement or aesthetics. Keep the original need in mind. Experiment with multiple prototypes keeping in mind that a prototype is not a finished product, it simply allows one to determine the practicality of an idea, or often, one aspect of an idea. Use everyday materials and objects to build.

Get Feedback
Share your prototypes with others and collect their reactions. When possible use prototypes for their intended use.

Evolution
Track Learning
Identify markers of success - as a team define how you will determine whether an idea is adequately meeting the need. Document progress, as prototypes change and evolve it may become necessary to reexamine previous iterations or move backwards through the Design Thinking cycle.

Move Forward
Engage others, share, and sell your idea.
Use these flashcards to walk through the Design Thinking process and view works of art through the eyes of a designer.
Design Thinking - Critical Analysis Flashcards

Interpretation
What elements or characteristics of this object appeal to its intended audience?
Would this object be considered a long term vs. short term solution?

Discovery
What need is this object fulfilling?
What audience does this appeal to?

Experimentation
How might this object be better?
How does material selection play a role in design?
Brainstorm/sketch additional designs.

Ideation
How might this object be different if (change one characteristic)?
How does this change how the object appeals to its intended audience?
Taking into account the change you’ve made, does this object still fulfill a need?

Evolution
What measures of success could be developed to evaluate this object?
Using these measures, is this object successful?

The Design Thinking Process is intended to be cyclical. Explore beginning at different stages and working through the cycle in varying orders.
Graphic designer Stephen Frykholm is best known for his innovative and award-winning work for furniture manufacturer Herman Miller.

Shortly after he was hired by the Zeeland-based company in 1970, Stephen Frykholm was asked to design a poster for the company picnic, named the Sweet Corn Festival. Trying to decide where to begin, Frykholm placed an ear of corn in his mouth and a colleague made a quick sketch. From that sketch, Frykholm made the stencils and prepared the screens, and with the help of his colleague, printed fifty posters. He was so pleased with the result that he entered the poster into an American Institute of Graphic Arts (AIGA) competition. It was only after he submitted his design that he read the fine print: All entries must have been produced in a quantity of 500 or more. Herman Miller agreed to produce 500 more if the poster was accepted into the competition. It was, and Frykholm received his first Certificate of Excellence for communication graphics.

Frykholm went on to design twenty picnic posters over the next two decades, several of which are now in the permanent collection of the Museum of Modern Art in New York. Due to the generosity of Herman Miller, Inc., 1978 (posters 1970–1977); and a gift of the artist, 2013 (posters 1978–1989), the Grand Rapids Art Museum is the first museum to own the full set.

Classroom Connections

+ Frykholm is known for his simplification of form and bold graphic style. Present students with a topic (ex. a movie, book, or event) and instruct them to create a poster using basic shapes. Discuss with students how Frykholm simplified not just the subject matter, but carefully composed his images to capture the essence of the event. For instance in the work we see above he focusses on the activity of eating, an essential component of the picnic festivities he advertises. Instruct students to hone in on a single image that effectively conveys the message or feeling of their topic.

+ Do an internet search for “minimal movie posters.” Collect images of a variety of posters (choose images that students would both easily identify as well as one they may be unfamiliar with. Make a game of having students guess which films are being depicted. Discuss why the designer may have selected the image that they did. Critique each poster and brainstorm potential changes that may make the poster either visually stronger or convey a clearer message.
Suggested Resources

Books

100 Ideas that Changed Graphic Design
Steven Heller and Veronique Vienne
Laurence King Publishing (2012)

Graphic Design: Now in Production
edited by Andrew Blauvelt and Ellen Lupton
Walker Art Center, Cooper-Hewitt National Design Museum (2011)

Herman Miller: The Purpose of Design, Updated and Revised Edition
John Berry
Rizzoli (2009)

Megg’s History of Graphic Design (Fifth Edition)
Philip B. Meggs and Alston W. Purvis
Jon Wiley and Sons, Inc. (2012)

Video

Design Q&A - The Films of Charles and Ray Eames: Volume 4
Pyramid Media
color, 5 min, 1972

Ken Robinson: Changing education paradigms
Ted Talks
color, 12 min, 2010

Objectified
Plexifilm
color, 75 min, 2009

Internet

Design Thinking for Educators
Designthinkingforeducators.com
Exhaustive curriculum and resources created for educators by IDEO on how to effectively incorporate design thinking into classroom practice.

d.school
http://dschool.stanford.edu/dgift/
Participate in a 90 minute crash course in design thinking, working through a full design cycle. Follow step by step instructions and participate with others from around the world.

Design West Michigan
designwestmichigan.com
Provides extensive information on design projects, initiatives, and professionals in west Michigan. Includes numerous “case studies” documenting the work of well known designers and design initiatives.

This resource written/compiled by:
Christopher Bruce
School Programs Coordinator
Grand Rapids Art Museum

To learn more about GRAM’s school programs visit artmuseumgr.org

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