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Cybermedia literacy in communication design education

Laura Scherling, Senior Designer and doctoral student, Teachers College,
Columbia University

Abstract

Communication design students today have grown up 'digital' and for many, interactions with cyberspace begin in early childhood. By arguing for more attention to be paid to the intersection of youth design identity formation and digital media in the field of communication design, this provocation piece argues for there to be a greater focus upon this intersection in teaching. Technology change issues – such as career identity development and interdisciplinary design studies – are considered in relation to identity formation. Given that these topics have in recent years become more prominent, there is thus an argument for moving beyond previous conception of design students' experiences in order to prepare them for their careers, not only when first entering the field but in ways that allow them to continue to adapt and grow as professionals.

Keywords

communication design; design education; identity formation; technology

Much has changed over the decade since I first started my practice as a communication designer. Websites, social media feeds and streams of comments now flow amorphyously in real time. Computer, mobile and digital watch screens – in a multitude of shapes and sizes – are proliferated by texts, videos, photography, memes, advertisements, emoticons, animated gifs or more recently, augmented and virtual reality creations. At any given moment across the world, digital media travels with us to work and inhabits our homes while we socialise with friends and family. Such experiences are widespread and not only shape our views of the world but also how we form our identities, especially in adolescence. An awareness of these increasingly immersive experiences has led me to reconsider the *curiosity*, *elation*, and *anxiety* that communication design students grapple with as they pursue their studies and prepare to the join design as a field, as they simultaneously navigate the 'psychological and societal arenas that dominate the identity-formation process of late adolescence' (Kroger, 2007, p.89).

In order to fully grasp changes in technology, it is vital to look at the extraordinary breadth and depth with which it permeates society. A recent report from the United Nations' *UN News Centre* outlined that approximately 47% of the global population is now online, accounting for an estimated 3.5 billion people. Smartphone ownership has reached 'near-saturation' throughout Europe, the United States (US) and much of East Asia. Moreover, some of the highest individual and household internet use rates are attributed to Iceland, Luxembourg, South Korea and Qatar (*UN News Centre*, 2016). For many people using digital technologies, cyberspace occupation begins in early childhood. In the US, the Pew Research Center has estimated that 96% of adults aged between 18 and 29 use the internet, and approximately 24% of teens use it 'constantly' (Lenhart, 2015; Perrin and Duggan, 2015). In the UK, Ofcom assessed that teens and young adults aged between 16 and 24 use the internet for approximately 31 hours per week (2016). As computer and internet use soars, notable new research has been undertaken into 'constant' computer and internet use, to consider the role it plays in young

peoples' lives (Carr, 2010; Gardner and Davis, 2013; Prensky, 2012; Rideout, Foehr and Roberts, 2010; Turkle, 2015). In light of these technology changes, this provocation piece argues for more attention to be paid to the convergence of youth identity formation and the use of digital media in the field of communication design.

Cyberspace is an evolving and expanding *creative, cognitive, social* education space in which design students are simultaneously acting as avid producers and consumers of digital media. At the same time, they are also now negotiating their present 'stage of adolescence' (Erikson, 1994, p.128) with cultivating their 'digital' identities (Chung, 2011; Sweeny, 2011; Whittier, 2013). Cyberspace is dominated by a highly visual culture and in these heavily 'media-saturated' environments, design students are presented with various technology choices, an array of creative venues through which to express themselves (Gardner and Davis, 2013). Students are confronted by growing awareness that computer and internet use has restructured the design curriculum *and* the career pathways available to them (AIGA, 2015; Chung, 2011; College Board, 2017). Thus, there is an urgent need for the advancement of cybermedia literacies to help prepare communication design students to develop the necessary skill sets, which will enable them to confront the technologies that saturate their everyday lives. This urgency has inspired a few emergent themes – questions – for provocation.

1. Identity formation as a communication design student

Turkle observes that 'networking makes it easier to play with identity [...] but harder to leave the past behind, because the Internet is forever' (2015, p.169). It can be argued that design students' constant use of digital technologies is deeply ingrained in identity formation. It can also be argued that the inundation of technology can amplify identity role confusion in identity formation, and it is understood that forming a sense of self and finding a 'solid anchor point' in the school-to-career transition is a complicated process. According to Kroger, identities 'are formed through the mutual regulation of society with individual biology and psychology; thus, the range of variation in the identities that will be sanctioned and fostered lies in the hands of the culture itself' (2007, p.66). Growing up with digital technologies and engaging in a profession that is increasingly computer- and internet- based, strongly suggests that design students' identity formation takes place across a range of virtual learning settings (McCreery *et al.*, 2012, p.976). How can educators, mentors and practitioners in the field of communication design, support 'online' and 'offline' identity formation among design students, keeping in mind the anxiety and trepidation rooted in these processes? Is this necessary to succeed in 21st century design studio settings? Moreover, to what extent are parents, administrators, policy-makers, professional design or education associations also responsible for the individuation of communication design students?

2. Career identity development in communication design

The field of design is traditionally aligned with technological innovation – from movable type to the mechanical printing press, Photostats and computing. The relationship between design students and emerging technologies therefore has a significant historical precedent (Jury, 2012). With today's technology changes, what are the implications for design students who are joining the field? How do technological changes shape students' career identities – in studio classrooms, professional design studios, in community work and beyond? Furthermore, how can design students, educators and practitioners support each other in these evolving digital spaces?

3. Interdisciplinarity and identity in communication design

There is much conversation about design as an interdisciplinary endeavor. Some of which can be attributed to the historical move toward discipline-oriented curriculum reform (Efland, 1990, p.241). It can be argued that a move toward multidisciplinary design education can help shape a new generation of designers who are media savvy, critical of their virtual surroundings and better able to

readily apply new technological mediums in imaginative, innovative and socially-engaged ways. As the UK Design Council observes, 'multi-disciplinary design teaching is seen to be relevant to industry across the world' (Design Council, 2010, p.6). According to this multidisciplinary framework, what then does it mean to be a designer who engages with the sciences? What does it mean to be a designer who engages with the arts and humanities? What else can be done to help eliminate discipline-based education barriers (STEM to STEAM, 2017)? Given the existing discipline-based education 'silos', what types of identity conflicts do design students' experience?

These questions for provocation may sound reasonable to address. However, issues in human development and creativity transcend normative understandings of student experiences, with career preparedness in mind. I posit that students who engage critically with cybermedia literacies enhance their 'cognitive flexibility' – addressing the need to explore and challenge digital technologies (Chung, 2011, p.69; Efland, 2002, p.92). Designers now live in 'glocalities' – an 'interconnected global matrix' with a shared consciousness (Meyrowitz, 2005, p.23) – and cyberspace retains an immense potential for creativity in learning. Burton asks what 'kinds of distillations do children and adolescents draw from their cultural environment and how do they embed these in their own creative practices?' (2011, p. 79). Learning to navigate cyberspace might appear deceptively simple to students given its immediacy. However, there are numerous possibilities for improving cyberliteracy and for thinking more about cybermedia as a tool for art and design. Integrating more cybermedia literacy interventions in educational and professional settings – in the field of communication design itself – can encourage students to confront digital visual cultures in unexpected ways.

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Biography

Laura Scherling is a senior designer, completing a doctoral degree at Columbia University. Her research interests include design, education and media studies. Scherling is also the founder of GreenspaceNYC. Her work can be viewed at laurascherling.info.