Enhance the creative potential of Omani graphic design students

Article in Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences · March 2015

1 author:

Salman Alhajri
Sultan Qaboos University, College of Education

Some of the authors of this publication are also working on these related projects:

- Fostering the learners' Creativity in Graphic Design Education from Psychological Perspectives for sustainability View project
- Application of waste materials View project
3rd World Conference on Design, Arts and Education (DAE-2014)
01-627
Editor
Prof. Dr. Siniša Opid
Global Journal on Humanities & Social Sciences

Issue 1 (2015) 194-198

Selected Paper of 3rd World Conference On Design, Arts and Education, (DAE-2014)
02-03 May 2014, Royal Princess Hotel Conference Center in Dubrovnik, Croatia.

Enhance the creative potential of Omani graphic design students

Salman Alhajri *, Graphic Design, Sultan Qaboos University, Sultanate of Oman.

Suggested Citation:

Received January 06, 2014; revised February 18, 2014; accepted March 02, 2014.
Selection and peer review under responsibility of Prof. Dr. Siniša Opić, Zagreb University, Croatia.
©2015 Academic World Education & Research Center. All rights reserved.

Abstract

This paper investigates the position of ‘creativity’ within graphic design education in general, and within the Omani educational context in specific. Creativity is defined within this research and in relation to graphic design education as ‘problem solving’, which is explained also as a cultural activity, or a cultural production. Graphic designers can involve themselves effectively in solving communication, social, and cultural problems that are classified as ‘wicked problems’, which usually require creative solutions. It is argued that Omani graphic designers should be creative problem solvers and able to find effective solutions for these problems. Yet this is not the case in Oman, at least from the perspective of this paper.

A qualitative interpretative methodology was used for this purpose. A survey approach was used, implementing two methods: questionnaires and interviews. The online questionnaire was conducted with 33 international participants. It investigated how creativity is defined within graphic design contexts; whether creativity can be taught or enhanced. The same set of questions was asked in face-to-face interviews conducted with 39 design lecturers. The interviewees were local lecturers who teach graphic design courses at some Omani institutions. All of the collected data was analyzed through a thematic analysis.

As a result this paper has defined the concept of ‘creativity’ from design educational perspective, collected ideas, insights and trends about creativity in graphic design education, and has advanced knowledge of the relationships among graphic design, creativity, within Omani education system.

Keywords: creativity, Omani design education, teaching creativity, problem solving, wicked problems.

* ADDRESS FOR CORRESPONDENCE: Salman Alhajri, Graphic Design, Sultan Qaboos University, Sultanate of Oman. E-mail address: salmanh@squ.edu.om
1. Introduction

Creativity is a complex phenomenon. It “is typically venerated above almost all other material properties or personal prospects” (Williams, Ostwald & Askland, 2010). It is commonly assumed to intersect with multiple areas of knowledge: art, psychology, education, sociology, and cultural studies, to name a few. “Yet, as a society we have no common definition of creativity, we rarely articulate just how important it is and there is even less clarity in how we teach or assess it” (ibid., 2010, p.ix). Examples of the claimed effects of creativity are a crucial component for both the individual and for the whole society; it can help the individual to increase their productivity (DTI Economics Papers, 2005,) and raise their self-confidence (Barron, 2007), and self-esteem (Banaji, Burn & Buckingham, 2006). The very basic definition of creativity, among most fields, is “the production of novel, appropriate ideas in any realm of human activity from science, to the arts, to education, to business or to everyday life” (Amabile, 1997). As a result, the concept of ‘creativity’ is a contested notion, and a “divisive topic” (Williams, et al., 2010), with definitions spanning the academic, artistic, and everyday worlds. Therefore, it is difficult to find a ‘one size fits all’ definition of creativity that suits all fields and is agreed by everyone.

Based on the above discussion, this research argues that defining creativity is a problematic issue and the current use of the word ‘creative’ is misleading because “No word in English carries a more consistently positive reference than ‘creative’” (Williams, 1961). “The very width of positive reference of ‘creative’ word involve 1) difficulties of meaning through a habit, 2) unthinking repetition which at times make the word seems useless” (ibid., 1961). Therefore, it is difficult, because of infinite regression or tautology, to define the word ‘creativity’ by using similar words such as original, creative or new. Barnard (2005) argues, “It is not uncommon to find each of these words used to define and explain the others”.

This research does not make a global claim for creativity, but argues a small and tight claim based on both theoretical and first-hand research. It is an attempt to locate the ‘creativity’ phenomenon within the educational context of graphic design. Therefore, creativity can be comprehended as a cultural activity that each member of a specific culture - in the case of this research, graphic design education - performs routinely as part of their everyday cultural activity (Williams, 1961). “…Cultural production is both graphic design and art examples of cultural production” (Barnard, 2005). More specifically, creativity in graphic design can be defined as problem solving, more specifically solving ‘wicked problems’. ‘Wicked problems’ are quite frequently addressed in the design research (e.g. Buchanan, 2010).

2. Discussion

2.1 The creative designer and the creative artist and their roles in the society

Design lies between the unmeasured fluidity of the arts, where nothing is measured, and the rigidity of the sciences, where everything that cannot be measured is ignored. As such, design operates in the fuzzy realm of social problems and ‘wicked problems’, a place where results are valid, but generally local and difficult to reproduce universally; so, design is to do with the meaning of problem solving, and cultural production. The same case can be applied to graphic design education. Its education, operation, theory, and technical strata of delivery are all strongly aligned with the cultural framework of the West. By contrast, graphic design education in non-Western developing countries is an emerging topic at all levels, from general to higher education.

Western philosophy (e.g. Williams, 1961) has provided a fundamental base, as a conceptual framework for this research that will be adapted herewith to non-Western education (i.e. Omani educational system). The tradition Western philosophy begins with Aristotle and Plato, and is then

taken up by Marvell (ibid.). However, Williams (1961) critiques traditional ways of comprehending the ‘creative’ concept and argues that creativity is a part of everyday cultural activity, an activity that everyone performs routinely as a member of a culture. He argues,

> Art is ratified, in the end, by the fact of creativity in all our living. Everything we see and do the whole structure of our relationships and institutions depend, finally on an effort of learning, description and communication, we create our human world as we have thought of art being created (Williams, 1961).

Also, this research can be linked to Williams’s conception of creativity, as stated by Rustin (2007):

> Williams’s conception of the core value of ‘creativity’ included dimensions of work, learning, and decision-making. A good life would be one in which work made use of human faculties; in which education would encourage the development of a variety of capacities; and where people would share in decision making in the public sphere.

It is argued that Williams (1961) here focuses on the role of education to “encourage the development of a variety of capacities”. This describes the term of ‘enhancement’ that will be discussed within this research. In the above passage, Rustin (2007) argues that creativity can be developed, and notes that it represents a “variety of capacities”. Therefore, this understanding works well with the concepts of this research which were mentioned earlier.

Moreover, each culture has distinctive models, frames, and thoughts to define the ‘creative’ act. Williams (1961) argues,

> There are thus, two senses in which we can speak of this activity as 'creative'. The evolution of the human brain, and then the particular interpretations carried by particular cultures, give us certain 'rules' or 'models', without which no human being can 'see' in ordinary sense, at all. In each individual, the learning of these rules, through inheritance and culture, is a kind of creation, in that the distinctively human world, the ordinary 'reality' that is culture defines, forms only as the rules are learned. Particular cultures carry particular versions of reality, which they can be said to create, in the sense that cultures carrying different rules ... create their own worlds which their bearers ordinarily experience.

This research is based on the perspective that artists and graphic designers play a vital role in society in revising the understandings of specific terms (e.g. ‘creative’, ‘valuable’, ‘appropriate’). Williams (1961) suggests, “by returning the ideas to their place in the tradition, we can become conscious enough of them to reject them, as a part of our ordinary account of perception and communication”. Barnard (2005) argues, “graphic design is not different from art because art is creative and graphics is not”; rather, “both graphic design and art are creative in the sense that they are two of the ways in which experience is made meaningful and communicated”. Williams (1961) attempted to define the word 'creative' by stating, “The 'creative' act, of any artist, is in any case the process of making a meaning active, by communicating”. This understanding clearly supports the argument made within this research in terms of how educators understand the creative act, that is, creativity in design education is an approach, process, and fundamental attribute of the learner (i.e. graphic designer).

Another argument that underpins this research is that “the individual creative description is part of the general process which creates conventions and institutions, through which the meanings that are valued by the community are shared and made active” (ibid., 1961). Therefore, it can be argued that if educators are interested in establishing a central role for creativity in universities and higher education institutions, they need to ensure that there are suitable opportunities, a supportive environment, and enthusiastic motivation for their students. This is in addition to activating innovative and imaginative experiences whilst teaching graphic design. But, more importantly, it is argued that to ensure the flourishing of graphic design education in developing countries, a deep understanding of the importance of creativity is required in the first place.
3. The research methods

The two main methods employed to collect the required information were semi-structured questionnaires and semi-structured interviews. They are explained later in separate sections. Such details highlight the sampling population, proposed questions, how the questions were asked and answered, and the process of the pilot study. The justification for using these two methods within this research is that the questionnaires intended to collect information from an international experience, whereas the interviews were designed to collect the same information, but from a local (i.e. Omani) perspective. Therefore, the questionnaire participants answered the questions online. The second group of participants was interviewed to answer the questions in a face-to-face setting. The final outcome of both methods has contributed positively to answering the main research questions and fulfilling the research objectives. For example, the information collected from the design lecturers was helpful in highlighting the research problems and comprehending how those people approach research-related issues.

This research is interested in what the experiences and what that means to them, based on the fact that culture is all about the meanings of things, which are constructed differently according to different realities. Therefore, the interviews were appropriate because they helped to raise some issues that were not thought of during the early stages. Even though the initial collected answers were generated from asking simple questions, they were not totally naïve. This is because the answers were collected from experts who are intensively involved in graphic design education practices. Most of them showed an ability to answer the questions directly and objectively, and avoid expressing personal beliefs or attitudes.

4. The results

This research has examined how graphic design education might be taught in new socio-cultural settings (e.g. Omani design education). This research offers several benefits to the international educational community, such as other Middle Eastern states (e.g. Saudi Arabia and Kuwait). This paper also can benefit some Far Eastern countries, such as China, Korea, and Singapore. These countries would have the same kind of problems that designers deal with, therefore what is proposed in this paper may well be useful to them. Design educators, researchers, and design lecturers from both developing and developed countries could reflect positively on this research. Generally, it encourages researchers from design education, design studies, psychological studies, and many more fields to undertake further research in creativity enhancement and assessment, in order to establish a greater degree of accuracy in these fields. This research is one of the few studies that have examined creativity enhancement in relation to graphic design education, particularly in the Arabic region. It introduces the notion of design as a process in the West versus design as an application of technology in developing countries (e.g. Oman). It gives a snapshot of differing views regarding creativity in design education as perceived by the international educators versus Omani educators. This raises several interesting questions that might be of interest to international researchers. The following points outline examples of lessons that can be learned by the international community.

Also, this paper emphasizes the idea that creativity is a primary component in the modern graphic design education context and should have a very important position reserved for it in any current educational research. This would encourage educators to establish a dialogue between educators, designers, and possibly psychologists, to find an inter-disciplinary approach to studying the phenomenon. Such research may eventually generate theories, opinions, or perhaps new controversial discussions that can benefit graphic design education in general. This would assist design lecturers to develop new specific ways of enhancing creativity that consider the requirements of design education.
Furthermore, this research has made some contributions to advancing the current understanding of creativity within the graphic design context, specifically in Oman. It introduces creativity as problem solving in graphic design education, which can generally be understood as a cultural production or a cultural activity that is usually performed by everyone. This understanding is new, at least from this research perspective, and may also encourage future research to stand with or against this standpoint. The idea of creativity as problem solving would assist researchers interested in graphic design education to examine this definition and accordingly, develop theories and suggest pedagogical models or practical guides to enhancing creativity. It is argued that this definition is a reliable one because it is extracted from ‘global’ experiences (i.e. international graphic design contexts) and clarifies more precisely the nature of the creative abilities of graphic design students.

5. Conclusion

The main motivation for conducting this research was the author’s desire to gain a clear understanding of the concept of creativity, in a general sense, and specifically in relation to graphic design. It is interesting research, because it is one of few studies that have investigated the links between creativity and graphic design education. Williams et al., (2010) argue, “There is no established ‘study of design creativity’ that explores the particularities of creativity as it relates to design”. Based on this notion, it is reasonable to argue that the topic of this study is currently of interest to the community of design educators and lecturers. It is timely and fills a gap in current knowledge in design education. Another motivation was to contribute to improving the importance of creativity in relation to graphic design education in Oman. This can lead to increasing the standards of creative design practice in developing graphic design educational systems in Oman.

References