Writing-Intensive Approaches in a Typographic Design Studio Class: Using Writing as a Tool toward More Intentional Design

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Abstract: Taking advantage of a university-wide initiative that requires all students during their course of study to take at least one of their writing intensive classes in their major, the author relates how he was spurred to formulate one of his graphic design studio classes to accommodate the writing-intensive requirement. He had been intuitively integrating writing activities of different kinds across all his studio courses over a period of several years, so this external motivation provided an opportunity to integrate a more deliberate plan to his studio course. For the typography class featured in this article, students complete typographic design projects inspired by historical periods discussed each week from the course's textbook and write in a variety of ways about their experiences.

Introduction

The act of writing makes thoughts concrete. It shapes and structures incipient ideas. My decision to transform my graphics class in typography into a writing-intensive course was based on my successes with writing exercises that I had used in other design studio classes. In these classes, I had picked up on writing's chief virtue—at least in my case—that of keeping my students on task by having them think critically and specifically about their classroom activities.

In one class, in order to help prepare for the oral presentation of their designs, I had students write reflectively about the designs they were to present that day. I posed a question about what tone or expression they were aiming to achieve—an essential element to consider as students design logos or fliers for a client and specific viewers/users of the design's information. I asked them to explain how the typeface they chose helped them achieve the intended tone and how their color and layout choices supported that objective. I had them write their responses prior to a class-wide critique, so they would think more specifically about why they made their design decisions. Most students benefited from this approach. Come critique time, when asked to speak about their designs, students were less inclined to say, "What do you want me to say?"

In another class—one devoted to hands-on two-dimensional design—I had students write a formal analysis which followed a format in Sylvan Barnet's *A Short Guide to Writing About Art* (2014), so that they could examine an original artwork in our gallery more critically and understand how the artist's use of color and composition evoked an emotional expression from them personally. After revising a draft or two, where I guided them to begin with a thesis statement and then support that thesis with evidence directly from the artwork, most were capable of writing an analysis where the elements

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they chose to describe supported their thesis statement. I concluded this assignment by having each student stand next to the artwork they had analyzed and read from their finished paper. Students listening could thus hear each class member's "take" on the piece being analyzed. By being in the presence of the artwork during these readings, students could affirm how others had approached their interpretation of the artworks and the assignment that spawned the interpretation.

I typically begin a new design project by brainstorming ideas with my class. We map brainstorming sessions, chart words and phrases on the chalkboard; I encourage students to note and then to doodle or work through several 20-second thumbnail sketches of layout possibilities for the logo or page design after the brainstorming ideas regarding color, shape, and type choices, so that visual ideas may come to them intuitively. As we conclude the brainstorming session I have students volunteer to contribute at least two or three words that to them describe or evoke the tone or expression so that we will have a target for what we need to communicate in the design. Students are thus guided, as they Google-search designs by other designers, to find examples of how others have used color and typography to get at the intended tone *before* they begin their own designs.

It is in this phase of research where I relate their image searches to the process of reviewing literature for courses involving writing a paper. Students begin to see how other designers have solved design problems of a similar tone to our current design project. As they work through the design process, students may partner with another to simulate the collaborative approach often used in design studios.

Finally, I require students to experiment with traditional art materials such as charcoal, ink and paint so they can expand their range of expression beyond digital media. Hand-drawn lettering with crayon or chalk for a poster design for an event may, for example, have an energy and immediacy best suited for a celebratory effect, or to better appeal to a younger age demographic. Any hand-drawn elements can always be digitized for reproduction.

Each week in these studio classes students orally critique one another's designs under the direction of the instructor, making suggestions that will improve their fellow students' work. They then have the opportunity to finesse the designs, taking advantage of the coursework's structure. I encourage trial and error approaches to the usually complex creative process.

Context

For the upper level course in typography, the main topic of this article, I decided to combine a history of typography with weekly design projects so that students have historical and cultural contexts for their designs. The ARTS 345 "Intermediate Graphic Design" course, offered every spring semester at the University of South Carolina Aiken, is open to students across campus. But the course is tailored to students in the fine arts program, who are required to enroll in at least one writing-intensive course in their major. The course's description and range of activities supporting the course's objectives follows:

> Intermediate Graphic Design is a studio and design history course with a focus on typography. Students will complete a series of weekly design projects, which, tied to historical precedent, are designed to promote an understanding of the role of typography as a cultural practice. This course is a Writing-Intensive course, and as such includes a significant writing component.

The course syllabus proceeds to outline activities I have developed to help students make connections between the typographic designs we study, including their historical/cultural context, and their own original weekly designs. My intentions for all of my graphic design courses are to have

students work not only toward aesthetic standards, but also to be aware that in the world of graphics they need to consider the client's and viewers' perspective. Their weekly projects thus focus on ways typography has been used to convey graphic messages for a particular era. As reinforced in this typography course, the text's introduction, *Graphic Design History: A Critical Guide* (2013), authors Johanna Drucker and Emily McVarish note "Graphic artifacts always serve a purpose and contain an agenda [...] Someone is addressing someone else for some reason through every object of design communication" (pp. xiv-xvii). While researching examples of typographic designs to inspire their own design creations each week, I require students to conclude their design work by writing a reflective paragraph that explains the motivation for their design, including the design's historical/cultural/technological sources as diagrammed in Faigley, George, Palchik and Selfe's *Picturing Texts* (2004). I intend that this writing activity link the cultural agenda of the period to the appearance of the design that they have created. Students are free to transpose historical agendas to our own time, making connections with historical precedent from their own frame of experience. More than creating an aesthetically pleasing design, then, students come to understand that a design's look is motivated by a designer's agenda, which is necessarily rooted in the designer's culture. Included in each culture are methods and media at use during the time of the design's creation. I have found that the students' deliberate act of writing the rationale for their design choices drives home the visual/cultural connection. I have them display this written rationale along with the design in the hallway each week. I have noticed that passers-by who are engaged by the visual, often read more about the design they have noticed, and thus connect the design's look with its cultural influences. Students then have the opportunity to push toward the more complex "ideal thinking" as described in Daniel J. Boorstin's *The Image* (2012, p. 197), where the student actively strives toward perfection—toward something in its most excellent form—rather than a static or synthetic image to be "fit into."

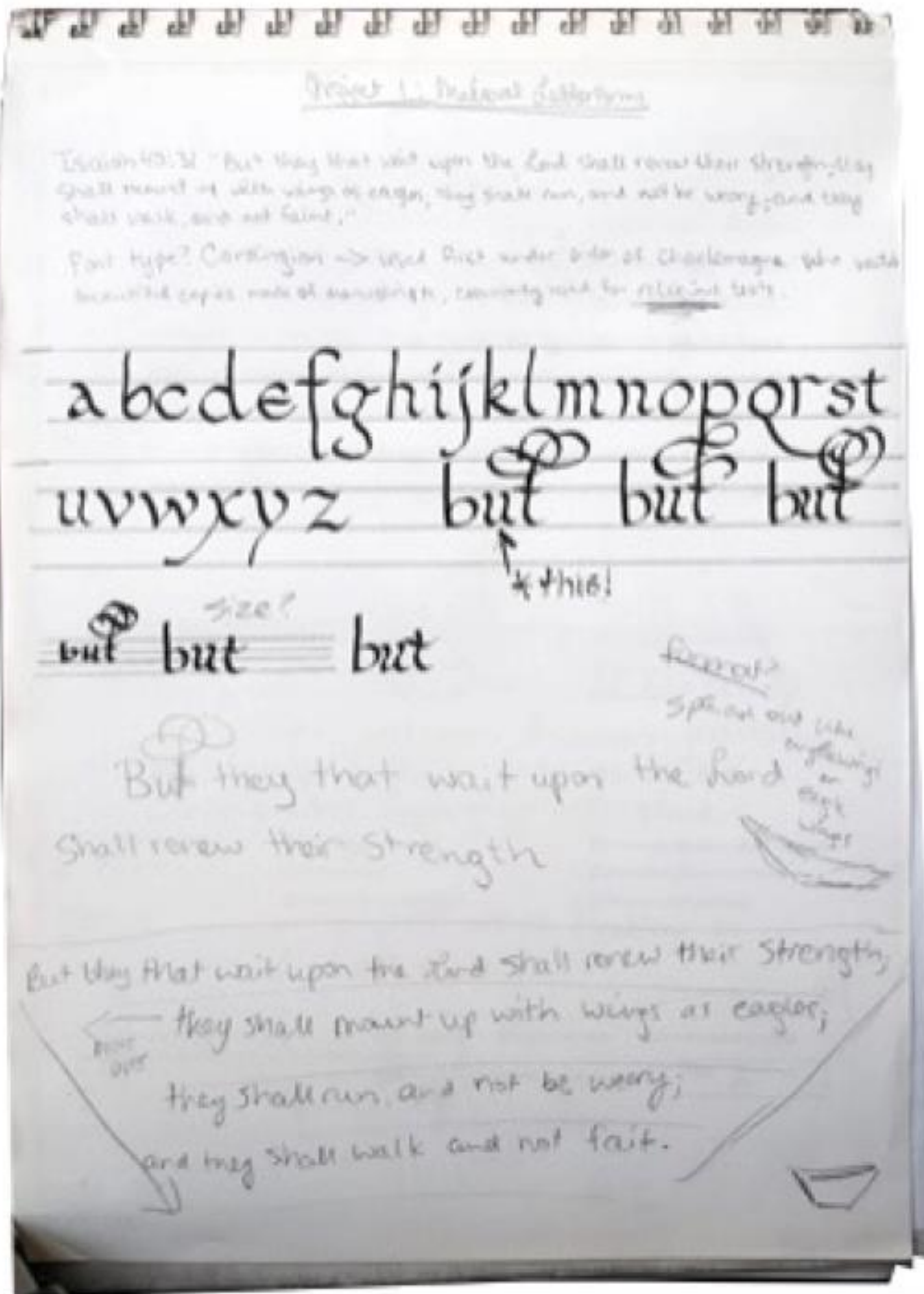
Finally, for the bulk of the writing-intensive requirement of the course, students write and design an illustrated booklet or article. They compose a 10-15-page paper about a topic of their choice to explore a typographic subject more thoroughly. I provide some guidance toward their topic choice and have them write a thesis that indicates their intended approach to the topic. The research librarian then holds a workshop so that they are directed toward choosing appropriate bibliographic sources for their topic idea. After they write the first draft of the paper by mid-course, I give them written and oral feedback to discuss ways to expand or reduce the scope of the topic appropriate to the length of the paper. As they complete their more finished draft, I require them to design their paper in the form of a booklet or magazine article, integrating images with the text in keeping with editorial graphic discipline that relates with typographic design. A portion of their paper's grade comes from the *design* of their writing. The students' booklet designs' format, size and color thus provide a supportive context. Examples of this formatting idea conclude this article.

Writing to Deliberate

I intend writing activities, from the very beginning of the course, to guide students toward thoughtful, deliberate decision-making in their design work. But, before they begin their very first weekly project, students are required to read the *New York Times* bestseller, Simon Garfield's *Just My Type* (2012), which deals with the place of typographic design in our present-day culture.I have the students write an annotated chapter outline to focus their attention on the book's content. I have them ask themselves as they read each chapter and then write a sentence or two from their reading: "What is your take-away?" "What seems an important lesson for *you* in the chapter?" Some may be inspired from their reading to pursue a topic for their term paper. They will, at least, be prompted to consider the crucial role that type and type choices play in forming today's frenetically-paced culture.

After beginning discussion of historical eras or periods—often accompanied by a video, an interactive game, or performance by the student who had signed up to present a text chapter—a memorable "hook" for that week—I require the students to make entries in a sketchbook so that they merge the deliberate writing and sketching activities toward concepts for each of their weekly design projects. Writing in this capacity thus helps students weave their ideas for their project design from their research for each project, relating the look and content of their eventual design with historical and cultural sources of the week's focus.

Figure 1



The first weekly project links lettering practice and note-taking on this sketchbook page. The student makes choices of manuscript face, line breaks and other compositional format decisions for the sake of bringing out the meaning of the passage more clearly. (courtesy Robyn Rutland)

Our first weekly project focuses on the pre-printed word during the Medieval era. Students practice drawing letterforms they initially trace from their choice of manuscript style according to the content

of their choice of poem, biblical passage or song lyric. I require that they hand-letter their passage for this project in order to understand how a letter's stroke width, dictated by the width of their pen nib, corresponds to the letter's size, and thus letter, word, and line spacing. Where line breaks occur also can promote or undermine the meaning of the passage they have chosen to design. A case in point can be seen in Figure 1, which illustrates one student's sketchbook page. It reveals several design considerations, such as how she chose the Carolingian manuscript style due to its appropriateness for lettering a biblical passage, as initiated by France's Charlemagne, king of the Franks, because he promoted beauty through this particular hand-lettering style. The student also notes on the same page how she prefers that the lines of her written passage be broken out, to "spread out like eagle wings," in order to underscore the meaning of the passage's content.

Following this mandatory hand-lettered assignment, students are free to complete the rest of their weekly projects for the semester digitally. However they are still required to work through each week's design plans using manual sketching and note taking as an approach, which promotes deliberate planning. This process is especially important as writing is a critical component of this exercise.

Writing to Explain Connections

Following completion of each weekly design project, students write to explain how their designs, and especially their choice and layout of their typefaces, were inspired by the historical and cultural conditions we have studied during the week. Since students have the option of transposing concepts from an earlier era to the present, one student chose to transform a familiar scene from a *Peanuts* cartoon to accommodate the tone and content of an early nineteenth century Parisian poster design.

The French poster was created to advertise a then-recent Balzac novel (Figure 2)—the plight of a husband who bears his idle wife on his shoulders while being plagued by a child mounting his leg, and who is attempting to escape (?) his dilemma as a satanic figure who whispers in his ear. To support her comic take on the earlier poster, she wrote the following poem to entertain the viewer of her work while making a connection to the historic precedent:

> **A Modern Take on PETITES MISERES, Introducing the Plight of "ANTI-HERO"**
> Monsieur Brown:
>
> "Poor fool Charles Brown, nicest boy as could be,
> Can't seem to learn not to trust the girl Lucy
> Every time he rushes in to punt the ball
> That bully Lucy laughs while he falls
> And despite all his might and determination
> He's brought to himself no more than humiliation
> But Lucy doesn't mind; she tolerates his lack of sense
> He's her best customer, and her advice is just five cents!"[1]

Figures 2 & 3

Picking up on the tone of the nineteenth century poster advertising a recent Balzac novel (above), the student designed a take-off of Charlie Brown's oft-repeated dilemmas with Lucy. The recent use of the lithographic printing medium in Paris adds a liveliness through color and freely drawn type that is simulated in the Schulz characters. (Figure 2 courtesy Bibliotheque Nationále de France; Figure 3 courtesy Valerie Johnson.)

To her credit, her "Peanuts" design does pick up on one of the trademarks of the lithographic process that appears in the French poster—she places the letters of the title in the freehand manner that simulates the way larger display lettering was rendered on the lithographic stone. The layout of the display type is loosened from the normally metal type, otherwise locked into a chase, as would be the typical approach in the relief printing process. She also directly refers to her design's inspiration from the French poster.

But, while the student succeeds in picking up on the tone of the piece by focusing on the content and the treatment of the typography and layout, capturing something of the humorous content from the original French poster, her weakness lies in not addressing *why* she uses type in the "Peanuts" layout as she has. I instructed her to explain why the letterforms in the French poster looked the way they did per printing process, and how the lettering served at the time to convey a radical way of advertising the humorous tone of the poster. Color was also new to the advertising scene in early nineteenth century France, and would have been a revolutionary means to direct attention to the poster's content. By not writing to explain the reason for her design choices, she has failed to convey her understanding of the conceptual and expressive connections that relate her design to that of its French inspiration. Other students would also gloss over answering the "why" for their typographic and layout choices, often detailing the processes in creating their designs instead. Historical and cultural connections are thus largely neglected in favor of a more intuitive and thus less conscientious

and deliberate approach that robs the student of the opportunity to fully appreciate the rationale for their design approaches—the very thing that in their practical approaches to designs for real clients are likely forfeited, or at best, compromised.

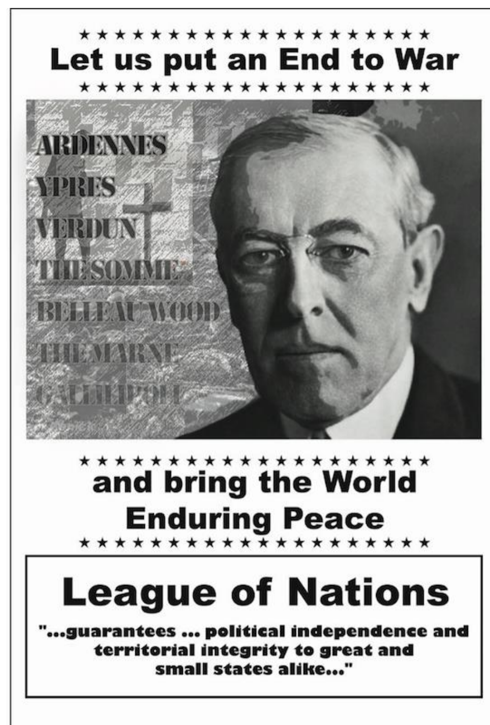
A second student's design, underscored through his written rationale, provides a more thorough historical context for the subject matter of a World War I motivational poster (Figure 4). While he chose for the content of his design to remain within the period under study, thus recreating a period poster design, he made connections, as spelled out in his written rationale, between the content of the motivational poster and his uses of typefaces designed since the World War I era. The result produces an impact that relates the urgency of the original concept of the poster with a twenty-first century twist, though that twist is a subtle typographic one. He writes,

> The shock and horror of World War I profoundly affected the combatant nations. Mechanized warfare on a scale never previously experienced produced a staggering number of casualties and widespread physical and social destruction. Idealistic leaders like Woodrow Wilson resolved to ensure the conflict would be "The War to End All Wars" and proposed the establishment of an international body (a "League of Nations") to enable the peaceful resolution of conflicts between and among countries.

This poster is designed to support President Wilson's campaigning on behalf of the League across the United States in the summer of 1919, when antiwar sentiment was strong in the country. The graphical treatment is consistent with the time: photography was being used as much as hand-drawn graphics (the image of Wilson is a photograph of a painting, the background scenes of war and burial grounds are sketch-renderings). The typeface for the poster body is Arial Black or Gill Sans Ultra Bold, in emulation of the heavy, sans-serif faces used in posters from that era. The list of battles in the background is done in Stencil, which was in use at the time (although it is not certain it was as closely associated with military environments as it became during World War II—a conflict that demonstrated the futility of the League without American participation: the United States never ratified the treaty.[2]

While more subtle in its impact as compared with an original World War I patriotic motivational poster, his written rationale makes clear that his choice of display typefaces, which spell out the urgent call to arms, are what complement the message. It would likely be revealing to see some of the period poster designs in a side-by-side comparison with the student's design to better appreciate the differences in imagery and typography that take place in the century span of the two designs.

Figure 4



Writing Lengthy Narratives with Supportive Stylistic Layout

Finally, as students progress through their written drafts toward the major paper for the course, they are required to consider an appropriate editorial graphics context: What types of image-text combinations support the content of what they are writing? Ideally the appearance of the booklet and layouts should evoke the era that inspired the writing, but the way the layout is arranged should also affect the reader's experience beyond just understanding the content of *what* is written.

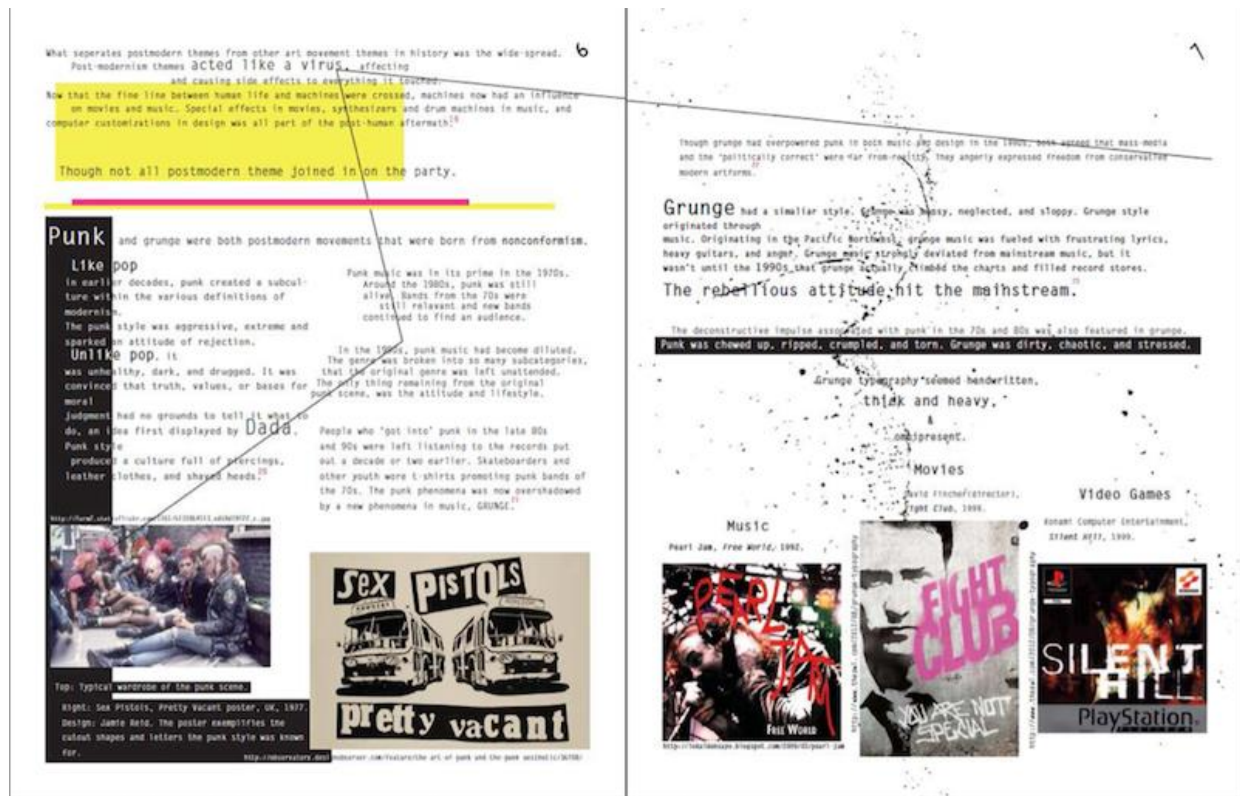
I share the first example in Figures 5 and 6 below: one that on the surface captures the look of text and images written and drawn on papyrus, a writing medium and substrate contemporary with his subject of the ancient Egyptian culture. The student even mocked up his paper to include end-scroll dowels and roller end-knobs. He took pains to transform digital type to the columnar layout typical of a scrolled document, simulating the physical and visual texture of papyrus. For his illustrations he transformed symbol and imagery from relief carvings and reproductions of handwritten pictographs. Throughout, he succeeded in evoking a convincing papyrus scroll that was sized and formatted to accommodate his text, illustrations and credits for text and images. My only suggestion was that he provide something of how the writing and use of symbols of that time be experienced by our current people who are used to reading left-to-right and top to bottom. One of his illustrations indicates how Egyptians took in information and read in varying directions. Was the direction of reading dependent on the subject, the status of the one promoting the message, the caste of the reader? Maybe an example or two of how a phrase of ours could be "read" in hieroglyphs, so that the reader could experience something of how the ancient Egyptians might have had to read in order to decipher written messages.

Figure 5

Figure 6

Another student, as though to book-end the time continuum for the purposes of this article, chose a style closer to our own time (Figure 7). He was interested in the Post-Modern graphic styles of 1990s: a reaction to the cooler rational and formal language of a decade earlier. He featured this style that challenged readability through its self-conscious techno and idiosyncratic styles of twenty years ago. His use of the style *does* give the reader a sense of the schizophrenic nature of page layouts that jump from the narrative to quotes from celebrities and politicians. Other elements—quotes, call-outs and captions—compete with the reader's normally seamless flow of narrative. Even within the narrative the reader is interrupted by text boxes of different color, overlapping and often disjointed arrangements of varied typefaces and sizes, lines that zing through the page, splatters of ink that texture and enliven (or distract). The student and I joked in understatement that the aesthetic standards to evaluate his design would likely try the patience of the reader who is used to more conventional standards.

Figure 7



Conclusion

Though early in the processes of integrating writing activities into this design course, I will continue to have students write for a variety of purposes. From their earliest note-taking efforts in the semester, I will use writing to help students deliberate over challenges and questions I pose during class discussions and in one-on-one visits with them over their developing weekly design concepts. Through their research of images I will visit with them about their findings. I will work with them as they revise their rationales so that they accommodate historic, cultural and technological truths which pertain to each project. I will continue to provide written and oral feedback on their drafts for their topic choice of the semester. My goal is to guide students toward a more deliberate analytic and self-critical attitude during their concept developments. To this end I will help them to own those skills, initiated largely through writing practice that will keep them life-long learners in their quest toward excellence as designers.

As for my use of writing in my other courses, I will continue to use my previously mentioned tactic of having students respond to questions I pose regarding their choice of color, layout and typeface for the logo and other print designs we complete, with or without a client to instigate the project. The exercise during our brainstorming sessions, where we map concepts on the chalkboard to come to common understandings of color, shape, symbol, typeface and tone is a way of using writing to lead to further notes, doodles, and thumbnail sketches, providing the advantage of giving us all a common foundation for beginning course projects.

From my use of writing in the writing-intensive course outlined in this article, I am more convinced than ever that writing has the potential to produce thoughtful, intentional designers, sensitive to their

client's agenda and to the viewership they serve. But whether students pursue design careers or are otherwise engaged with the public in any career, the skills they hone from their writing activities will serve them to be critical evaluators of information as they deal with any number of issues critical to the society they serve.

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Notes

[1] Valerie Johnson's written rationale for her Charlie Brown poster of February 13, 2013.

[2] John Strack's written rationale for his World War I poster of March 24, 2013.

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