What students say about their work and what it says about their work. Toward the development of rhetorical practice in the educational design studio

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Abstract: The knowledge and skill required by graphic designers is expanding from traditional views that value craft and technical expertise to those reliant on reflective design thinking. This marks a re-definition of design as a social practice more concerned with the facilitation of interaction(s) and that draws on design criticism and principles of rhetoric. Consequently, design practitioners must apply skills that place more emphasis on the impact or outcome of design and where people, and how they respond as part of a communication system, are the priority. However, despite this indication that rhetoric is vital to shifting design thinking and practice, our understanding of the skills related to its application and how they are developed is relatively limited. In this exploratory study we gauge the current state of design education in an Australian university to determine whether and to what extent students reflect critically on the effectiveness of their work.

Keywords: Rhetoric, Design practice, Design education, Communication design

1. Introduction

Recent changes to design practice have highlighted an increasing emphasis on information and communication, leading to several arguments for the re-definition of graphic design from how it has been understood and discussed since the late 1980s (Buchanan, 1985; Ehses, 2009; Frascara, 1995; Kinross, 1985; Poggenpohl, 1998; Tyler, 1992). This contributed to a diversity of definitions of graphic design, from those that highlighted its traditional connection to conveying ideas on a surface in material and visual form to those that framed graphic design as a practice concerned with the organisation and communication of information for efficiency of use. Consequently, the idea that graphic, or communication, design as a practice can be neatly located in relation to the production of physical objects, visual and material forms, and mechanical reproduction, and where the model...
for design thinking and practice involving (1) the identification of a problem, (2) for which a solution is proposed, and (3) made, is no longer feasible.

Contemporary communication design practice is tending to place greater emphasis on strategy, experience, interaction, use, and social impact, and focusing less on the idea that value and meaning are embedded in the artefact itself (Friedman, 2012; Margolin, 2002; Norman, 2010). This may be due in part to a recognition that the traditional model for design practice has very little consideration for how the end user's response contributes to or 'completes' a design process through meaning making and action (Kimbell, 2012), suggesting that 'design' might be better understood as a process of design in use. For example, the role of the designer is now seen more as a facilitator of social action where the design process does not end with the generation of an object but with the use of that object/communication/environment/system by the audience. The audience is, as such, a vital part of the design process and how they use, integrate, and individualise a design (Kimbell, 2012). In application, designers must think less about how they act on a system and more about how they act within a system (Findeli, 2001). With this view, the designer is a participant along with the end user, where both contribute in an effort to achieve a desired result. Findeli (2001) states, ‘(1) Instead of a problem, we have: state A of a system; (2) Instead of a solution, we have: state B of the system; and (3) The designer and the user are part of the system (stakeholders)’ (p. 10). This implies a more ethical and critical practice since the individuals (actors or stakeholders) working within the system are prioritised rather than the designed object/artefact/output.

Designers must, therefore, be concerned with the idea of effectiveness; i.e. a design is appropriate in fit, use, and appeal, by way of having an influence and impact on a human subject’s belief, behaviour, or action to address desired (or proposed) needs. Integral to this concern and to design practice is the designer’s ability to articulate and present a design proposition to their stakeholders (including the client and/or commissioner of the work), in a range of formats and situations. In this light it is not surprising that the practice of rhetoric, as ‘the technique of discovering the persuasive aspects of any given subject-matter’ (Aristotle, 1991) has grown in scholarly design discourse over recent decades. Better-known discussions posit rhetoric as a means of visual concept formation and the analysis of design artefacts and advertising images, mainly drawing on the invention of argument and the classical figures of style (elocutio) (Bonsiepe, 1965, 1999; Durand, 1983; Ehses, 1984). However, they also range to include the infiltration of rhetoric in all visual design (Kinross, 1985) and the way that ideologies are reflected in visual messages in advertising (Barthes, 1977). Discussions of design as the invention of argument then turn to focus on challenging the values and beliefs of particular audiences with the purpose of persuading them to adopt a new belief (Buchanan, 2001; Tyler, 1992). With this view it is easy to see how designers are engaging in more of a social practice that involves shaping both the communication process and the artefact (Ehses, 2009, p. 6), and how the interaction of the end user also helps to shape that message (Kimbell, 2012). Thus, a study of rhetoric is a suitable means for approaching communication design education (Poggenpohl, 1998; van der Waarde, 2010).

However, despite this indication that rhetoric is vital to a more viable design process, the way the skills related to practicing rhetoric are developed and understood remain somewhat elusive, tacit, and theoretical (Kelly, 2014). For example, ethos is often revealed in design strategy as the ‘voice’ and ‘character’ of a design. These are readily identifiable terms frequently used by designers in conversations with clients and on their websites suggesting rhetoric is implicit in the application of design process; however, it is rarely explicitly defined as such, leading to the conclusion that this application of rhetoric as part of design process is poorly understood.
Notwithstanding an expanding body of literature on the relationship between design and rhetoric, the specific means to educate designers as rhetorical practitioners is relatively unexamined in the literature. Our aim is to explore this area and identify the necessary skills that practitioners draw on regularly as part of rhetorical practice so that these can be systematically taught to design students. As such, we hypothesise that design students: (1) will be able to draw on rhetorical practice to discuss and validate their proposed design outcomes; (2) the implementation of a rhetorical framework will improve design students’ understanding of their practice; and (3) following a rhetorical framework will enable design students to better situate their work, and themselves, as social practitioners, leading to a stronger understanding of the social and cultural relevance of design generally and their practice specifically (Thiessen et al., 2015).

To inform this larger project, we undertook a pilot study to develop an idea of the current state of student understanding and engagement with rhetorical practice. The aim of this pilot study was to explore the viability of this area of research and to point to specific areas for deeper exploration. It is also an attempt to map the current state of rhetorical practice in a typical educational design studio scenario and provide a baseline from which comparisons can be made. The hypothesis guiding this pilot study, with the aim of feeding into the larger project, was that the students participating in this study will favour language and arguments that prioritise formal analysis and production processes necessary to create the designed ‘object’ over the design intent and audience response. We expect that they will draw on rhetorical practice to discuss and validate their design outcomes in a limited way.

2. Method

The aim of this pilot study was to examine students understanding and use of rhetorical appeals (ethos, pathos, and logos) during two typical oral presentations of work in common educational design studio critiques. We explored how advanced level design students talk about and present their work and whether they used verbal techniques associated with rhetorical practice. For this study we were only interested with the way they structured and delivered their oral presentations of communication design outputs and suggest this could reflect the current state of design education in Australia. The students who participated in this study were introduced to rhetorical principles as part of design theory coursework as shown in Figure 1. However, they have not explicitly or intentionally engaged with or explored these principles as part of their design practice and as they pertain to the design process. By collecting data at this stage, before formal and explicit instruction, our aim is to develop a clearer picture of the current understanding of and ability of senior level design students to present a design argument. We expect these data to show a common approach to design practice and point to areas for study and curricular development, which will inform a larger and future body of work that this project is based on.

1 Details of the methods used have been published previously in a study protocol (Thiessen, et al., 2015). Please refer there for an extended description of the participants, design subject matter and processes, assignment expectations, and studio presentation procedure. For our purposes here, we have limited the mention of these details to focus on a discussion of the results.
Figure 1. Rhetorical appeals introduced to students in a design theory lecture. In this structure, ethos is discussed as the character or ‘voice’ of a design that creates a relationship of identification with design respondents (Buchanan, 2001). Character is also a means of drawing attention to the links in designing between how things are configured and enacted in diverse kinds of associative forms and contexts, between all participants and parts (i.e. human and non-human). Pathos is explained as the ‘fit’ of a design – the suitability and appeal of a design proposition for a particular community of users. Logos relates to the reasoning and ‘structure’ of a design such that it appeals to a person’s logic and reason; i.e. the visual language used that makes sense in the light of the design intent.

2.1 Participants

All participants were in their final term of their final year of a 3-year undergraduate degree program in communication design (graphics major) at the University of South Australia in Adelaide, Australia. As part of their degree program these students are required to complete theory as well as studio coursework. At this stage, they have developed sound knowledge of design vocabulary and theoretical underpinning for practice. They are required to participate regularly in studio critiques of work and participate in oral presentations of work, both formal and informal, resulting in a very good socialisation to professional studio expectations.

Data was collected for oral presentations given for 24 personal identity projects and 42 capstone research projects across 3 studio classes. All students granted permission for their presentations to be used in this study. The student’s identity was removed from the data during analysis and does not form any part of the results and discussion.

2.2 Procedure

Educational studio critiques are a typical means to assess student work and provide an opportunity to both socialise students to professional practice and provide an opportunity to learn skills and vocabulary essential to that practice (Dannels, Gaffney, & Martin, 2008; Dannels, 2005; Dannels & Martin, 2008; Oak, 2000; Wong, 2011). Since this is an oral task it is also the ideal means to measure rhetorical propositions and determine whether students are drawing on these skills. The students who participated in this study are frequently asked to present work for assessment to both peers and studio lecturers in this semi-formal way. The familiarity with this task means that the students were more likely to have respond as they normally would, thus providing data that is likely to be more
representational and accurate to the students’ current engagement with principles of rhetorical practice.

Each student was asked to present finalised design work and an oral presentation of between 5 and 7 minutes. They were provided with a framework of rhetorical practice (Figure 1) as guidance and asked to consider their presentation in the light of ethos, pathos, and logos.

Data was collected for 2 studio projects. The first was a visual identity design; a means for the students to represent and project themselves as a professional design practitioner in a competitive design industry. This is a practice-led project that runs for approximately 2 months and results in more traditional design outputs where the students develop a logo, stationery, promotional pieces, curriculum vitae, and a professional portfolio of their work. They face typical design problems such as analysing and considering their unique skill set and finding a unique way to visually represent themselves as a professional designer, and set themselves apart from the competition. The second project was a capstone design research project that spans the duration of the final year of study (two 13-week study periods). This project requires far more investment of time, effort, and endurance. It develops skills in problem identification and investigation, forming a research question and hypothesis, and writing a proposal for research. According to their proposal, students research their identified problem and develop a design proposition or intervention in response. This project is self-driven and forms a substantial body of work that demonstrates the student’s engagement with the skills associated with research and social practice. This process is less formulaic in structure and tends to result in less traditional design outcomes.

3. Results and discussion

In our analysis of key words and phrases used by design students orally presenting their work, three key trends emerged. First, the students showed a moderate level of skill in using the rhetorical devices generally, and second, this application was most apparent with regard to language associated with the appeal logos. The intentional application of ethos and pathos was less clear. Shown in Tables 1 and 2, a limited application of ethos can be seen with the use of terms like ‘creative’, ‘playful’, ‘cheeky’ or ‘adaptable’, but these terms are general and lack explicit connection to the work or the audience. The least intentional engagement was seen for pathos, or the emotional appeal. This can be expected since determining how to actively engage and appeal to emotional states could be considered more complex and require a more mature sense of self than exploring the character or voice portrayed or visual techniques necessary to communicate the message. It is, however, important to recognize that these students are operating within a university environment and may not be engaging with design respondents directly, so an understanding of the actual effect of their work (pathos) becomes more challenging.

As a general observation, and as hypothesized, these students’ presentations tended to focus on discussion around the formal aspects of their work. Even when the students attempted to discuss the character or emotional appeal this was often done so in very general terms (e.g. empathy, connect, interactivity) and in relation to specific visual aspects of the work rather than the intended audience response. For example, it is clear from the words used that Aristotelian ethos i.e. character, as a source of habit and human behaviour, emerges in the descriptors used by students to create a means of identification with the design (see Ethos in Table 1). However, student presentations centred more on the material form that was being shown than the context or how it would create a relationship of identification and/or attachment with the audience. Students often use terms like ‘clean’ or ‘simple’ and expressed the desire to ‘reduce complexity’ but did not indicate whether or
how this might be related to or have an impact on use. We are not attempting to neatly delineate ethos, pathos, and logos, given their instrumental relationship to each other, but to suggest that the emphasis on and articulation of logos may be more tangible for students whose education, to this point, has focused primarily on developing craft and basic design skill, and in the context of specific object outputs (e.g. poster or app design). In these instances, student’s goals can tend to focus more on producing a final solution that is ‘different’ and more ‘visually exciting’ than their peers, rather than linking more closely the solution, in intent and resulting form, to an examination of the arising design problem. This approach to educating communication designers is relatively common in university programs of study given that students are required to demonstrate evidence of an application of disciplinary knowledge and skill in a range of outputs and platforms in preparation for professional design practice and employment. It, therefore, can be expected that in an environment that emphasises developing specific visual outputs logos would emerge as the basis of students’ rationales for designing.

Table 1. Example of key words and phrases used during discussion of the personal professional identity system (practice-led).

| Ethos      | Pathos          | Logos                     |
|------------|-----------------|---------------------------|
| Creative   | Familiar        | Logically structured      |
| Playful    | Comfortable     | Simple                    |
| Passion    | Readable        | Cohesive                 |
| Adaptable  | ‘Them / they’   | Contrast                  |
| Simple     | Tactile         | Organic ‘feel’            |
| Consistent | Happiness       | Need to reduce complexity |
| Modern     | Empathy         | Clean                     |
| Clear      | Fun             | Quirky                    |
| Sustainable| Connect         | Smooth                    |
| Imagination| Remembering / memory | Layout               |
| Dynamic    | Familiarity     | Stock [materiality]       |
| Esteemed   | Interactivity   |                           |
| Versatile  |                 |                           |
| Cheeky     |                 |                           |
| Strong     |                 |                           |
| Bold       |                 |                           |
| Refined    |                 |                           |
| Critical   |                 |                           |
| Restrained |                 |                           |
| Authenticity|                |                           |

Table 2. Example of key words and phrases used during discussion of the major design research project (research-led).

| Ethos       | Pathos          | Logos |
|-------------|-----------------|-------|
| Easy        | Carefree / freedom | Fresh |
| Straightforward | Playful      | Vibrant |
| Interesting | Personal        | Useful |
| Funny       | Individualising | Effective |
| Inviting    | Tool            | System |
| Connecting  | Easy            | Easier |
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| Familiar       | Quirky          | Colourful       |
|----------------|-----------------|-----------------|
| Cohesive       | Fun             | Bright          |
| Crisp          | Bright          | Practical       |
| Clear          | Beautiful       | Dynamic         |
| Open           | Connect         | Fun             |
| Calm           | Engage          | Helpful         |
| Relaxed        | Positive        | Integrated      |
| Soft           | Authentic       | Tools           |
| Tranquil       | Simple          | Simple          |
| Consistent     | Clean           | Encourage       |
| Trustworthy    | Memorable       | Track           |
| Relatable      | Emphasise       | Connect         |
| Bright         | Heritage        | Meaning         |
| Peaceful       | Interconnectedness | Symbolic     |
| Organic        | Experience      | Relevant        |
| Positive       | Familiar        | Vibrant         |
| Balance        |                 | Playful         |
| Safe           |                 | Attention grabbing |
| Fun            |                 | Punchy          |
|                |                 | Hierarchy       |
|                |                 | Tone            |
|                |                 | Tints           |
|                |                 | Harsh           |
|                |                 | Minimal         |
|                |                 | Clear           |
|                |                 | Bigger          |
|                |                 | Structured      |
|                |                 | Interesting     |
|                |                 | Engaging        |

The third trend that emerged implies that engagement with higher-order and less traditional design thinking, skills, and outputs may provide a more explicit link with rhetorical practice than more craft-based object-oriented outcomes. Although the students showed an ability to draw on principles of rhetorical practice generally, this was more apparent for the capstone project that was research-led and framed by the students (Table 2) compared with the visual identity design that was practice-led with a pre-defined output (Table 1). This is likely because the visual identity system required a degree of awareness and reflection on self-as-designer, which for undergraduates in their third year of a Bachelor degree is an understanding only just beginning to emerge. For example, describing one’s ethos as ‘creative’, ‘dynamic’, or ‘adaptable’ was reasonably common, and not unexpected as an indicator of one’s design capability. On the other hand, part of the expectation of the capstone project was for the students to consider the social impact and what sort of action they aimed to facilitate or advocate for others. Here, terms such as ‘straightforward’, ‘trustworthy’, and ‘funny’ spoke more to creating a relationship of identification with design users and respondents. Additionally, students were encouraged to consider design interventions that drew on experiential learning. These students predominantly work part-time (or full-time), they may be parents or carers, have travelled, and they may have undergone significant life changing experiences. By inviting
students to reflect on their lived experiences and issues of wider concern, they can connect with social and cultural concerns that are relevant and timely, and demonstrate a potential for deeper reflection on such topics. In this regard, they and their peers can take up pivoting positions as both social agents and as the actual subjects of design.

Based on personal experience working in a food retail environment, one student explored the idea of ‘fresh’ in relation to supermarket produce. A visual system was developed to explain sensitive information to consumers that could be considered the ethical responsibility of the merchant to disclose. This included details such as how long an item might have been in cold storage before making it to the supermarket shelves or what distance an item has travelled to be sold. It was not the intention of the student to shame the food production industry or present in a bad light varying definitions of ‘fresh’, but to consider the ethics involved and provide accurate information design assisting consumers to make informed decisions. The system included the application of a labelling system drawing on colour coding to show a range of information such as where food is grown and stored and how long since it was harvested. According to an item’s age, options and ideas were given to consumers for use and consumption. A tomato that was near the end of its shelf life might be labelled with a sticker that said, ‘use me for sauce’. A tomato that was grown locally and picked recently might have a sticker that said, ‘enjoy me fresh in a salad’. Despite this student not clearly demonstrating a recognition of the extent to which they drew on rhetoric in their design work during the oral presentation, the three modes of appeal (ethos, pathos, and logos) can be observed in the project strategy and implementation. An inanimate object (i.e. a tomato) is personified to create a connection and engage in conversation with a human subject. Here, visual form is attributed with life, reflecting rhetorical elocutio in which personification is a figure of relativity via resemblance (as is metaphor).

A second example explored gender roles portrayed in animated ‘princess’ films for children. Here we can see the emergence of Aristotle’s (1991) thought on eudaimonia – wellbeing and self-sufficiency in life (that which all people tend to seek) – where all exhortations (encouragements of behaviour, belief, or action) and dissuasions (of behaviour, belief, or action) are to do with happiness (wellbeing) and that which encourage it and are contrary to it. This student recreated an environment drawing on the form of a fairy tale castle that would elicit feelings of stress, discomfort, and panic in the audience by forcing them through a maze that was dark, cramped, damp, and with high and foreboding walls. In this ‘castle’ women who are smart and independent are led to dead ends that result in a lifetime without love or family. Only those who fit a specific physical model and keep their opinions to themselves win the ‘happy ending’. In this example, stress and discomfort are employed to draw attention to gender stereotypes as the mobilisation of power relations, with the intent being for a respondent to recognise this and act to work against the perpetuation of stereotypes, through a desire for freedom, and in effect towards a state of eudaimonia.

In response to our hypothesis, we found the students could draw on skills related to rhetorical practice to validate their design outcomes but the application was not always explicit nor was it clearly intentional. This is consistent with the way that experienced design practitioners talk about their work (Kelly, 2014). We were also able determine that the extent to which the students enlisted the rhetorical devices varied based on two key features: (1) the scope and context of the project, and (2) the abstract nature of the device. Since we argue that a more explicit understanding of how rhetorical practice can be applied and that a more intentional use of these skills will lead to a more socially aware design process (Findeli, 2001; Kimbell, 2012), this pilot study demonstrates viability and provides a clear direction for future work.
4. Conclusion

This study has shown a clear need for an exploration of how the skills related to rhetorical practice can be more explicitly and systematically identified and taught to design students. Of particular interest is the students participating in this study tended to form a more cohesive argument and more actively engage with the rhetorical devices when discussing research-led work compared to practice-led. In the former, students could act on behalf of a cause, client, or concern, which is the more expected and familiar role of designers in professional practice. In the latter, as they were in effect the subjects of the design, articulating their own professional design voice and how they would propose to appeal to particular audiences was more difficult. A model for research-led project briefing may provide a means to develop a stronger relationship with design as a rhetorical practice. However, the implication is that there is a need for a critique of these positions, given that design is fundamentally performed by individuals and socially relational.

The study discussed in this paper is the first part of a larger ongoing project that aims to investigate how a more explicit instruction in rhetorical practice can influence how design students are able to better situate their work and adapt to the changing landscape of design. We propose that the implementation of a design practice that is based in rhetoric, and its critique, can provide the means for students to engage more critically and ethically with their environments and their role, as a designer, in that environment. This study focused on communication design educational studios but we aim to broaden this work to explore the relevance in a wider design pedagogy. The significance of this research is in both developing and recasting how rhetoric can be taught in design to assist students with taking up more critical and reflective perspectives on their work as designers and their roles as social actors in future practices.

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