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Imitation or creation: The effects of visual material in basic design education

Dilek Akbulut^{a*}

^a*Inst. Dr., Gazi University Faculty of Fine Arts, Department of Industrial Design, Kırım Cd. No: 52 Emek, Ankara 06510, Turkey*

Abstract

Design education can be described as a means to enhance certain visual skills in a prospective designer. Among the courses offered in the curriculum, basic design appears to be the foundation course which aim to develop creative talent with visualization skills. Throughout the first year, the students are introduced with materials and techniques for 2D and 3D visualization together with basic principles of design. However the students' reconciliation of these principles with the design work is often observed to be a hard process. Although visual course material can be used as a guide to demonstrate the students the proper answers to a design problem, it can have an impact on student works which can result in replication and imitation. The aim of the study is to trace how basic design students are affected by the visual information given at the beginning of a problem solving act.

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1. Introduction

The students willing to be admitted to one of art or design schools in Turkey need to take the student selection exam where the student's qualitative and quantitative reasoning abilities are assessed, or the aptitude exams in which student's artistic skills are evaluated together with general and academic knowledge (Akbulut, 2010). Secondary education, on the other hand, is generally poor in enhancing visual skills. In the curriculum of general high schools, arts courses only take 1 out of 40 hours of class a week (Akbulut, 2011).

In every institution offering a degree in design, there always is a foundation course generally called "basic design" in the curriculum which deals with the grammar of visual language (Wong, 1993). The course not only presents the basic concepts of visual organization, materials and techniques, but also aims to enhance creativity by generating behavioral changes in students. The freshman design students generally encounter with the basic concepts first in basic design course (Denel, 1998). This first encounter results in a hard process where visual skills are tried to be developed while the mental blocks are forced to be removed from the students' minds. Since the students are very much affected by their past educational experiences in Turkey (Koyuncugil, 2001), basic design education strives hard to deconstruct its memory based nature. The secondary education in Turkey is structured on memory based teaching and learning system build on the direct transfer of the ready knowledge where the instincts of the students are suppressed by an absolute dependence on the authority (Aytaç- Dural, 1999). Generally, memorization of clichés becomes the predominant vehicle for learning in educational practice and when the student

* Dilek Akbulut. Tel.: Tel.: +90-312-216-2200/ 62167
E-mail address: dilekakbulut@gazi.edu.tr

confronts a question different from these clichés, he tends to be in a “complete state of loss” (Denel, 1981, xiv). While the secondary education is founded on the repetition of transmitted knowledge, and “the system denies the independent, original, sensitive, temperamental, ego-centric mind” (Denel, 1979, 4), basic design course requires creativity fostered with an independent and visually sensitive touch. Therefore, basic design students will have a tendency to form preferences that are gained from their instructor(s) or from other student(s) in an implicit or explicit unconscious manner instead of their own preferences (Aytaç-Dural, 1999, 24).

Murphy(1947) referred by Lawson (1997) suggests that mental processes are bipolar, being influenced by the external world and by inner personal needs. This bipolar nature creates a sort of tension in creative behavior since the external world forces one to follow the mainstream. On the contrary, creativity requires independence and the motivation to set his own standards (Lawson, 1997). Before one develops a creative behavior, it is essential that he can convince himself and fully attain freedom from pride, constructive discontent, wholeness, curiosity and the ability to escape from habit (Denel, 1981, x).

On the other hand, design practice needs a certain collection of ideas and images stored in the memory of the designer. Everything that is seen, experienced, absorbed and registered in the mind, serves as a sort of library, a reservoir of knowledge, or a consultant that provides references. However this reservoir of knowledge and experience should be supported with an ability to evaluate and to transform the ideas into appropriate and relevant context. So the design practice and the design education as well should perform a delicate balance between familiarizing with the ideas of others that form a springboard for the new ideas to be launched, and yet not mechanizing the design process to the point of preventing the emergence of original ideas (Lawson, 1997).

For the students which went through a memory based teaching system and learning experience poor in enhancing visual skills, the first encounter with the basic concepts of design is generally a hard process. The course not only presents the basic concepts, techniques, and materials in design, but also tries to develop certain behavioral aspects and attitudes to free the student from clichés.

The aim of the study is to trace how basic design students are affected by the visual information given at the beginning of a problem solving act. In the conducted study, the students are presented exercises where visual information is gradually reduced and the student works are assessed on the basis of dependence on these visual clues.

2. The Study

Within the case study, three design exercises were given to a group of basic design students and their responses to these problems were evaluated on the basis of resemblance and closeness to the visual references. The students consisted of 18 freshman industrial design students. The group comprised of 7 male 11 female students at an average age of 19.69. The students were given basic design problems in order to scrutinize their attachment to the already existent visual information. The visual clues were gradually reduced in each exercise in order to observe the students' response with respect to attachment to the visual information.

2.1. Exercise 1

The students were presented 56 A4 format samples on which 7 black squares were located. Mainly the exercise is on the principle of “emphasis” and the students are asked to create as many compositions as they can on which 7 black squares are located among which one of them is emphasized. At the beginning of the exercise, few of the samples are shown and the students are compelled to comprehend the principle of emphasis by commenting on the samples. Later, all of the samples are presented to the students and the ones having successful emphasis are marked with + and the others with -. The samples followed certain typologies as linear, circular, diagonal, checkered, two rows, V, T, H. At the end of the exercise, the student works are evaluated on the basis of achieving successful emphasis and creating compositions free from the typologies and the samples shown during studio hour (Figure 1).

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