The Researcher's Challenge: Entertainment or Epistemology?

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(Slide 1: The researcher's challenge: Entertainment vs Epistemology?)

Mary Ann: Hello everybody.

Right. It's early in the morning. The first talk is via Skype. The caffeine hasn't hit yet… and the word "epistemology" is on the screen… So, let's have some trans-Atlantic virtual audience participation! Hands up who here is a typeface designer? a typographer? a researcher? a historian? an academic? a practitioner? (Now that was all very helpful as we can't actually see you!) But we wanted to begin by acknowledging the diverse range of people that ATypI comprises and to suggest that "research" in typography occupies a far wider spectrum than the rather narrow or specific domain of "education."

Our aim today is to raise some questions about how research, especially "academic" research, is perceived and understood in the context of typographic education and practice.

Clare: One of the reasons that we ask this is that we often work together as a research partnership. (While there is a sliding scale of definition, by and large Mary Ann is a design historian, and I'm a graphic designer. Both of us teach and are doing PhDs). And the issues that we encounter often arise out of the seemingly dichotomous nature of this shared vein of enquiry.

Mary Ann: A pet peeve of ours is the false dichotomy that's often drawn between theory and practice, or if you like history and studio. We argue that this problem is not simply about disciplinary territoriality in education, it reflects an existing resistance to and misunderstanding of academic research in the design profession itself.

(Slide 2: Call for papers: ATypI 2010)

The first example of what we we're talking about came from the observation that ATypI issues "calls for presentations", rather than the more common "call for papers". In this paper, we are going to draw on our experience of organizing the ATypI annual conference in Dublin in 2010.

(Slide 3: Rooftop in Mexico City)

Clare: Something we found interesting, and quite relevant, in the terms of today's discussion, was an exchange that took place on a rooftop in Mexico city at planning meeting between members of the organising committee about the use of the word "paper", as opposed to "presentation" to describe the call for submissions. It was suggested that the term "call for papers" could be off-putting for some of ATypI's audience. Such concerns about the likely response of practitioners to the idea of submitting a "paper" seemed to suggest that practitioners are either unable, unwilling—or both—to engage with the currencies of scholarly activity.

(Slide 4: Epistemology v entertainment)

The idea of a "presentation" as opposed to a "paper" also touches on a much larger problem. We argue that within this context, it renders participants passive receivers of information or even entertainment rather than active generators of their own epistemology.

(Slide 5: Twitter: "3 academics sitting at a table alternatively (and monotonously) reading off a script equals presentation suicide"
Anonymous)

Mary Ann: The term "academic" is often used by practitioners as a synonym for "boring" (as you can see here in a selection of tweets harvested from last year's conference) or worse, academic language is accused of being, to use Paula Scher's expression, "exclusionary language."[1]

Of course, the problem here is not the academics, but the reading of something off a script (which of course we're not doing here, no, no!). That's real issue that needs to be addressed because nobody wants *this* to happen…

(Slide 6: Twitter: "I've been in academic presentations so awful that I considered gnawing off one of my own limbs to escape."
Chris Moorehead, @cjmoorehead)

More recently, while organising the Year of Irish Design's Face Forward typography conference we were surprised by the level of resistance to some of the language used in our call for papers and the word "epistemology" in particular.

(Slide 7: Twitter: "Is the abstract a tad difficult to read/ parse…
Fontguy, @mickduggan
"It's abstract…"

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[1] Paula Scher, "Back to show and tell," in *Looking Closer: Critical Writings on Graphic Design* eds Michael Bierut, William Drenttel, Steven Heller and D.K. Holland (New York: Alworth, 1994), 224.

Lorenzo Tonti, @swissoidLo
"Now I need biscotti…"
Lorenzo Tonti, @swissoidLo)

(Slide 8: Twitter: "Epistemological? You need biscotti" Lorenzo Tonti @swissoidLo)

What is often taken for jargon by those outside of a particular field is actually a highly coded and meaningful set of terms used to distinguish levels of specificity not necessary for non-users.

My interior design colleagues refer to all visual renderings of letters as "fonts", or better still, Times New Roman… but I don't think I'm being exclusionary when I suggest they may wish to distinguish between say, uncial and sans serif…

Often a call for "clarity" presupposes transparency of meaning, as if the "meaning" existed outside of and before the word, when—as we've all experienced—when we try to define something, meaning is constantly deferred. Words are not transparent, one cannot substitute simply one for another. We use the word epistemology not to obscure meaning, but actually to clarify it.

So how do we define epistemology?

Clare: We (and Wikipedia) describe it as "knowing that", as opposed to "knowing how".[2] In other words, it loosely equates with the difference between propositional knowledge and tacit knowledge.

(Slide 9: Photo of badly kerned sign of uncial at Dublin Airport)

For example, knowing *that* this is kerned incorrectly is one type of knowledge and knowing *how* to correct it is another.

Currently the epistemology of graphic design and typography appears to comprise a set of formal and compositional rules or principles, a canonical history of individual designers, or the historical development of formal attributes. But this only deals with the formal aspects and material processes of typography. What else constitutes the epistemology of a discipline? And how is epistemology more than just a set of principles?

(Slide 10: Mural reading "battalion Brigade" located in West Belfast)

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[2] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Epistemology retrieved 15/10/2015

Well, for example, in my PhD research on the Falls Road in West Belfast, the use of gaelic typography, which proliferates the area, appears to function as a distinct tool of self-identification or a boundary marker. The 'use' of Gaelic lettering in this way, raises questions of who it is directed at, and who that message includes or excludes in its address.

Upon further analysis of the exact character of these questions, and how Gaelic typography and lettering can engender a slight, yet tangible feeling of alienation, to those not from a Catholic background, their social and cultural (as opposed to formal or historical) nature revealed itself. These questions activate themes of identity, belonging and exclusion—materialising and lodging themselves at the interface of the relationship between language, visual artefacts, representation and social or cultural life—and typography. That these instances of cultural identification occur via typographic representation is not only compelling in its own right, but also because the questions that arise here *can not* be answered, to any satisfactory extent by an engagement with the literature of the subject domain of typography and graphic design.

(Slide 11: "While in prison it's almost like you didn't choose the typeface, the typeface chose you.")

Very little of the literature of our discipline can tell me why one ex-prisoner that I interviewed said, "While in prison it's almost like you didn't choose the typeface, the typeface chose you,"[3] Further, that these types of questions are not widely acknowledged either in graphic design practice or pedagogy, as a regular subject for discussion in the main domain discourse also interests me.

Mary Ann: Epistemology is also the heading under which we can situate the heated debates Clare and I have over, for example, the location of man-hole covers on the spectrum of typographic interest. (This is one issue where Clare and I part company).

(Slide 12: lettering walk with Phil Baines and Catherine Dixon at ATypI 2010)

To Clare, she finds the people who find man-hole covers (and other details) interesting—interesting.

(Slide 13: Jean Francois Porchez taking shot of Dublin Street)

Clare: But Mary Ann considers man-hole covers interesting in themselves.

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[3] Clare Bell, (forthcoming) Interview excerpted from forthcoming PhD research, *Typography, Culture and Society: the visual representation of the Irish language in Northern Ireland* (Dublin Institute of Technology, 2016).

Here's another interesting tweet…

(Slide 14: Tweet: "No need to announce the structure of your talk. Let us discover." Yves Peters @BaldCondensed)

Mary Ann: Sorry Yves… now we're going to… discuss some of the consequences for how research is perceived and understood in the context of typographic education and practice, or of what we argue is the discipline's lack of an epistemological framework.

The number of journals dedicated solely to the publishing of research in the fields of typography and visual communication is very low. What is there, rarely finds its way back into the studio at undergraduate level. Further, research published in discipline-focused peer-reviewed journals does "not tend", as Robin Kinross has argued, "to be highly valued by those engaged in practice." As a result of this he claims, "the academic discussion of typography, and design in general, is too often hermetic and unreal: in unholy partnership with the proud anti-intellectualism of many practicing designers."[4]

(Slide 15: "unholy partnership with the proud anti-intellectualism of many practicing designers")

Clare: In addition, in education, false binaries between "theory" and "practice" or "industry" and "academe" are frequently reinforced. Further, a lack of explicitly theoretically-informed studio practice and a dearth of scholarly writing emanating from within practice has led to a perception of graphic design and typography as marginal activities which do not contribute at a constitutive level within society.[5]

For example, revealing observations come from such apparently neutral activities as compiling a reading list for our Typography Ireland seminar group. When a we made an attempt to put together a bibliography for our reading group last year, we were presented with a difficulty: only a very small percentage of the large volume of material suggested as being relevant by our attendees was actually peer reviewed.

(Slide 16: DAAI database screen Frutiger search)
Mary Ann: Here is an example. If I want to find an article for my MA students on the late great Adrian Frutiger, I can go to the Design and Applied Arts Index, the largest database of design related publications, and search for "Adrian Frutiger"… and I find 38 published articles.

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[4] Robin Kinross, "Fellow Readers: Notes on Multiplied Language," in *Looking Closer 2: Critical Writings on Graphic Design*, eds Michael Bierut, William Drenttel, Steven Heller and D.K. Holland (New York: Allworth Press, 1997), 19.
[5] Clare Bell, "Criticality in Graphic Design" (working title), *Campaign Magazine*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (Dublin: Institute of Creative advertising and Design (ICAD) forthcoming, 2015)**.**

Of which how many is a peer-reviewed article?

(Slide 17: DAAI database screen Frutiger peer-review)

One.

Perhaps it might be better to try a more general academic database? So I tried "Academic Search Complete". I carried out the same search,

(Slide 18: Academic Search Complete database screen Frutiger search)

5 articles (which makes you wonder what constitutes "completeness"…) I checked the peer-review box and…

(Slide 19: "No results were found")

(Slide 20: EYE magazine cover)

Clare: It doesn't just end there. This issue is further underlined when one considers that unless we put *Eye* magazine on the required reading list for students, we are not really teaching them properly. Yet *Eye* magazine, despite featuring key writing on contemporary graphic design and typography, is a trade magazine. Thus the academy is forced to go outside of itself for its own required primary reading. This is just one example, others are *Design Observer*, *Print* magazine etc - all of which are invaluable to the scholar of graphic design, and all non-peer reviewed. While we acknowledge the presence of peer reviewed journals such as *Design Issues*, *Visible Language* and *Visual Communication*, very little of the knowledge produced there finds its way back into the studio in a more general sense.

So, what does that suggest? It would appear that because the *locus* of graphic design knowledge is positioned largely outside of the academy, the locus of knowledge about practice is as well[6]. As Audrey Bennett has noted,

" *[…] what exists is an intellectual chasm between practice and research with practitioners leading the way.*"[7]

(SLIDE 21: Curation vs peer-review)

Mary Ann: So with regard to compiling the Typography Ireland reading list, this leaves us in the unenviable position of having no recognised criteria by which to decide on its contents. We are actually left in the position of *curating* most of the reading list. In other words everything is valid

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[6] Clare Bell, "Criticality in Graphic Design" (working title), *Campaign Magazine*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (Dublin: Institute of Creative advertising and Design (ICAD) forthcoming, 2015).

[7] Audrey Bennett, "*Meta-DesignInquiry An analysis of a participatory symposium"*, (New York: Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute, 2006) 3. Retrieved from http://www.rpi.edu/~bennett/meta.designinquiry.pdf, 03/01/2008.

—although (as we have seen from the Frutiger count) the academy might say that only one (or none) of the 38 articles could be described as such. So, instead of starting the discussion at a level that examines or evaluates the inclusion of a relevant text within an established critical framework, we get embroiled in the various subjectivities that come into play, based on the proclivities of the participants.

This also goes for conferences, in the absence of peer review, certainly blind peer review, the programme of speakers is curated and tends to prioritise well known names. This also has stark implications for gender representation at conference as has recently been the subject of much discussion on Twitter.

Clare: We are also more likely to "fall prey to the construction of a knowledge base that meets the needs and presents the views of dominant subjectivities"[8]. As Simon Downs has noted, graphic design "does not know what it knows."[9] The significance of this comment also chimes with Kristina Niederrer's observation that tacit knowledge forms a substantial proportion of the knowledge drawn upon in order to practice graphic design.

(Slide 22: "[...] *implicit prioritization of propositional knowledge seems to exclude certain kinds or formats of knowledge associated with practice, which are often called practical, experiential, personal, or tacit knowledge and which evade verbal articulation.*") [10]

This all relates to the wider issue of the academy's difficulty in integrating the type of knowledge generated by practice-led disciplines (for example, graphic design, fine art and nursing). Thus far, its method of hypothesising and substantiating inquiry through research is based entirely on language-based propositional knowledge which makes it difficult to account for and validate knowledge based on procedural or experiential models.

(Slide 23: Tacit v propositional, books/welding)
Further, the writing down of knowledge that can usefully be deployed within the context of practice is only successful if that knowledge can be "integrated into the practical knowledge of the art [...] [it] cannot replace this knowledge."[11]

(Slide 24: All the theory in the world cannot replace talent)

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[8] Clare Bell, "Criticality in Graphic Design" (working title), *Campaign Magazine*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (Dublin: Institute of Creative advertising and Design (ICAD) forthcoming, 2015).

[9] Simon Downs, "It's all about communication: graphics and cybernetics," *Kybernetes: The international journal of systems, cybernetics and management science*, Vol. 36 No. 9/10, (2007), 1287.

[10] Kristina Niedderer, "Mapping the meaning of knowledge in design research," *Design Research Quarterly,* vol 2 , no. 2 . (2007).

[11] Haridimos Tsoukas, "Do we really understand tacit knowledge?" *Managing Knowledge: An Essential Reader* eds. Stephen Little and Tim Ray (London: Sage, 2005), 119.

Paula Scher's statement, "All the theory in the world cannot replace talent"[12], is an interesting reflection of this point. From this, it is clear that she also situates propositional, verbalised knowledge – or theory as she calls it – beyond the domain of essential knowledge requirements for a practicing graphic designer as her use of the word 'talent' seems to suggest that within this context, what is being referred to *is* "tacit knowledge". Yet, Scher's statement demonstrates that she, herself, has perceived a clear division between theory and her own knowledge of the experience of practice, reflecting Neiderrer's view that the lack of integration between the propositional and procedural knowledge within the context of the academy has indeed led to a dichotomy between theory and practice.

(Slide 25: Magma vs Long Room, Trinity College)
Mary Ann: So how does this all relate to typographic education and research? Well, because graphic design, and, perhaps to a lesser extent, typography, and their accompanying discourse, are in the main, positioned outside of the academy, criticality has not yet come naturally,

For example, the consumption of the practice of book design and the consumption of the practice of book history happen in very different places.
A description of the London design bookshop, Magma, that we came across, included the following remarks:

(Slide 26: Quote: "Magma continues to present graphic design to the masses. […] All books, magazines, and graphic novels are faced out and stacked to the ceiling, which results in quite a sight. There are no sorry-looking spines…")[13]

(Slide 27: Long Room, Trinity College vs Magma again)

And yet if we look at the Long Room Library in Trinity College, Dublin, all we see are those "sorry looking" spines…

Book history, like design history, has a fascination with the material form of books, and as such has a good record of examining factors of their production. Here there is a clear intersection with certain areas of typographic history where the identification of particular typeforms can help in the provenancing of the books. However, too often in our experience, design historians' interest in book designers is limited to the opportunity for the historians to ask about a particular design or printing process, or the dreaded "type spotting"…

(Slide 28: 17th century text: "is this that Times New Roman?")

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[12] Paula Scher, "Back to show and tell," in *Looking Closer: Critical Writings on Graphic Design* eds Michael Bierut, William Drenttel, Steven Heller and D.K. Holland (New York: Alworth, 1994), 224.
[13] https://www.shopikon.com/s/london/magma

…a very limited part of the disciplines' epistemology.

Communication between historians and designers can provide a great deal more than simply helping understand why and how books are made, it can also throw light on the whole area of mediation, how text becomes book. Which is also a job for the critical theorist.
Critical theory allows for potential engagement with another aspect of epistemology, looking at the *consumption* of design, and yes, even typography—its histories of readers and audiences, and at the interplay of production and consumption.

But why engage with critical theory or with academic language at all? Well, in general graphic design and typography are considered utterly superficial to the constitution of society, to the point where as you yourselves know, there are few legal rights over the protection of the design of a typeface, for example. Design is still not regarded as content, it's considered to be ornament.

A corrective against this is often sought via business models of credibility, a desire for the elusive "professionalisation" of design practice. Instead, we'd argue, a strong epistemological awareness, or academic credibility perhaps, would acknowledge the socially constitutive as well as authorial validity of visual communication and typography.

The situation is similar with regard to the apprehension of the social production of design, as highlighted by Ewan who writes, "*Designers are primarily aware of their work as a selling device; there are few connections made to the socio-aesthetic tradition from which their profession was born. An aestheticism that separates images from social concerns dominates not only the thinking of practicing designers but also the curricula of most design schools.*"[14]

(Slide 29: "An aestheticism that separates images from social concerns dominates not only the thinking of practicing designers but also the curricula of most design schools.")

Clare: Secondly it may have caused, "a limited appreciation or awareness of the significance and value of the expertise and craft of graphic design in a number of spheres. Both because of—and despite—the foregrounding of commercial imperatives at the heart of contemporary practice at the expense of theoretical reflexivity, research opportunities that may explicate and substantiate the merit and benefits of the craft, yielding a significant and positive impact on the extent to which design, and its practitioners, are valued (and renumerated) —have yet to develop. In turn

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[14] Stuart Ewen, "Note for the New Millennium: Is the Role of Design to Glorify Corporate Power? in *Citizen Designer Perspectives on Design Responsibility*, eds Steven Heller and Veronica Vienne (New York: Allworth Press, 2003), 192.

this would, in fact, protect against some of the more exploitative and corrosive practices that one may encounter during a career in design as it currently stands."[15]

As McVarish asks:

(Slide 30: "Why close the door—especially the classroom door—on these questions? Educated awareness of the networks within which graphic design [and typography] is produced, distributed, and encountered need not presume a latter-day Constructivist program of mass empowerment through structural exposure. It need not entail a disruptive critique of normalized power relations. Knowing interaction with the forces that orient and are deployed by typographic resources can only sharpen practice. In educating practitioners, there is a place for analysis of the rationales that have been proposed for dominant models of typography.")[16]

For our final observation, let's strike a cautionary note. This education strand is a welcome feature to this conference. However, is there a danger in sectioning off papers that deal with explicitly epistemological issues from the main conference and hence, the main body of practice? Research is not simply a facet of education, it's an integral part of practice—and a practice in itself. The presenter's challenge, like that facing the educator, is not simply to opt for *either* entertainment *or* epistemology, but by putting a kind of intellectual *cordon sanitare* around the latter we may be forcing such a choice.
Thank you.

 (Slide 32: Cartoon of gnawed off arm)

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[15] Clare Bell, "Criticality in Graphic Design" (working title), *Campaign Magazine*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (Dublin: Institute of Creative advertising and Design (ICAD) forthcoming, 2015).
[16] Emily McVarish (2010) "Reconsidering: 'The Crystal Goblet': The Underpinnings of Typographic Convention", *Design and Culture*, vol. 2, no. 3.