

Formstorming: Deepening the Creative Process

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Introduction/ Need for Idea

Graphic design is a creative field and requires students to think out of the box (Alhajri, 2017). Creativity is a powerful design tool synthesizing new ideas and concepts through restructuring of existing ones (Hsiao & Chou, 2004). No matter a person's age, creativity can be developed in formal and informal learning settings, though there are no guaranteed steps for success (Valgeirsdottir & Onarheim, 2017). Brainstorming is one technique for enhancing creativity (Hsiao & Chou, 2004). Brainstorming, the most well-known method of ideation, generates ideas, increases creative efficacy, or finds solutions to problems (Wilson, 2013). Wilson explains the weaknesses of brainstorming sessions as being chaotic and intimidating or being inefficient without an experienced facilitator. However, through formstorming designers can use a set of structured techniques for seeing a graphic design challenge in new ways to and then general fresh visual solutions (Lupton & Phillips, 2015). Formstorming is "an act of visual thinking—a tool for designers to unlock and deepen solutions to basic design problems" (Lupton & Phillips, 2015, p. 13). Traditionally, when designers needed to generate ideas, they applied pen to paper to produce idea sketches. Recently, design students are turning too quickly to a software program to begin creating, bypassing the very important thinking part of the process, resulting in underdeveloped designs (Lupton & Phillips, 2015). The use of formstorming allows designers at all levels of the profession to elevate and extend design basics (Lupton & Phillips, 2015).

How It Works

There are many different formstorming exercises, but the key is "guided creative engagement" (Lupton & Phillips, 2015, p. 13). For an in-depth exploration of these exercises, including One Hundred Iterations and Dailies, see Lupton and Phillips (2015). The most basic formstorming exercise was utilized on four occasions in the New Mexico State University introduction to graphic design in agricultural communications course in which nine students were enrolled.

During the class session one week prior to the due date of each design assignment, the instructor reviewed the assignment task sheet and rubric with the students in attendance. In a subsequent class session, 20-30 minutes was taken for a formstorming activity. Students were given a sheet of paper and a writing tool, as well as step-by-step directions designed to "trigger and tease out options and ideas that go beyond the familiar, prompting designers to find fresh new ways to illuminate subjects" (p.13). The steps were:

1. On the sheet of paper, write the values, personality, or essence you want to communicate through your design to solve the problem.
2. Using your phone or computer, gather at least five ideas from which you draw inspiration. Save them in some way.
3. Returning to your sheet of paper, sketch out at least five completely different versions of you design.
4. Reflect on your formstorming experience – what did you discover?

The final step of the process was reported via Canvas as a part of the daily participation assignment. Students kept their sheet of paper to use as a launch point when they began to create a design in a software program, such as Adobe Illustrator.

Results to Date/ Implications

Student reflections were utilized to inform the effectiveness and value of the formstorming activity, as perceived by the student, throughout the semester. The activity continued for each assignment because the students reported overall enjoyment and appreciation for taking time

in class for the exercise. Reflections also made the instructor aware if the student had questions or concerns about the assignment.

In order to evaluate whether the students liked the instructor meeting assignment, students were asked during the anonymous, end-of-semester evaluation, “Did you find formstorming during class valuable to the development of your assignments?” and “Why did you, or did you not, find formstorming valuable?” as a part of a Google Forms questionnaire.

All nine student respondents indicated they found formstorming to be valuable to developing their design assignments for class. A review of their explanations as to why formstorming was helpful revealed two themes:

“Kickstart my creative process”.

Several students identified the value of the formstorming activities being related to beginning the creative development of their design assignments. As one student put it, “I felt it was helpful because it really helped kickstart my creative process”. Perhaps a little skeptical at first, students came to appreciate the exercise as evidenced by one student stating, “Formstorming actually worked, even though I'm more of a "spur of the moment" designer, because I came equipped with a skeleton to work towards.” Project procrastination is common concern, so students, “found it valuable because it forced me to think creatively and start the design process, which I don't think I would have necessarily had the discipline to do on my own. My work was definitely better because of the formstorming.”

“Time to sit and focus”.

Oftentimes new to juggling many responsibilities and assignments, students found formstorming, “beneficial as it gave me time to sit and focus on what direction I wanted to go with my designs.” Students reported enjoying the quiet time in class because, “it was nice to be able to sit still for a moment and just think about what I was doing without any other distractions. It felt like a safe space almost.” Another student reported the activity being a time-saver because, “It guided my entire design process. It also saves time in the long run, because it is easier to sketch ideas on paper than it is to design in Adobe. I was able to eliminate options faster.”

Advice to Others

Instructors who choose to integrate this activity into their class sessions should plan adequate time to allow the student to explore each step without haste. Students in this classroom enjoyed listening to soft orchestra-pop/rock music (Vitamin String Quartet) during the activity. Inspiration could be drawn from digital platforms (i.e. Pinterest, Instagram, or Behance), print publications (magazines, flyers, or books) or tapping into student’s own mental database of ideas. Formstorming activities, such as this and others mentioned by Lupton and Phillips (2015), could be used by professionals to deepen their creative process.

Costs/ Resources Needed

This activity can be executed at no cost to the instructor, students or professional. Each student will need to be supplied with, or provide their own, piece of paper and writing tool. Students will need a method of identifying inspiration, either via their phone, computer or through provided materials, such as magazines or other print publications.

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