

The Benefits of Typography in Materials Design in the Classroom

Ryan Lege, Kanda University of International Studies, Japan

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Abstract

Understanding the basic principles behind design and typography in particular, is an often overlooked part of educator's basic training and practice. In the educational field, we interact with a variety of different text types and often take part in designing and creating new materials. This paper argues that typographical design is extremely beneficial for all educators. Typography is pervasive and present in all forms of written communication. It has the potential of being a hindrance or boon in the learning process. The author provides practical suggestions for how typography can best be utilized, and the positive effects it can have on classroom practice.

Keywords: Typography, materials design, practice, teacher development

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Introduction

Robin Williams begins her bestselling book, *The Non-Designer's Design Book*, with an anecdotal principal known as the "Joshua tree epiphany." She relates an experience of having received a tree-identification book as a present. Opening the book to the first page, she is presented with a strange appearing tree known as the Joshua tree. Williams recalls thinking "That is a weird -looking tree. I would know if I saw that tree, and I've never seen one before" (Williams, 2008, p.11). Following this thought, she went outdoors, and to her surprise was able to identify the Joshua tree all over her neighborhood. She concludes her experience with these words, "Once you can name something, you're conscious of it. You have power over it. You own it. You are in control" (p.12). During my graduate degree, I had my own Joshua tree experience. A materials development course I was enrolled required that I read a section from William's aforementioned bestseller. Following the reading and discussion on materials design, I noticed the materials I had created were poorly designed. I quickly began experimenting with layout, typefaces, and other design-related principles. However, my initial efforts were amateur at best, and it wasn't until years later in my first full-time teaching position that I learned the true impact of design through two seemingly insignificant experiences.

The first experience occurred because of a report to the stakeholders of the University where I was employed. When my colleges and I received the report, comments concerning the professional nature of the report were common. Many commented that the title page looked great. One colleague remarked that regardless of the content, he was impressed by the professionalism of the author. For others, they simply noted that it was well done. For me, it was a Joshua tree moment. I knew that the report's typographical design had contributed to its high appraisal.

Months later, I participated in a community outreach program. Students from the community participated in short lessons at the university. Each student was provided with class handouts and additional self-study activities. As I perused through the materials, I was struck by the amount of appalling design errors, which in sum contributed to an overall impression of shoddy, unprofessional material. I was conscious of it but as a teacher required to use the materials, I also assumed ownership of them through no fault of mine.

Sadly, in regard to materials, teachers often have little or no control over what they present to students. On the other hand, practically every teacher in every context has a hand in creating, adapting, reviewing, and consuming a plethora of materials. A teacher performs a variety of roles in her or his career which are most always based on texts. From paper-based to digital mediums, chalkboards to tablet computers, all media used in a classroom acts as an interface between teacher and learner. How much thought do we give as teachers to the effectiveness of these mediums? Typography and design are critical parts of effective materials creation, without which materials cannot achieve maximum effectiveness. The principles of good typography and design are something that educators cannot afford to ignore.

Literature review

Typography is a type of quiet media that “emphasizes the message of text...invites readers in, and keeps them there” (Williams, 2006, p. xi). Good typography is inviting to reader and creates a general sense of professionalism. Typography, though a quiet form of media, communicates a great deal of information to the reader. Essentially, typography is a key player in determining how well materials perform their roles. In environments such as the classroom, educators send messages to learners through typefaces, line-spacing, and point size, which are all seemingly miniscule or unimportant aspects of materials design. Papadopoulou, Manoli, & Zifkou (2014) conducted a study that found 44 of 46 children ages 4-6 were able to notice typographical differences without having developed formal reading skills (p. 5). We can infer that learners of all ages should be able to notice typographical changes. Though typography can factor heavily within the design of a document, it can also seemingly melt into the background behind the content. Whatever its role, it is part of the interactive dynamic process of creating meaning in a text.

Typography also contributes to the message of a text as “a basic interpretative act for literature, which is full of chances for knowledge” (Papadopoulou et al., 2014, p. 24). Typography can enhance and enrich text in ways that go beyond the words themselves. Indeed, this is a requirement for the increasingly complex media landscape in the modern world. The argument can be made that attention to the details outside of the linguistics content of a text are increasingly important. Kress et. Al (2001) describe this fundamental shift in the reading process in this manner:

In this way, literacy pedagogy, particularly, the meaning-making process of reading comprehension skill, needs to be modified, as it can no longer be viewed as a process that is centrally contingent on language, but as a process where the various modes of communication are either woven jointly or are separated to produce meaning in order to keep up with the constantly changing world and meet the communicational demands of the era.

So then, if the very nature of literature pedagogy is changing to match the rich modes of communication common in today’s society, typography must play a critical role, as it is “what communication looks like” (Felici, 2012, p. ix). The potential benefits and affordances of typography in the classroom are numerous, but hereafter I will provide three simple areas wherein typography and design can aid educators.

Benefits of good typography in classroom practice

1. Design materials that communicate professionalism

One of the most important contributions well-designed materials make is on the perceptions of the parties exposed to said materials. In fact, the message of a text is partially constructed before a single word is even read. Visual design can communicate a variety of messages, both positive and negative, about the teacher or institution in which texts are used. The field of advertising employs various strategies to ensure brand recognition and positive emotional associations; the same principles can be applied to any other specimen of text. Poorly designed texts reflect poorly on the creator or designer of the texts, and may have negative connotations which are

applied beyond the text. On the other hand, a well-designed text may have the opposite effect. Sometimes the texts with the best typography and design are not noteworthy, because they draw attention to the content of the text rather than the design itself. When a text is able to fulfill its intended purpose in the most efficient manner, professionalism is a result.

2. Increase uptake of materials through readability and legibility

Reading texts can be approached in different manners. Sometimes we want to read every word carefully. In this case, typography can be applied to create an optimal reading experience. Line length, spacing, and choice of font all contribute to the overall readability of a text. Other times we need texts that provide relevant information quickly, such as instructions which help to perform a task correctly. In these cases, texts designed for maximum legibility, meaning the ability to quickly read and understand a text, are the most appropriate. In essence, readers should be able to scan a text quickly and easily find relevant information. To aid in this process, creators of materials need to consider creating a hierarchy of information through a system of headings and subheadings. Properly segmenting and organizing the flow of information in a text will also make the materials easier to understand and follow. Classroom materials are in essence very similar to a recipe, a desired outcome is defined and the materials and method are given to reach the outcome. Think now about the formatting of a recipe; the design leads prospective cooks through a clear set of materials and methods with the information broken up into small chunks that are easy to understand at a glance. This same design strategy can be applied to classroom instructions and materials.

3. Create materials that can be shared proudly with others and or integrated into a curriculum

One of the most important functions of good design is its ability to focus on communication. Good typography not only helps to communicate a message more clearly, but it creates communication around a text. Collaboration is more likely to take place when a text's content and aesthetics are sufficiently polished. It is easier to share and easier to use materials with good organization and typography applied. An organization is more likely to adopt materials on a larger scale if they are well designed.

Conclusion

Typography is the visual aspect to textual communication. As such, typography is central in shaping the message of texts. It is not something that can be ignored in education. Good typography will improve the communicative ability of a text, and allow a text to extend and impact areas far beyond the walls of the classroom. Good typography can help materials reach wider audiences and provides support for educators in need of a voice or empowerment. Typography is powerful tool that should have a place in every educators' toolbox.

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