

Teaching Students to Draw Quickly: A Strategy to Encourage Traditional Drawing Skills

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Abstract

With the introduction of better design and drawing software in the previous decade, Architecture and Interior Design students are relying more and more on the computer to produce visual representations of their ideas. Students entering the College of Architecture, Art and Design at the American University of Sharjah (AUS) are becoming less motivated to build their observational freehand drawing skills knowing that when they enter the second year of their major they will transition to producing most of their work on the computer. The challenge is to get students to understand that learning freehand observational drawing is more than being able to replicate things they see in front of them. Observational drawing is also the act of visual analysis that transcends superficial observation. Being able to quickly understand and draw what is in front of them will also lead to being able to quickly draw and understand what they envision in their minds. In order to get students to embrace traditional drawing, they must understand the benefits of what drawing can do that is hard to replicate on the computer. Speed is key. Students are more apt to use and develop their drawing skills if it allows them to work more efficiently. This paper will explore the process involved to learn how to analyze form and space and quickly produce a drawing that privileges formal and spatial content over superficial detail. It will also examine how both drawing and computer visualization can work in tandem to enhance design process.

Keywords: Drawing, Design, Studio Teaching, Visualization

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Introduction: Getting Started

Free-hand drawing is just one aspect of the larger issue of representation. The representation of objects, form and space can be accomplished in many different ways. Various forms of representation require differing skills and sensibilities to be able to communicate effectively to a given audience. Free-hand drawing is probably the most immediate skill because we start drawing as children and use the tools (pencil, paper, pens) throughout our elementary and secondary education. Students entering university tend to come in with some degree of drawing skills even if they haven't drawn since they were children. The intention of teaching drawing skills to first year design students is to foster their abilities to represent and communicate complicated ideas visually and to be able to do so quickly and efficiently. Skills in other forms of representation, including computer drawing or modeling, build on these primary free-hand drawing skills.

Drawing is not just about developing a technical skill. Drawing is a means evaluate and analyze objects, form and space through your point of view or perception. It is a method of active engagement to analyze and understand the components, characteristics and organization of a complex form or space. Prolonged looking and documentation through free-hand drawing often reveals characteristics that are not noticed or seen by just a passive glance. This type of seeing and understanding opens up a realm of knowledge and understanding that goes unnoticed by much of the world. It is important for students to understand these broader objectives in order for them to accept the importance of free-hand drawing.

Before you represent the ideas in your head, you need to be able to represent those things that are in front of you. When the lesson is about developing an understanding of form and space through drawing, there is a big difference between the representation of a two dimensional image from a magazine or the internet and the representation of an actual three dimensional object or space in front of you. For design students, copying two dimensional images through drawing is pointless. The translation of an actual three dimensional object or space to a free-hand, two dimensional drawing is key to developing both representation skills and understanding. Francis Ching describes drawing as “not only as artistic expression but also as a practical tool for formulating and working through design problems.”¹ It is these types of exercises that help students learn how to see and think visually.

Traditional Still-Life Drawing

Traditional art and design foundations drawing courses tends to examine very complex still-life's with various types of objects, cloth with folds and patterns, and dramatic lighting. These drawings tend to be developed over a period of a few to many weeks often totaling 40 to 50 hours to complete a single drawing. They emphasize a high level of realism. Unless you are going into fine arts or illustration, most students will never draw like that again in their careers. For design students, this type of still-life drawing is irrelevant to how they will eventually use drawing as a means of thinking and experimentation. Not to say that there aren't benefits to looking and drawing a still-life over a long period of time. There is a discipline and an eye for detail that is developed by having to draw a single still-life over a multi-week period. But there is also a discipline that develops when you have to draw the same thing over and over again in a much shorter period of time until you get the proportions and relative relationships correct. It is a type of exercise that relies on active drawing without

¹ Ching, p.18

erasing. Design drawing allows the students to move away from realism and to be comfortable with a certain level of abstraction.

Design Still-life Drawing

Design drawing is quick but accurate. It is not the same as sketching. Sketching implies a quick, rough approximation of what you are observing but design drawing tries to be more precise although usually more abstract. Design drawing encourages an editing process where some details are ignored and others exaggerated. Iteration is key so students learning how to draw the same thing from many different angles. They draw the same object over and over again at different speeds. Some drawings are very quick taking just 5 minutes. More complex spatial drawings might take up to two hours but usually that is the maximum time for most free-hand design drawings.

The Process of Design Drawing and Building Speed

Students starting out at university learning to draw come with a wide variation of drawing skills. Some have taken drawing in high school while others haven't drawn since they were 8 years old. To level the playing field a little bit we introduce drawing exercises that most students are not very facile with. It is important to get students to slow down and just start making a series of marks on the paper so they don't worry so much about the outcome. The first exercise is a series of line drawings that begin to develop muscle control, speed control and hand-eye coordination. These drawings require students to fill up A5 and A4 sheets of paper with horizontal, vertical, diagonal and random lines spaced as evenly as possible but allowed to vary from 2 mm to 5 mm apart. Students first define an area or border with light regulating lines on their paper so that each line has a particular start and finish point. This means that students must be able to start and stop in a consistent way and control their speed. If students get in a hurry or lose their concentration after fifty to one hundred lines, the inconsistencies are easily identified. Erasers are not allowed and are contrary to the point of the exercise anyway. After doing this for a number of hours every day for a week, students are eager to move on to the next exercise.

The first exercise where students get to draw an object in front of them entails a series of blind contour drawings. This exercise is important because it begins the process where students are forced to really look at the object they are drawing and think about the continuity of the line. The exercise is really about a process and not a product but the outcomes are usually psychologically troubling for the student who has been conditioned to produce drawings that must maintain a level of realism and accuracy. Blind contours are typically quick, one to two-minute drawings that are repeated over and over again. Using blind contours helps the drawing student to loosen up and relax and not worry so much about the outcome of each drawing. It is also an important exercise to make students less reliant on their erasers and thinking that every drawing must be perfect. Blind contour exercises are great because it allows the students to just prioritize the act of looking (seeing) and develop confident consistent lines.

From the blind contour, students are given the opportunity to look every 5 to 10 seconds to orient themselves a little better on the paper. These semi-blind contours help students to begin to translate what they see in front of them to the paper by finding formal relationships between the various parts of the still-life. These drawings tend to take a little longer but are still in the 2 to 4 minute range. It is not uncommon for students to fill up their entire pad of

paper in less than a week with these drawings. Blind and semi-blind contours are mostly executed in pen so the temptation to erase is eliminated.

After a couple of weeks of blind and semi-blind drawings, students transition to more traditional drawing techniques where they are allowed to pick up their pen or pencil and begin the process of representing proportions, formal relationships and positive and negative space much more accurately. These quick still-life drawings are also very repetitive and are loosely time to occur in 5, 10, 15, 30 and 45 min. drawings. It is important to constantly reinforce the notion that students should be spending much more time looking at the still-life and much less time looking at their paper. After each drawing, students will evaluate the accuracy of their work and determine areas for improvement before drawing the same view again. While a lot of students have difficulty finding their mistakes, the role of the drawing instructor is to point these out but only after the drawing has been completed. These still life drawings focus primarily on the overall form and less of the qualities or details of the surface. The drawings are broken down into relationships of lines and points, looking at the shape of both positive and negative space. Students are also encouraged to use light regulating lines or construction lines to help plan out their drawings.

The next step of adding shade, shadow and gradation to help integrate surface with line and form introduces a variety of techniques. Graphite, hatching and cross hatching, charcoal and stippling are all explored as a means to move from a more two-dimensional line drawing to a more three-dimensional drawing where light becomes an important element in the visual representation of form. While these drawings incorporate a much more complex set of issues to address, each drawing is still kept to 45 minutes to one hour. When students practice in the studio after hours, they might take a little longer. This is the first set of drawings where the eraser becomes more of a tool as students add and subtract graphite or charcoal to get the gradation and tone variation correct.

The final set of exercises removes the still-life as the focus of the drawing and places the student in various interior and exterior spaces to draw. Perspective is introduced as a basic structure to help students understand how lines and surfaces relate but observation is maintained as the primary method of analysis and representation. Because these spaces are extremely detailed and cluttered with information, students are made to edit what they see to depict only those things that help them define the space. There is a necessity towards abstraction that allow for the essential information to be represented and other things to be simplified or eliminated altogether. Students begin to understand that drawing is about interpretation of what they see and that it is ok to use their own judgement in how the space or form can be represented. These series of final drawings are the longest drawings they might make but still only amount to about two hours per drawing.

The intention to the entire semester is to encourage students to use drawing as a means to explore possibilities and analyze and document what they see. Beyond the technical skills they develop over a period of a few short months, the ability to represent form that is in front of them will hopefully translate to an ability to represent form that they conjure in their mind. With the introduction of other means to represent space and form, namely the computer, it is hoped that these traditional drawing skills are quicker, more flexible, and more easily utilized at the initial stages of the design process.

As the computer is introduced to produce measured orthographic drawings and 3d modeling, students are encouraged to use free-hand drawing to diagram architectural ideas, and their

initial representation of form and space. Using free-hand drawing as an initial exploration incorporating multiple versions and many ideas allows a certain amount of flexibility before investing in the time and energy to produce the computer drawings that requires precision, certainty and clarity. Charcoal and graphite drawing can also introduce an atmospheric quality that is hard to replicate very easily on the computer, especially at the early stages of the design process.

Conclusion

Freehand drawing allows flexibility in one's visual thinking. Ching states, "In fostering a heightened and critical awareness of the visual environment, drawing also nurtures understanding and improves our visual memory."² Though it produces imprecise and vague notions of form and space, it allows the designer to move through many ideas quickly and efficiently until they commit to a particular direction. At a point of some degree of certainty and direction, the designer will move primarily to the computer to produce a three dimensional model and a series of two dimensional drawings. Even at this point, there are times where a computer drawing will be printed out and a freehand drawing will be traced on top of the computer drawing to investigate alternative elevational ideas or plan organizations. Designers that are nimble with both computer and freehand drawing skills often use them in tandem to work more efficiently which in turn produces better results.

² Ching, p. 22

Reference

Ching, Francis D. K. (2018). *Design Drawing*. (3rd ed.). Hoboken, NJ: Wiley.