



Experimental Typography

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Experiential Learning Spaces to Enhance Typographic Communication

Ruchita Arvind Mandhre, University of Illinois at Urbana Champaign, USA,
ruchitamandhre@gmail.com/typerience@gmail.com

Abstract: This paper explores the use of experiential learning spaces to enhance typographic communication in a design classroom and for a museum audience. The author defines experiential learning as a situated form of interactive design which engages the senses in the act of learning, using multiple media of making. The author attempts to define an experiential meaning making theory, its use in a typographic classroom and its relevance to the future of design pedagogy. This paper illustrates theories, strategies and experimental methods to actively engage design students in the process of learning.

Key words: Experiential Design, Situated Cognition, Typographic Communication, Design Pedagogy

1. Introduction

Contemporary graphic design practice is shifting from visual design artifacts to creating experiences within complex systems (Davis,13). The Designer of 2025 Symposia (2017 American Institute of Graphic Arts [AIGA] Conference, Minneapolis, MN) compiled a list of trends for design educators for the upcoming seven years. These trends have mentioned the need to create new sense-making platforms that will allow designers of the future to bridge the gap between the physical and the digital realms. This is necessary for users today, who are not passive observers of design but are rather engaged in the process of design through interactions within mediums. The author's design practice is evolving from designing print-based work to designing experiences that allow the user to understand the information being communicated in an embodied, immersive manner. This paper

demonstrates the author's strategies while creating experiences that communicate information through all sensory channels and via the use of multiple mediums. The current work defines this approach to design as 'experiential design' and will use this definition hereafter. The objective of this research is to use an experiential design approach to teach type in a design classroom and to illustrate how this approach will allow future designers to effectively communicate information to the users using experiential design.

The author has worked on a new approach to teaching typography, which is built on the theories of meaning-making (semiotics), the contribution of materiality to add value and meaning to a designed object, and experience design. These theories together build a criterion for experiential meaning making. In a design classroom for the course 'ARTD222 typographic practice for non-majors', at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, the author tested how teaching practice and pedagogy can evolve to be experiential learning for the students. In these courses, the author introduced a range of projects, like 'letterpress postcards' to understand materiality, 'type in space' to understand layout and the grids in a spatial manner, and 'type as an experience' to help students design experiences with type. Introducing core class-concepts, by arranging activities, workshops, in-depth discussions and experiences around the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign campus, allowed students to observe typographic design examples in their situated environment in an embodied manner. The author speculates that this teaching method reflects in student-work, allowing students to design immersive and valuable experiences for the users. This paper demonstrates some student-work and projects to highlight the students' journeys through class activities and student-project outcomes.

The author pursued this further by testing the use of this approach for a museum audience. 'Typerience', the exhibit, transformed the museum space into an interactive learning space to give the visitor an opportunity to learn the foundations of type. The two immersive components, type-anatomy toolkit and grids and layout, allowed the users to engage in the learning process. The type-anatomy component deconstructed the typeface Futura Medium (Renner, 1927) to its anatomical elements in the form of a game-like puzzle and asked the users to spell out their name on a worksheet ruled out with guidelines such as the baseline, x-height, cap-height, ascender and descender lines using these puzzle pieces. The user interactions were documented on Instagram, a social media platform that allowed users to voluntarily share images of their creations and feedback using the #Typerience. This created a platform to study user reviews and feedback and also document the learning process of users. Based on the user reviews and analysis, this

was one of the most successful interactive component of the MFA 2018 exhibit held at the Krannert Art Museum, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.

This research argues that an experiential approach to teaching allows the students to learn core concepts in a design class through an interactive, immersive manner. Experiential learning helps build a positive emotional context through embodied learning. This context helps nourish student creativity, allows them to explore varied methods of making based on a project prompt.

2. Experiential Meaning Making Theory: Definition and Implementations

2.1 Defining the Theory

The framework of Nathan Shedroff's 'Information Interaction Design - a unified field theory of design' (2014), is used to propose the 'experiential meaning making' theory. This theory is a methodology for designing valuable experiences. This methodology consists of three components as illustrated in Figure 1. The *Information Design* component of this methodology introduces the principles of semiotics and visual design to the design learning space. The *Interaction Design* component comprises of creating educational and immersive interactions for students. This component is inspired from Donald Norman's Emotional Design (2004). The *Sensorial Design* component explores different methods of making, through theories of materiality, design history and craft practices, and impact of embodied cognition. This component uses parts of John Dewey's criterion of an experience (1934). The author revised the structure of the course 'ARTD222 typographic practice for non-majors' based on this theory.

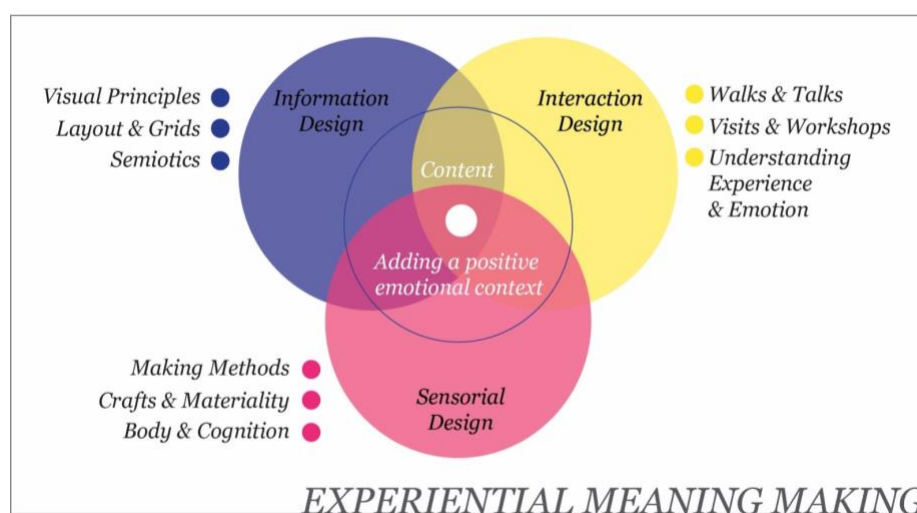


Figure 1. Experiential Meaning Making Theory, built on Nathan Shedroff's Information Interaction Design - a unified field theory of design

2.2 Classroom Activities



Figure.2 'Type in Space'

The students redesigned a poster layout in a 3D spatial environment, engaging their bodies to understand the concept of grids and layouts in an immersive, situated manner. The redesigned layout showed improvement through the use of an expressive layout, which better communicated the context of the message as a visual. Understanding type composition in a spatial manner helped students identify the type as an extension to their body, which helped them understand the emotional effect of positive and negative space on a 2D page.

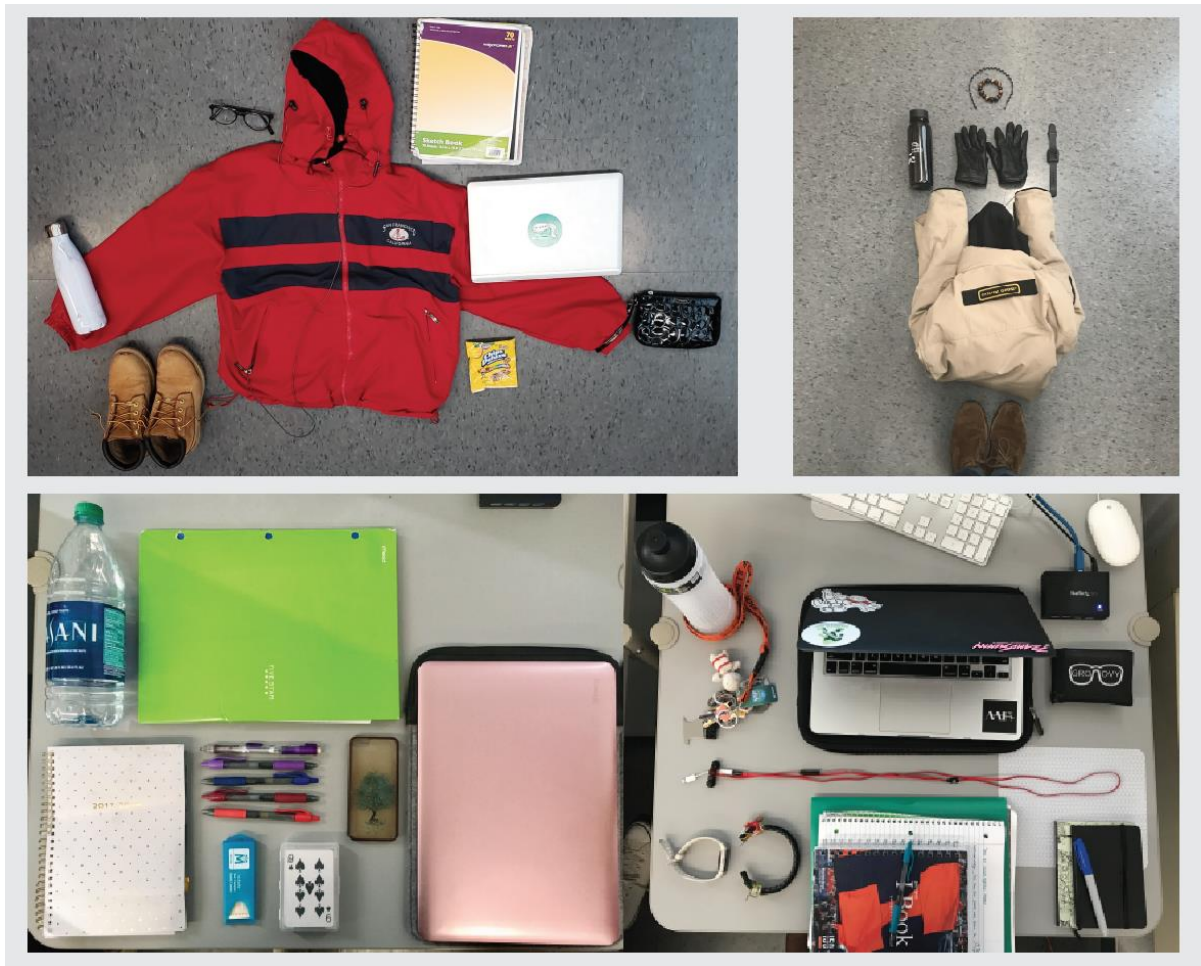


Figure.3 Material Self-Portraits

The students created self-portraits using everyday objects they carried in their backpacks. This exercise was inspired by the work of Paula Zucotti, a design ethnographer who documents the emotional value of the material objects humans possess. This exercise aimed at helping students understand the use of physical materials through design and led into a letterpress workshop where students printed postcards on varied materials. The tactile textures of the materials used added meaning to their message.

2.3 The Narrative Project

As a design educator, the author used the Experiential Meaning Making Theory to restructure the type course they taught, which included these theories in succession through a project titled 'Narrative', challenging students to effectively communicate a message using integrated media and experiential design. Through each stage, the author challenged students to incorporate experimental means of making to add layers of meaning to their design. This accompanied with in-depth classroom reading discussions and activities helped students design in an experiential manner.

Below are a few student work examples from the last stage of the Narrative project - Type as an Experience/Real Myths, where they designed embodied typographic interactions to communicate their message.



Figure.4 Hope (Emily Dickinson) - A group project by Daniel Corry, Madison Tompkins, Melissa Andrikos and Armando Sanchez-Monsivais

Students created an interactive installation playing on the words of the poem that read 'hope is the thing with feathers'. The users walked through the installation to put down a message in a bird's nest that speaks to their hopes in the coming future. On stepping out, students engage the user in a conversation asking them their thoughts on the experience and their interpretation

The users found the experience very immersive and hopeful in a positive manner, understanding that 'life can be dark at times but it is important to see the light at the end of the tunnel'.



Figure.5 Final Wars Crawl - a group project by Lucas Simes, Sam Althaus, and Edward O'Malley

This group worked on creating type interactions by creating a “Star Wars” themed crawl (walk) on the quad. Since the finals week was approaching, they sensed that students across campus were in need of some motivation - which they aimed to provide through this walking experience. Accompanied by the “Star Wars” opening theme, this embodied experience helped stressed-out students feel more optimistic about finishing the semester well.

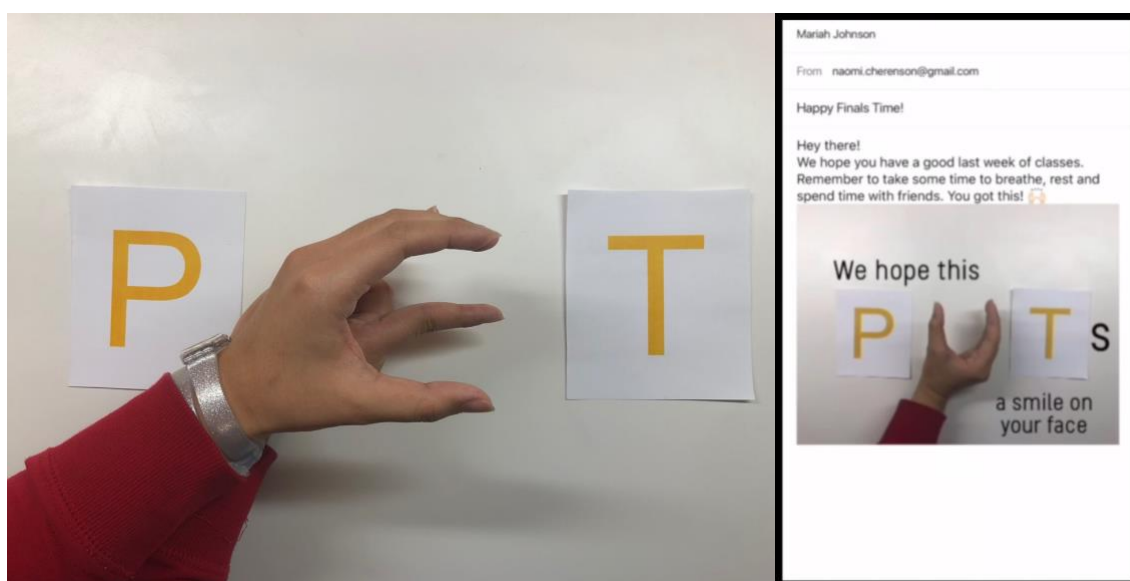


Figure.6 A group project by Shuijing Liu, and Naomi Cherenon

This group focused on the concept that ‘we all see the world differently and our minds

make meaning'. They created a game-like puzzle where the users could create a word by adding letters to the set of letters placed in front of them using their hands. They followed up with the users after a week, sending them encouraging messages using the words they made.

2.3 Typerience the Exhibit

As a designer, the author used the 'experiential meaning making' methodology to design an interactive and immersive museum exhibit, 'Typerience'. The aim of this exhibit was to understand the use of a museum as an experiential learning environment. Below is a documentation of the design and user interactions through the exhibit. The game-like interactive design components of the exhibit can be used in a design classroom as tool-kits and workshop activities. The author continues to explore this through her research.



Figure.7 Type Anatomy Kit in detail - a deconstructed Futura Medium (380pt)

To engage the museum audience in an immersive manner to understand type anatomy, the author designed the above kit. She selected the geometric sans serif typeface Futura Medium (Renner, 1927) and deconstructed it to its anatomical components. They were color coded to separate stems, curves and counters. Placing them on the worksheet the users tried to spell their name out, building letters using the puzzle like components. Being simple geometric shapes, this component invited user interaction.



Figure.8 Type Anatomy Kit - user interactions

Above are some documented user interactions with the type anatomy kit. Due to the simple, geometric nature of the deconstructed typeface, users found it engaging and playful. This reflected the importance of a positive emotional context created for the learning experience. The author was pleased to see that this tool works across varied scripts, besides Latin. It can also be used as a logo/glyph making tool by designers.

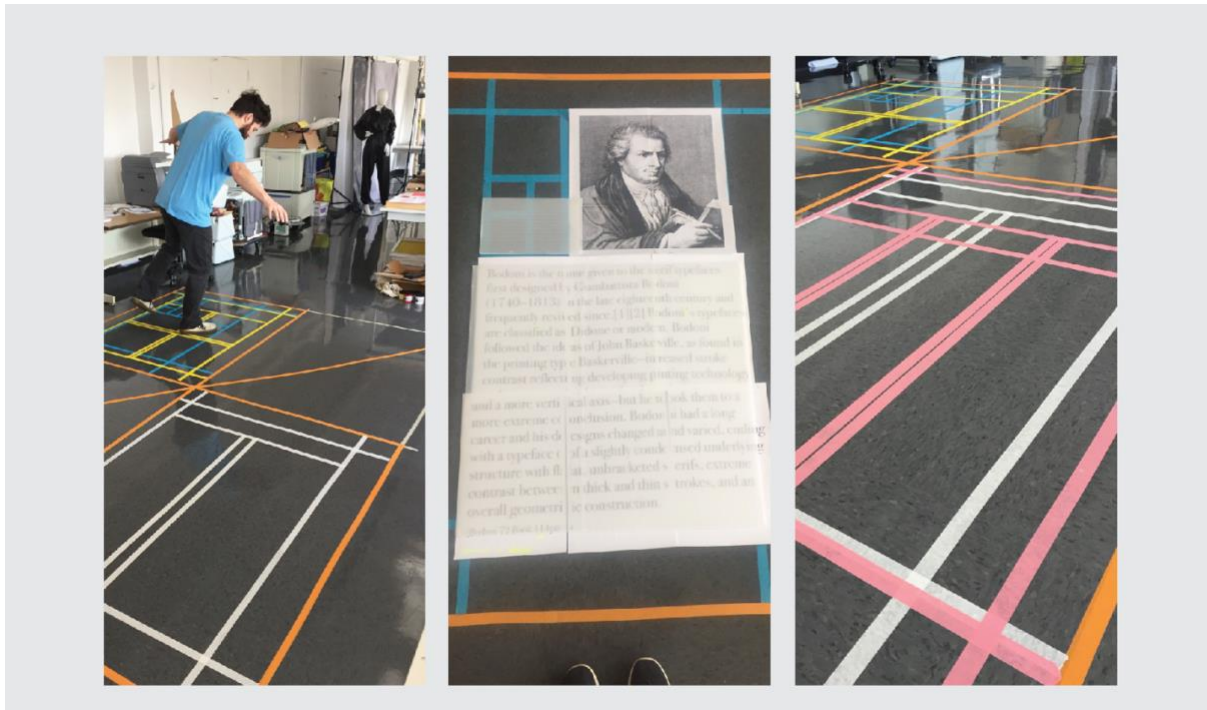


Figure.9 Grids and Layout (testing and prototype)



Figure.10 Grids and Layout (installation detail)

The Grids and Layout component built on the learnings from the ‘Type in Space’ activity. The author wanted to demonstrate use of popular layouts that one can use for a standard Letter sized sheet. The installation helped visitors see the grid on the museum floor and helped them visualize the division of space in an embodied manner.

3. Conclusions

This research compiled a series of strategies, tools, and techniques that can be brought to the graphic design classroom that help teach core design concepts in an experiential manner. The changes in course structure from Fall 2017 to Spring 2018, developed by compiling theories that build on each other across a longer project - 'Narrative', showed that student work enhanced to use type as a tool to design experiences, adding layers of meaning through different means of making. This research helps define the value in experience design - a positive emotional context created for the user. This reflected in student's work and the author's practice, through designing embodied interactions for the users. It was helpful to gain constructive feedback from users as well. A large accomplishment of this research is building the framework for a theory to design experiences in an embodied manner, and adding emotional value in an experience for the user.

In a classroom, an experiential approach and course structure may require an interdisciplinary set of students who collaborate on projects. For example, graphic designers, studio artists, and industrial designers will bring unique skills to the table, that will enhance the quality of project outcomes. This is a speculation which the author aspires to address in their future teaching and academic practice.

This is a new pedagogical approach that will require an effort from design educators, it challenges them to change their teaching practice. The author plans to collaborate with other design educators conducting similar research and create a platform to share this framework with design educators.

This approach to designing experiences is a method to engage a museum audience in immersive learning. The author used this approach to design a museum installation to help the audience learn core design concepts from a typography class. Creating achievable goals around the activity helped build a positive emotional context that reflected in the audience interactions and feedback, which are documented on Instagram @typerience. The deconstructed type-kit is an effective learning tool that can be used to learn type anatomy across varied scripts. The author will continue using this framework in their work through designing immersive, interactive installations, that cultivate a learning environment for users.

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