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Extreme Makeover: How to Use a Popular Television Format to Teach Both Process and Professionalism in Publication Redesign

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Extreme Makeover

How to use a popular television format to teach both process and professionalism in publication redesign

By Dr. Jean P. Kelly
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Introduction

In order to introduce a systematic approach to evaluating, researching, creating, testing and promoting a graphic redesign of a journalistic publication, students apply the approach by “redesigning” the instructor or other prominent campus individual following the makeover format now popular on several television programs. Students follow a 5-step protocol adapted from Harrower (2002) and physical materials (a type of paper doll) to analyze and change the makeover candidate’s wardrobe, lifestyle and physical appearance. In the process, they learn how to be both honest and diplomatic in delivering constructive criticism.

Rationale

Though it is quite possible to teach the theory and process of redesign in a classroom setting, it is often difficult to convey to students the human element of managing change, particularly how ego involvement in creative work complicates both self-critique and critique by a third party. This exercise effectively simulates that phenomenon by giving literal expression to an analogy common in graphic design textbooks—redesign is to a publication as a facelift is to an individual. It uses a redesign process that is utilized throughout the rest of the term as students redesign a newsletter or magazine produced by a community non-profit.

The exercise grew out of my frustration with how novice visual communication students typically analyze and critique publication designs without considering limitations on the designer, such as budget and

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deadlines. A guided strategy to these critiques is necessary so students learn to navigate the middle ground of constructive criticism.

The makeover assignment is innovative in that it requires students use instead intentionally low-tech, physical materials instead of computers. By returning to an activity they knew as children, students learn that playfulness is often a route to creativity. The playful nature of the assignment also seems to ameliorate some of the students' discomfort about critiquing the appearance of an authority figure.

Implementation

- A worksheet introduces the exercise, establishes ground rules and provides explanations of each step of the process, with prompts as necessary, and space for notes. The five steps are evaluation (noting strengths and weaknesses of such features as "hair style," "facial features," etc.), gathering examples, making a shopping list of elements to change, building a prototype, testing and promotion.
- Students are provided with a selection of fashion and lifestyle publications (magazines, Internet

sites) from which illustrations may be cut out during the "gathering examples" step.

- Each student group (of 3-4) is given one "paper" doll with a variety of clothing or material that can be made into clothing using scissors and glue. There are a variety of toys on the market that work for this purpose. Because they offer the most creative flexibility, I use "Woodkins." These are bas-relief doll figures whose clothing is created from fabric scraps and fibers placed under a hinged flap. For enhanced realism, a photo of the makeover candidate can be pasted over the doll's face.

- When the exercise begins, students are told that "Change is never easy. But every once in awhile, both people and publications need to be reinvented in order to stay current." They are given the worksheets and the ground rules are discussed.

- Students then progress through the 5-step process guided by the worksheet. They end with a presentation of the group's prototype to the professor and larger class in which they must discuss both strengths and weaknesses of the makeover candidate's look, justify their choices for change and present strategies for how to implement these changes.

Impact

This makes for a lively and memorable classroom experience, especially on a first day meeting. It would work in any visual communication or journalism design class where the process of design analysis and revision is considered. It might also find application in writing classes where peer editing takes place.

In learning journals completed after the exercise, students wrote that they liked working with an instructor who is willing to poke fun at herself in order to teach important lessons. This is one of those assignments that generates "good buzz" about a class among students and faculty.

Students also see it as a valuable revelation that individuals have personal attachments to publications they've designed. Wrote one: "I could see how if our choices were presented in a harsh way, it would be easy to hurt Dr. Kelly's feelings....If I offend a [designer] by tearing apart her publication, she won't let me continue on the job."

Source

Harrower, T. (2002) Redesigning. *The newspaper designer's handbook*, Boston: McGraw Hill. pp. 210-226.