Education Practice in the Course of Content & Diagram: Take “The Posture of Myth: The Song of Fiber in Collective Speech” as an Example

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Abstract

Data visualization is an important creative method for authors with a background in art and design to communicate information effectively. To maintain the accuracy of data, authors typically apply their personal creativity carefully in their work. However, creative and diverse narrative training is essential for students in art and design schools. Starting from the conflict, the course “Content & Diagram” was initially introduced. This award-winning innovative course was initiated and sponsored by the China Academy of Art. The course is designed for level 2 graduate students in the Department of Visual Communication, Art, and Technology and Industrial Design. It aims to cultivate basic abilities in systematic thinking, logical deduction, and genealogical structure capabilities. The course is based on two essential units: "content production & edition” and “graphic deduction & induction”. Taking “The Posture of Myth: The Song of Fiber in Collective Speech” as an example, this paper demonstrates how the authors communicate a large-scale graphic narrative to viewers through practical application in the course “Content & Diagram”.

Keywords

Information visualization education, content production & editing, graphic design education

1. Background and Curriculum Design

Information visualization is “the use of computer-supported, interactive, visual representation of abstract data to amplify cognition (M. Card, 1999). Traditional information design courses are often considered to have specific limitations, such as the fact that the data types behind data visualization are typically single basic observational data, such as daily temperature changes, number of airplane flights, etc. The clear and instant transmission of information, where the author disappears, allows data to appear in its clearest form (Burgio, V., 2022). However, in the situation that we need to deal with more complex information or fictional information, such as the development of things within a certain historical period, or the expression of scientific hypotheses, The proactive construction of the network of relationships between information by the author will become important. Fictional narratives and logical reasoning are crucial for students with an arts and design background, while information visualization is an interesting and practical expressive technique. Therefore, offering a course aimed at expressing creative fictional narratives for students with an arts and design background, with the purpose of knowledge integration and content production, while using information design as a method, is a
groundbreaking teaching experiment.

With the background above, China Academy of Art has designed and established a brand-new course “Content & Diagram”, which is a mandatory professional course set for level 2 graduate students in the Department of Visual Communication, Department of Art and Technology, Department of Industrial Design, aims to help students to decompose the knowledge structure of the content, present graphical narratives and info-graphics statement with images, this course shows how to analyze and describe data from a sociological and anthropological perspective, and how to transfer data to knowledge with diagrams. With systematic and serialized examples, graphical methods are clearly demonstrated.

The course requires students to complete the study of two units and related practical work, including the initial creation of a "knowledge map and database construction" and visual expression based on the database: “cartography standard practice and creative practice”.

The assignment for the "knowledge map and database construction" module requires the submission of a complete database. In the process of building the knowledge map and database, the "data sources" need to ensure the reliability and accuracy of the data sources, including strict adherence to academic paper citation standards, external evaluation, and proofreading by professional institutions and experts, etc. The "data editing and organization" aspect requires students to present a clear organization of literature within the database, including logical relationships between information entries.

The assignment for the "Cartography standard practice and creative practice" module requires the submission of a large-format information map graphic design work of at least 2.4m² large in scale. This exercise requires students to, based on the characteristics of the information in the database and the reading logic of the audience, derive a complete narrative structure after completing the basic database construction. This narrative structure should logically link all information within the database, and have strong readability, and logical coherence. The "cartography standard learning and integrated creation" requires students to integrate the narrative structure with data graphics and text information after mastering the cartography standards (including graphic language, information translation, color systems, and other knowledge related to graphic design and information design), and deduce and draw them into graphics. The final effect should achieve a composition style and appropriateness, color coordination, and an interesting and smooth information-reading experience.

The purpose of the course is to establish the ability of systematic thinking, and logical deduction. Some data analysis methods, narrative strategies, and graphic design skills will be taught: the students will need to represent their own understanding of a complex knowledge pack with diagrams, massive data will be filtered and simplified, and with principle diagrams, data will be structured. On the base of a structured database, this course is designed to develop diverse narrative skills based on graphic language and information visualization. Meanwhile, students will learn a working methodology to handle a massive workload project with a great amount of information via producing a mega-size image on structure layout and other essential skills.

The teaching is carried out in the form of lecture series, seminars, and tutorials. Taking into account the universality of the group and the particularity of the individual, a video library on the cloud with knowledge points is built and contains years of accumulated experience and information. Considering both account theoretical guidance and skill transfer, the mentor group teaches with special lectures and subject guidance.

This course focuses on cultivating students’ ability of data filing, data collection, and logical deduction. Besides, from the aspect of graph making, the ability of visual strategy, graphic expression, and graphic typography also has attention. As a feature of the course, the creative topic selection is combined with current hot spots, or with exhibition programs like "the Hangzhou Triennial of Fiber Art", "the Way toward Poetry” hosted by the Zhejiang Provincial Institute of Culture and History, China Academy of Art, ”From VKhUTEMAS to Visions of the Future” hosted by the China International Design Museum and China Academy of Art.

The rest of this essay will introduce the implementation and achievement of this innovative course by taking “The Posture of Myth: The Song of Fiber in collective speech” as an example.

2. Curriculum Implementation/Case Analyzation

All the information about the course, “Content & Diagram”, is available on the official WeChat public platform of the China Academy of Art (School of Design and Innovation, CAA, 2024).

The students participated in the course are required to create a mega-diagram, which is based on its unique principle structure in content and designed with a proper visual strategy including methods in graphic design and information visualizations. In terms of content, students are usually encouraged to break out of their inherent scope of vision or "knowledge comfort zone" and instead choose a top trending topic in the realm, clarify their problem awareness through extensive research, and then begin constructing their own content structure. The benefit of this approach is that it can
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partially fulfill the function of general education courses through repeated topic training, while also activating the content covered in these general education courses and establishing a direct connection with students' creative work, thereby generating a research drive among students. This can effectively broaden the research direction for their future creative work.

“The Posture of Myth: The Song of Fiber in Collective Speech” is one of the works produced in the course “Content and Diagram” in 2022, by a student group formed with Cai Z., Hu B., Xie Y., and Zhang H., under direct from Feng Y. and Liu Y.

The theme comes from a curatorial panel from the 4th Hangzhou Trienniale of Fiber Art about the Myth of Fiber and its history.

The authors will firstly deconstruct the theme of “Myths” into its origin meaning and its extensions. In specifics, the students need to collect data in two aspects: The traditional stories about fiber and the characters related; and the modern myths, or the facts that are widely believed by the public that relate to the features of the fiber (Buxton, Richard G.A. et al., 2024). After researching for data and information, literature documentation is required.

After preparing the origin database, the information and data are classified and managed in a related database. The students will figure out the types of data and the connections between them, then deduct a linear narrative clue and further calculate a principle structural diagram of the data.

For example, in “The Posture of Myth: The Song of Fiber in Collective Speech” narration of the principal structure. The myths are classified with different features those are related to the female goddesses (Beckmann, S., 2024); the activities of weaving or spinning (McLeod, M., 2022); or the stories which there are natural creations like silkworms or spiders (Klein, B.A., 2022). The features of fiber myths are narrative clues, and the data can be classified as story texts with its geometrical locations, images from stories like females or animals, and activities like weaving or spinning which can be expressed with icon set design.

The secondary information circle is about the spirit or some common features of the stories, and was shown in the form of keywords like “nature” out of the story of Artemis and Minerva, whom are both featuring the fabric and the moon or other natural symbols.

The tertiary information circle is a speculative fiction based on the modern myth which the concept comes from “My-thologies” (Barthes R., 1993), or the common-talking and misreading news that relating to the keywords in the secondary information circle. For example, the feature of “nature” might be deducted from nature exploration which comes with the fact like “Nature - Explore - Moon Prob Project”.

The structure of the final work is clarified as the principal diagram. After introducing the history of cartography; a series of structural models of info-vies; and categories of graphics, students are encouraged to process a case study by them own, and to deduct proper methods to create the final mega-size diagram according to the principal diagram in the last step.

As we can see in the final diagram of “The Posture of Myth: The Song of Fiber in Collective Speech”, the main structure is in coherence with the principal diagram and in concentric circles. The collection of the origin myths is produced in the way of “Atlas”, while the modern myths in extension show a “dictionary” condition and can be searched via the central structure of categories of myths.

In this stage, the students will need to control multiple skills and combine them together to create the final work. For example, illustration making, graphic design principles, text editing, and etc. It’s absolutely challenging for graduate students, but the students can attempt and exam many different tools to find their true interests.

Controlling the final outcome not only involves deriving positive implications from the content of the work but also requires a deep understanding and respect for the reading habits of the audience. No matter how many clues we hide in the overall layout, or how many reading paths we offer to the audience, the gaze of the viewer standing in front of the image will inevitably focus on the level of points. Only after reading through one chunk of content will their gaze move on to the next. In other words, no matter how many dimensions the mind may have, the language used for conveying and communicating is always linear. Therefore, the degree of logical connection between the information points we create and the corresponding visual guidance is crucial.

In fact, submitting an electronic manuscript after completing all the processes is already a great assignment, but taking the work a step further towards mature public projects involves integrating the work into a large-scale exhibition or public project. If the work includes this aspect in the work plan, it will face another "landing" challenge. Students will adjust the scale of graphic elements based on the actual viewing distance of the audience. For example, the body text in a handheld reading material should be set at around 8pt for Chinese characters. However, when it needs to appear on a wall, the body text size could be 20pt or even larger. The final decision should be made by the designer, determined through a series of on-site sampling and iterations.
In summary, the course advocates a method of content deduction based on a broader knowledge domain, as well as the core concept of innovative knowledge reorganization, which can be seen as a pathway to sustaining creativity. Along with image communication strategies based on audience reading habits. It also encourages students to confront the challenges of dealing with the details and intricacies they will face in their roles as designers or creators. We hope that the admirable qualities of these creative creators can blend into the students' creative habits, subtly prompting them to critically examine their own designs, while also remembering that "interesting" and "reliable" should be essential qualities of design work.

3. Achievement

The course “Content & Diagram” finished and achieved its proposes, and we have received a lot of support and positive feedback from students. What makes us encouraged is that many students, after completing their undergraduate studies, have also brought the course’s creative methods into their future work and creative scenarios. They often come back to communicate with us, indicating that the course has provided them with a way of thinking and an effective method for solving complex problems in the long term.

Until 2024, more than 500 students participated in the course. It is selected as the winning team of the 2nd Teaching Innovation Competition for College Teachers in Zhejiang Province, also the Gold Course Award of CAA. After teaching. Also, the first-class of professional course in the Department of Art and Design appointed by the Education Ministry in China.

Works produced in the course have won more than 200 different design competitions worldwide, and have participated in more than 20 important exhibitions facing the public.

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