

Creating a Monograph: A Visual Communication Learning Community

Reflections Paper

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The reflections and analysis expressed in this paper represent the perspective of Claudia Steenberg, Graphics Instructor, in response to my participation in the Learning Community project, Creating a Monograph: A Visual Communication Learning Community, and do not necessarily represent the other participants.

Creating a Monograph: A Visual Communication Learning Community Reflections Paper

I. Defining the project

In order to reflect upon the Visual Communication Learning Community (VCLC) experience, it is necessary to clarify the nature of the project. The VCLC involved the development of 2 components: an academic classroom assignment and the creation of a professional, commercial-level publishing product.

While I believe that our final results were successful—we produced a group of sophisticated, professional, well designed books which showcase an impressive body of high quality photographic images and an intriguing and dynamic companion online version—we are all aware that this was also an exhausting and often trying project.

To understand the root of the difficulties it is important to distinguish between an academic and a commercial-level publishing endeavor.

The classroom / academic portion of the project worked in much the same way as our other classes and doesn't require extensive explanation: we utilized lectures, assignments, critiques, evaluations and grading. Classroom assignments do not involve coordinating the activities of 40 or more students, 4 faculty, members of the Learning Community and outside commercial printers, as the commercial-level portion of this project did.

The commercial-level aspect of the project (producing a printed, bound book) is quite a different story.

All of the activities which took place during the process of producing the printed* Monograph (our product) are fairly standard components in book publishing: writing, editing, revising, designing, prepress work, and print deadlines; **however**, these activities are generally done within a well defined environment and supported with appropriate and sufficient staff to handle the numerous and varied aspects of the job. The successful outcome of a publication also relies on the use of standard procedures.

** I am concerned here with the printed portion of the project, as it is the area in which I work.*

II. Requirements for a successful commercial-level publishing project

A. The staff:

Publishing houses rely on full time employees who are trained in the processes and procedures of a variety of specialties. Such staff may include the following positions and tasks:

1. Project Manager

- Manages flow of all material in and out from beginning to end of project
- Creates and manages daily schedules and deadlines for all aspects of project (consults with production manager to work back from print deadline)
- Determines what will be needed when and by whom; All relevant requests submitted at front end of project in writing; Once approved, incorporates these requirements into schedule
- Coordinates communication among group members
- All aspects of project pass through this person

2. Author(s)

- May include the authors of both written and visual material (writers, artists, photographers)

3. Editor

- Works with author to determine direction of content and deadlines for copy

4. Copy Editor

- Checks for meaning and intent, consistency, grammar, correct typographic treatment of various elements

5. Proofreader

- Checks for typos and other errors (including correct assignment of captions and credit information through each round of revisions)

6. Art Director

- Communicates with Editor and Author regarding content and direction of publication
- Oversees and approves overall look and direction of the publication and all graphic elements

7. Assistant Art Director

- Oversees graphic details and ensures that all graphic elements reflect Art Director's intent and are consistent throughout
- Reviews all pages of each designer's work including: initial roughs, initial grids and layouts, copy (initial and revisions) and specs; forwards material to Art Director for final approval

8. Designers

- Under guidance of the Art Director, develop format, edit art, determine layout and typography and create specifications for production

9. Production Manager

- Works with Art Director to procure source for printing, stock, and finishing processes
- Works with printer to establish final due dates and determines prepress schedule based on print schedule
- Communicates with Editorial and Design to create and maintain schedule
- Troubleshoots preliminary dummies, designer's mock-ups and proofs
- Oversees production staff to ensure adherence to specifications
- Coordinates with suppliers and vendors to determine and meet their requirements
- Manages quality control of files (software, fonts, color management), transfers materials to printer, coordinates final proofing and approvals with Art Director

B. The environment: availability and proximity of staff

To ensure the smooth coordination of people and materials, staff normally are located within the same physical environment and are available to each other on a daily basis. Generally staff production meetings are held at least weekly if not daily. Problems and concerns can be resolved jointly and early.

C. Systems and procedures

Several systems and procedures exist in a successful working environment which include but are not limited to:

- Tracking forms for copy
- Hard copy for proofing and revisions
- Specified sequence in which forms and copy travel
- Required initialing for approval or revisions
 - To expand on this: only 1 set of proofs exists at a time; all revisions go back through copy edit; each round of changes requires a new printout which must be passed to each person in the cycle for sign off. All persons involved must sign off whether making changes or approving.
- A central individual through whom initial copy and revisions flow
- Tracking forms for art which travel with printouts
- Incentives to minimize revisions (generally this involves fees)
- Work flow: normally all copy is approved before handing over to designers (including body text, captions and credits).
- Proofing: In addition to editorial proofing, early prepress proofing at initial design stage is necessary to troubleshoot before final submission of files (including checks for software, fonts, and color management issues to prevent costly and time consuming adjustments at the end of cycle).

D. Other considerations

A successful process begins with detailed and coordinated pre-planning by project manager and all staff in order to anticipate problematic areas and build in solutions.

III. How did we do?

As mentioned above, our results were successful, but was our process? An honest evaluation must also identify shortcomings and areas needing improvement.

What worked

- Richard did an admirable job of conceptualizing the project, developing material for the Monograph (both visual and text) and keeping the project on track as well as setting and upholding high standards for quality. He handled color management of photographs. He created an explanatory presentation to the design students on the photographers' perception of *visual relationships* and participated in cross-disciplinary meetings with the design class.
- Claudia art directed the design of 10 books from initial through final design and specs (including proofing all 654 pages at 4 separate stages: initial layouts, revisions, final layouts, and mockups). She designed and created test dummies for the printer. Together with Richard, she handled the management of schedules, corrections and cross-disciplinary meetings. She contributed copy to the preface and met the scheduled 4/20/07 deadline for submission of mock-ups, final files and specs.
- Patti completed the extra load of prepress work for 9 additional books, reviewed and prepared files and resolved production issues with the printer. She made prepress adjustments to the revised test dummy. She has worked with the students to resolve color corrections to the printer's output.
- Diana produced a Sharepoint site for communication between all participants. She also met the challenge of working within the restrictions of a web environment to create a companion online version of the chosen book which, while different, captures the spirit of the printed work. She and her students made a presentation of the website to facilitate dialog between the web and design students. Her students will also finalize work on the online display of the additional book designs.
- The 4 faculty members had the opportunity to gain insight into the workings of disciplines outside their own areas of expertise.
- The photography students have several beautiful books in which their photographs are sensitively displayed and which are part of a library collection. These can be used as portfolio pieces for all of the photographers who wish to present them to potential publishers or collectors.
- The designers' challenge was to develop a design for the Monograph which provided an interesting and intriguing format for showcasing the photographs without interfering with or compromising the images. They were asked to spend time with the images and to develop a considered response to the body of work. The designers met the challenge and also have a professional portfolio piece.
- While the level of communication between students was not all that we had hoped for, we did have some degree of interaction between students in the 4 disciplines, including at least one very successful joint meeting and presentation of final book designs with designers' reflections. The presentations included a lively question and answer period. Additionally, design students attended a presentation by the web students, were able to view the initial web design and ask questions of the web students.
- Students participating in the Learning Community were exposed to aspects of the project beyond the scope of their own disciplines.
- Although the initial intent of the project was to print only one book, during the design process it became clear to me that, due to the high quality and variety of book designs, it would be a far more accurate reflection of the project to create a complete set of the books and also, that it would be of benefit to the Learning Community to house the full set in the College library where they will be permanently accessible to the Learning Community, faculty and students. We were extremely fortunate to have administrative support for this goal.
- There has been a high number of requests for copies of the various books.

A look at the areas of difficulty:

If we compare our working situation to the factors for success as described in section II, we can see clearly where we ran into difficulty and where shortcomings developed. The following is a partial list of issues which affected our process:

- Inadequate staffing for the level of work involved in a project of this scope. The process required an inordinate amount of hours outside of the normal classroom and prep time. It exacted a high price in time, energy, and family life for us to manage the commitment we made to the project. (For my part, I found that from the date of receipt of copy and images until completion of final files, I was frequently spending 25–30 hours per week on various aspects of the project including: extended classroom hours, meetings, phone conferences, emails, proofing, re-proofing and re-working schedules to accommodate revised copy deadlines).
- Insufficient amount of coordinated pre-planning among all parties involved
- Insufficient communication between faculty on a regular basis
- A tendency to rely too heavily on email as a means of communication, especially for proofing. Email is practical for short memos (ie “I can make a meeting at 4:00 on Tuesday”), but not so effective at resolving complex issues, for indepth communication or for proofing.

IV. Where do we go from here?

We need to consider the feasibility of correcting the short comings, and, if we wish to pursue some similar sort of project, we must consider other formats. (for example using the concept as a classroom assignment rather than a printed project or creating a different, more limited physical format.)

What is the feasibility of conditions for the success of a commercial-level product being met in an academic environment?

- Staffing: is it realistic to assume we would have the budget for adequate staffing to handle the range of tasks involved?
- Coordination and communication: faculty schedules and other commitments don't lend themselves to allowing daily contact.
- Student schedules and work load: students are not full-time, paid employees who can be expected to dedicate unlimited time to producing a commercial-level product. For example, a certain number of revisions and changes are a normal part of the publishing environment but the word reasonable needs to be applied. Class meetings are twice weekly, not daily.

Other options / formats

It will require time to consider and discuss other options if we feel that such a group project is worth doing. Note: I am currently contemplating a revised option for the design component.