

Capstone Reflection

Laura M. Lyons

Southern New Hampshire University

Abstract

The following paper summarizes the capstone project for completing a Bachelor of Arts Degree in Graphic Design and Media Arts. This personal reflection covers ethics, social and cultural awareness, as well as the exchange of feedback between classmates, professors, and myself.

Capstone Reflection

The creation of this final portfolio has been an intense journey through inspiration, self-doubt, realization, creativity, demotivation, and tenacity. All of these feelings mirror what the real world is like, so this experience offered valuable insight into what life as a working graphic designer will be like.

Pushing Through Imposter Syndrome

My reason for returning to school and earning a second bachelors degree is for legitimizing through coursework and a degree the activity that has provided the most enjoyment professionally. While my previous career was in technical writing, there were moments where I could interact with graphics and helm the layout of a project, and both were more interesting than the subject matter I was writing. I found myself losing time when working on graphic design for personal projects, and after considering the next path at a crossroads, I decided to pursue the activity that felt more like fun than a job. The work ethic is there, but when the task feels like creative play, the experience is deeply satisfying.

However, designing for yourself is far different from designing to suit another person's taste. That leads to imposter syndrome, when you turn over your work to be judged by someone else and just know you will come up short. The reason this capstone is so important is that it is a curated collection of work that has been evaluated by peers and instructors. If the projects are successful and deemed portfolio-worthy, that is validation outside yourself. The imposter feelings can still be felt, but they do not hold back the artist who believes in the process.

To be successful in this program, students have to be self-motivated in isolation, disciplined and organized, and willing to give and receive constructive criticism. The online courses are useful facsimiles of what it is like to work remotely, without direct face-to-face

supervision. If the online program has been successfully completed with high marks, that is an excellent indicator to potential employers that the job candidate has the necessary skillset to be a valuable asset to the existing team. Producing an excellent final product in an online environment is equivalent to successfully handing in a stellar work presentation. In other words, each step of the online program has built upon the previous skillset, and all of it has been building toward this capstone. Having the ability to see this bigger picture view is necessary for working on projects in a leadership role. Details matter in design work, but so do having an awareness of where the journey is going to take you, what obstacles may pop up, and how you will adapt and overcome; all of that show employers the grit behind the candidate.

Learning to Love Criticism

One of the best parts of this academic program is the “early and often” approach to critiques. It can be career-ending to some people to receive criticism they deem overly harsh, so the fact that each class builds upon exchanging feedback is one of the strongest takeaways. Not only do we learn how to formulate effective, helpful feedback to offer others but also how to receive that same feedback in the helpful spirit it is given. I found myself starting to look forward to receiving comments, because I felt like each one either taught me something I needed to learn or reinforced my instincts. Both are worthy byproducts that help build confidence.

Incorporating Feedback into Design

In one class, our final project was a branding suite for one of four fictitious businesses. I chose Upper Crust Bakery, a Parisian-inspired business with a client brief that required hints of Paris without specification. In my original design, I created an illustration of a madeleine (small butter cake), but the professor was not familiar with the treat and had me switch to something more universal (a depiction of wheat and the Eiffel Tower). That is the one piece of feedback

that required reworking a project from the ground up to satisfy the brief. In another class, I was told to simplify my design to meet the assignment but pursue my idea at a later date because it was clever. Other feedback has had minimal impact on overall design and mainly has consisted of minor adjustments. Some feedback I have chosen to ignore because I had a different opinion. I did consider the input, but if I remained interested in a piece where a professor was less impressed, I compared against the design principles and my intent in creating the artifact. If the design was solid and the intent discernible to me, I asked for feedback from other people. If they supported the design, I dismissed the previous feedback as personal preference if I felt the design was strong.

Collaboration

Exchanging ideas is important for a better world view. In design, collaborating is often the key to creating the most universally successful final product. Each person brings a point of view and host of experiences that are unique, so comparing notes helps to ensure that cultural or social sensitivities are respected. Having someone advocate for accessible design is imperative because people who do not experience those particular difficulties can easily forget that audience. Inclusion and representation are important, so making sure voices from other ethnicities and lifestyles are consulted makes a design as globally relevant as it can be. As a designer, I have to make sure I not only listen to voices up the ladder from me but also down in the sense that younger coworkers will have different experiences with technology than me, and I can learn from them as much or more than they can learn from me. If I know, for example, that the Save icon is a floppy disk in pictograph form, that is lovely for me, but someone just starting out in the job market may have no idea that data used to be stored on disks that were inserted into computers. Being derisive about the knowledge gap is unkind and nonproductive. Conversely,

there are bound to be plenty of applications that are relevant for social media that I have no knowledge about using. Keep on learning always.

Preparing for the Future

The knowledge gained from working in InDesign, Dreamweaver, Photoshop, and Illustrator are all skills that I will use going forward. Prior to returning to school, I had experience with Photoshop and saving documents into PDFs using Acrobat. Otherwise, I was new to the Adobe Suite of products. I have gained solid experience with all of them and more importantly the confidence that I can learn even more without experiencing a great deal of frustration. I even taught myself Lightroom. As for communicating with peers, the discussion portions of these online classes have been good practice for interacting in a work environment. Exchanging feedback is a continuous process, so the amount we have employed it so far is good preparation for being on the job.

I have written several papers on ethics in design, so with that research I feel well-prepared as a designer to go forth and produce artifacts that lift up rather than punch down. I will bear in mind that representation of diversity is more important than I can imagine, and I have an excellent imagination. It always matters to consider who is watching and learning from the work we produce. Ethically, I have a strong moral compass to know when something is edgy-acceptable and over-the-line offensive.

In closing, the course work required to finish this degree is excellent preparation for embarking on a career in graphic design. The amount of time spent in self-reflection as well as in critique are realistic of what is required in a work environment. Learning about ethics is fundamental to good design, and I appreciate the emphasis on it from these courses.

Goals

My goals are to work in a career in graphic design instead of resorting to technical writing. I aspire to be extremely good at whatever I do, but I would be happy in a variety of design roles, so I do not pigeonhole myself into one dream job. I prefer variety. I would love to improve my illustration abilities and work as an illustrator. Creating branding identities would be satisfying because I enjoy working with enthusiastic people who have great ideas and need help conceptualizing them artistically. I would prefer to work remotely because of the schedule flexibility but for the right job, I would move.