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## **Teaching Graphic Design in Jordan: Theory and Practice**

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**Keywords: Graphic, Computer, Traditional, Teaching, Jordan**

### **Abstract:**

According to the latest Proficiency Examination in January 2007 in Jordan -as a form of Major Field Tests done by ETS- the students of University of Petra attained the highest scores in graphic design

This paper will discuss the curriculum balance in general knowledge, art theories, traditional skills and computer competence to prepare design students for career in the field and life tasks. Whether the curriculum needs alteration or not, a deep look at both course content and teaching pedagogy is required, especially during the first year of design education.

When first-year students attend the program, they are full of expectations to use computers from the first day, not any customary tool or media. They are usually shocked with what they find. Today's curriculum is a balanced blend of computer design core courses, supportive non-computer courses, theoretical and historical courses and finally non-art courses and foreign languages.

The paper will mention students' problems during and after education. First problem begins early during years of education when they do freelance work and be exploited in both time and income. Second, they meet non-academic designers who are sometimes more skillful in applying software tools than they are. Third, after graduation they go out with high values and theoretical ideals facing the dark reality in a market full of contradictions and colored with mixed backgrounds.

A persisting question is: does design school prepare students for future career; teach enough skills, help their critical thinking to develop, encourage them to solve design problems; and efficiently communicate with the world around them? To improve quality standards in design education -teachers, students and administrators- many steps have to be done. Most of all is to look around and see what the world teaches. Having the best graphic students in Jordan today is not enough; international assessment must follow up. Using an international quality assurance guide is required to enhance mechanism of teaching, learning and assessment.

### **Introduction:**

The curriculum of graphic design in University of Petra is 137 credit hours, a blend of theory and practice courses. This curriculum needs revision and updating in terms of course description,

course assignment and teaching pedagogy. Course description has to be rewritten in more details to include teaching incomes and learning outcomes. Stating each course assignments and projects will avoid overlapping courses. Szenasy urges teachers and curriculum planners to make some changes as follows, "develop courses where collaboration, research, social justice, and scientific and cultural understanding are at the heart of the design problems being solved. Make universities—with their unique capacity for research and analysis—into the intellectual leaders of your profession, with you as their collaborator" (AIGA 2003). Institutions have to encourage teachers' constructive evaluation for three factors as Grant Shen suggests: students' feedback, examination questions and answers, and teaching module folder. In the Middle East most evaluations' outcomes are unreliable because evaluations themselves are subjective and not taken seriously enough by both administrators and students.<sup>1</sup> During the following pages, I will discuss the current graphic design curriculum in University of Petra, computer and non-computer design, ethics of design and finally will include some suggestions to improve the design program.

### **Graphic Design Curriculum:**

Teaching foundation courses is problematical task. Teaching by itself is easy, but to make students learn is diligent. It is a vast responsibility and influential role that a teacher has to believe in. Without pronouncing it, you either tell your student 'keep trying, you will be a good designer' or 'this is terrible, change your major.' Basic Design, as one of the most important foundation courses is taught in two levels that presume to cover the elements of visual art and the ways to organize them. This two-leveled course, which has to positively reflect on student creativity and performance in all other courses -is mostly taught by architects. In this case students receive a good awareness of 3-D objects in real space, not on 2-D design. It is well observed that most of them have problems in understanding the compositional plan; the way an artist organize all component to create aesthetically attractive and meaningful graphic designs. I will review the entire curriculum of graphic design in University of Petra in comparison with a list of courses suggested by the U.S.A. Bureau of Labor to highlight similarity, mediocrity and/or excellence.

#### **1- Graphic Curriculum in University of Petra:**

- Non-computer-based art/design courses are: basic design (two levels), principles of graphic design (two levels), free drawing (two levels), technical drawing (two levels), photography, etching, Arabic calligraphy and ornamentation, and color theory [33 hours].
- Computer-based courses are computer skills (graphic soft ware), computer graphic design (five levels), typography (two levels), advertisement design, technical animation, digital photography, exhibition design, and packaging [36 hours].
- Theory courses: history of European art and architecture (two levels), history of Islamic art and architecture, history of graphic (two levels), visual perception, aesthetics, methods of research, and book commercial techniques [24 hours].
- Elective courses offered are: pottery, web design, industrial design, textile, semiotics, illustration, magazine design, marketing, consumer psychology, history of modern art and architecture [9 hours].
- Graduation Thesis and Project: a student has to register for [2 hours] to do graduation thesis; next semester will have to carry out 'the written' concepts, subjects, contents and graphic media for graduation project [6 hours].

- Jordanian universities compulsory courses are: Arabic language (2 levels), English language (2 levels), computer programming, and military science [18 hours]. There are three elective courses out-of-art major [9 hours].

## **2- Graphic Curriculum Suggested by U.S.A. Bureau of Labor Statistics:**

- Studio art, principles of design, computerized design, commercial graphics' production, printing techniques, and Web site design.

- A liberal arts education or a program that includes courses in art history, writing, psychology, sociology, foreign languages and cultural studies, marketing, and business are useful in helping designers work effectively with the content of their work.

- Graphic designers must effectively communicate complex subjects to a variety of audiences. Increasingly, clients rely on graphic designers to develop the content and the context of the message in addition to performing technical layout work (2006).<sup>2</sup>

After quick comparison, University of Petra curriculum of graphic design covers the most required subjects and skills that are listed in U.S.A. Bureau of Labor Statistics, except few subjects such as sociology and business. Without going deeper, I would like to talk about the problem which is usually encountered at the Middle Eastern graphic design schools. It is a threefold: teacher, student and educational system.

In Jordan, most professors of graphic design are not specialized in graphic design. Ministry of Higher Education requires a Ph.D. candidate to fill a position. In the field of graphic design -by today's definition: computer graphic design- there are no many schools grant a doctorate degree, but MA and MFA. One with Ph.D. degree in print-making fills the job whether he/she has experience 'using' computer or not; an architect with a Ph.D. in CAD -computer aided design- also takes the job without having any background in fine arts. In local market, there are tens of good graphic designers with no post-graduate degrees to fit the 'formal' requirements. We tend to invite those designers to join us in evaluating and advising students during the final jury of each course.

Concerning students, our institutes accept 'every' student who pays the fees, regardless of his/her interest or talent in art and design. Students, who are rejected in any other major, come to study art/design because according to what the public think 'art/design is an easy task and doesn't need any effort.' There is a quasi exam to test students' talent in drawing before granting admission; and we find that all students always pass. In every class there are few talented, interested students who attend the program to learn but the rest attend for fun.

Educational system –bureaucracy- is about some formal rules that have to be followed; under no circumstances you can change. I will state some examples. In Computer Skills 1, students have to learn Microsoft office, Photoshop and Illustrator in three-credit hour class in the first semester. The teaching hours are insufficient; the majority of students go for a soft ware training off-campus by a private tutor. Rules makers don't want to hear complaints. Another problem is the big classrooms. In computer-design class we teach 25-30 students; the time is not enough to listen, discuss, suggest and fairly evaluate each student according to pr-set evaluation criteria.

### **Computer and Non-Computer Design Course:**

Now I will discuss another dilemma that most teachers face. The majority of students complain for having to use traditional tools in introductory classes such as drawing sketches, using brushes to mix paints and pencils for light and shade. They would rather like using computers in design and art classes from the first day. Although Barbar Mones-hattal; Ken O'Connell; Deborah Sokolove unconditionally support the use of computers in foundation courses, they mention what some other teachers say: "it is necessary to teach the basics first, with the customary tools and media, leaving computers for more advanced work" (1990).

Students come to school of design with pre-assumptions. It takes time and efforts to have their minds ready to accept and positively interact in the program. They have to employ many other artistic tools, in addition to computer. There is something missing, mental preparation and orientation in art classes during secondary school. If students are mentally prepared for design education, the outcomes will be much better. Computer is a great tool that has made both academic research and creative art and design easier, faster, further accurate, and more interesting, but there is enormous misunderstanding about its role in graphic design. Its tools will not work properly without a good experienced and a practiced hand to control.<sup>3</sup> Most students assume that computer is the goal, the more you know the better designer you are.

I expected to find more evidence to support my personal point of view which is built on long experience; the significance of using both computer tools and customary tools and media, equally. According to Software Publisher's Association SPA, educational technology positively affects students' achievements and attitudes towards learning (1994). It stimulates them to create design with self confident and increase their class cooperation and develop more communication.<sup>4</sup> "The technology also allows students to work at their own pace and encourages them to take initiative and learn independently" (1995). Computers as one of the main evolved tools encourages students-students learning process and make them more compete with computers than with classmates. I quote Mones-hattal et al who -seventeen years ago- advocate the computers role in teaching graphic design saying:

Computers graphics deserves a place in the general foundations courses for all art students... for stimulating creative thinking ... the significant potential of the computer [is] in the evolution and development of new modes of artistic expression. The computer is a multi-dimensional medium that provides the artist and designer with different modes of communicating or expressing concepts or ideas. These modes include visual imagery, text, sound or music and movement or animation. No other tool or medium provides this diversity of expression in one device... (1990).<sup>5</sup>

### **Graphic Design: Traditions and Ethics:**

I will make a wide jump from techniques to another significant element, ethics. In the Middle East most ethical rules are built on ancient traditions; with many of which I agree. Everywhere designers have to deal with values relating to human conduct, regardless of their own preferences and personal moral standard. Graphic forms must be accepted by the common audience; no offensive words or images. A designer must not offend anyone's religion nor criticize the country's political symbols; no complaint is to be published either. The designer can freely play anywhere else. With all kinds of limitations, ambitious designers are relatively creative; they find their own way of expression within culturally accepted means in all forms: verbal, written, visual

and virtual communication. Jordanian designers are more liberated to create independent media with personality and discuss global issues comparing to any other Middle Eastern country.

In the West, during its regular questionnaire, IcoGrada raises the question of the role of ethics in professional practice; 90% of the designers reply “yes it is a critical element.”<sup>6</sup> Dan Saffer thinks of ethics differently; he sees ethics as design and vice versa; “design itself *is* ethics. It is all about what is the right thing to do, and not just technically ... Designers need to be both technically right and compellingly wise. Wisdom is about evaluating and choosing between competing principles. And to be wise is to be aware. And awareness is the passage to action” (2003). Similar to Saffer’s is Susan S. Szenasy’s statement who doesn’t consider ethics as social and cultural forces; “ethical decisions are personal. It is you—each one of us—who has to decide to do the right thing. Today we ponder the meanings of words like morality, responsibility, obligation, community, social justice, inter-connectedness...” (AIGA 2003).

Back to the Middle East to see how graphic student doing; after graduation and having jobs, they work with real products and services and mostly feel frustrated when their designs are rejected. But this is not what I refer to. There are four ethical problems which affect the design career in general and locally in specific.

- First one begins before graduation when some do freelance work for financial reasons. The design directors or managers exploit students in terms of working hours and earnings, therefore students neither balance the working hours nor regularly attend school. In spite of being good students, they lose themselves in between.

- Second, students meet non-academic designers who are more skillful in using graphic software than they are.<sup>7</sup> When this happens, students question the validity of their academic years in education. Although such problem occurs in no time, solving its negative influence on students’ attitude takes long time to convince them that the main goal of graphic design education is to prepare a student for creative and critical thinking with capability to solve communication problems not to prepare a soft ware guru. Software market is changeable and unpredictable but basic education is consistent, engraved and updated.

- Third problem starts after graduation, young designers go full of hopes, moral values and theoretical ideals, with open arms ready to beautify the world, unfortunately they face the ‘world.’ A market full of contradictions becomes the first obstacle in the creative designing process. Sometimes designers plan an advertising campaign for a fake service that does not exist or make a substandard design under pressure to please clients and some owners who have no art background.

- Fourth problem is that most design offices only need good technicians, who mechanically do the job as a substitute for creative designers.<sup>8</sup>

How can we motivate and encourage the common eye to accept and require a high quality of art and design? Visual communication requires basic knowledge to receive the designer’s visual message and appreciate it. Although art education is not the concern of this paper, it is vital to mention the need for public art education to accept fully qualified and well educated designers without polluting their minds. The public here is meant to be the audience, clients and owners of design firms who are in direct contact with graphic products.

### **Design Education Evaluation:**

Teachers everywhere almost ask the same question concerning their own performance. Do we prepare our students for design career? Do we teach them critical and analytical thinking to understand the market's needs and creatively solve design problems? Are they efficiently ready by the end of school to professionally send the right messages for the right target? Do we implement team project and group communication in course work and encourage students to freely talk about their concepts? Szenasy encourages discussing design concepts; talks to designers and design teachers saying "... get out of your darkened rooms with their big, flashy images and figure out how to talk about design in the sunlight. In fact, just try talking about design once in a while without showing anything" (AIGA 2003). Sometimes one doesn't have enough art vocabulary to describe visual art in general – a point was illustrated fifty years ago by Susan Sontage-<sup>9</sup> hence one starts to show examples.

When one tends to evaluate today's schools of design, there are two different points of view. One is commercial, the other is educational. I agree, both must find a middle ground to save the future designer from suffering and conflicts; teachers and design directors / owners have to communicate more often.

- From commercial standpoint, U.S.A. Bureau of Labor Statistics gives valuable advices for designers to competently embrace and perhaps influence design education policy.

Determine the needs of the client, the message the design should portray, and its appeal to customers or users. Graphic designers consider cognitive, cultural, physical, and social factors in planning and executing designs for the target audience. Designers gather relevant information by meeting with clients, creative or art directors, and by performing their own research. Identifying the needs of consumers is becoming increasingly important for graphic designers as the scope of their work continues to focus on creating corporate, communication strategies in addition to technical design and layout work (2006).<sup>10</sup>

- From educational standpoint, design education has to include historical, critical courses; influence of technology on visual art; and the expectation of culture and society from visual depiction. They put emphasis on moral and ethical problems in the visual arts and intensive studio experiences in computer art (Mones-hattel at al 1990). Ohio University prepared an evaluation for its graphic students' assessment, by which it also evaluates quality of education and curriculum; a good example that can be followed today. It is about six criteria identified for the assessment of student learning in both scholarly and creative practice.<sup>11</sup>

- 1- Acquisition of knowledge in the history of art and understanding the relationship and influence of historical context;
- 2- Knowledge and understanding of issues in critical and aesthetic theory in the history of art and studio practice;
- 3- Development of aesthetic judgment and critical thinking;
- 4- Developing specific technical, aesthetic, critical, conceptual, and material abilities within studio media;
- 5- Integrating research, verbal and written communication skills, and technology for scholarly and creative purposes;
- 6- Knowledge and understanding of contemporary professional practice in studio arts, art history, and art education. (1997-98)

### Conclusion:

Although the curriculum of graphic design at University of Petra shows many similarities to other well-credited institutes, we find the teaching pedagogies are different. The obvious differences are budgetary constraints and political frustration. Most Middle Eastern design institutes neither afford enough facilities; nor hire more qualified teachers or teacher assistants. As a result, every teacher has to manage teaching five to six courses/ week. Teachers lose both private and social life, which negatively affects teaching performance and academic research. In addition, every one lives in general frustration for political reasons and the existing wars in the Middle East; teachers, students and administrators are included and depressingly influenced.

To sum up, I don't deny that most schools of design work on educational curriculums that 'thought to be' the best for students' preparation, missing what the market needs. Middle Eastern design institutes have to put the listed skills in mind and in curriculum as well. If we plan according to market needs, we will not be worried to throw our students in the ocean after four years without enough skills to survive. From this point the whole educational system needs frequent upgrading; virus scanning; a sort of self-evaluation, alteration and development according to new trends, new market and the new students.

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<sup>1</sup> Grant Shen wrote an interesting short paper on evaluating teachers: "Some Reflections on Teaching Evaluation." *Centre for Development of Teaching and Learning*, 2001. <http://cdtl.nus.edu.sg/link/mar2001/appraise2.htm>

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<sup>2</sup> Bureau of Labor Statistics, U.S. Department of Labor, *Occupational Outlook Handbook, 2006-07 Edition*, Graphic Designers, on the Internet at: <http://www.bls.gov/oco/ocos090.htm>

<sup>3</sup> Some one may argue about the validity of using computer tools and pencils. A student may make free-hand drawing on a digital pad by digital pen or use writing pad, the student's drawing will be transformed to digital lines on screen, hence the computer will give a great selection of modifications!

<sup>4</sup> "Connecting Students to a Changing World: A Technology Strategy for Improving Mathematics and Science Education," *Software Publisher's Association* (1994).  
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<sup>6</sup> Icoграда enews (06-08/07).

<sup>7</sup> We can't provide full software training for three reasons; first the class hours are not enough; the number of students in computer design class is too big; and finally most teachers are computer illiterate. What we give is what we know; the basics and most useable tools.

<sup>8</sup> I informally asked few design office managers; the answers were similar; "computer technicians are enough for routine daily work; they keep the work on with low price. A good, creative designer who has B. A. degree requires high salary, unless we hire students" (Amman, June 5, 2006).

<sup>9</sup> In her great article "Against Interpretation," (1963), while she talks about the urgency for art criticism; describing forms and objects, talking about art work itself not interpreting it, she pointed out the shortage of art vocabulary issue as a universal problem.

<sup>10</sup> Bureau of Labor Statistics, U.S. Department of Labor (2006-07).

<sup>11</sup> Ohio University "School Of Art Assessment Of Educational Outcomes Report 1997-98"  
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