THE SUSTAINABLE GRAPHIC DESIGNER

Exploring connections, sustainability, and change capacity of a graphic designer.
WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE A “GREEN” GRAPHIC DESIGNER?

Graphic designers don’t produce the products we use or the space we live in or the clothes we wear. It’s easy, then, to have a narrow view of what graphic designers produce or help to produce. They often deal with the physical matter—the paper, the ink, the stuff. It’s a logical conclusion then to think that a “green” or sustainable graphic designer would mainly focus on using paper and ink that is responsibly sourced (FSC) or that has a lighter environmental impact (soy inks).

That’s good. Sort of.

This perspective is narrow. It doesn’t take into account what is really being produced or influenced by graphic designers. They have an enormous amount of power in affecting change through the scope of their work and the amount of influence they have in crafting messaging.

Expanding our view of graphic design can open up opportunities to affect change and to spread an agenda of sustainability.
The Avocado

Digging Deeper Into the Role of Graphic Designer

Brian Dougherty in his book “Green Graphic Design” describes the work of a graphic designer as an avocado.¹ The “skin” of the avocado represents the material stuff — the paper and ink that a designer works with. The “meat” of the work is message making. This work happens through crafting the visual information and tapping into the cultural context and values. Finally, the “core” of a graphic designer’s work is affecting change. This change creation is the primary purpose of the work of a graphic designer. Whether the design work is created to sell a product, disseminate information, or keep people safe, all of the work done by graphic designers is created to affect change.

With this expanded view of a graphic designer, the possibilities start to grow as we examine how a graphic designer can do the work of sustainability.
The Sustainable Graphic Design System

A systems map will allow us to see a better view of how a graphic designer affects change through their work.

**Boundary**
The boundary of the system is the graphic design process. This system exists within a larger context of work that might include an agency or in-house marketing and communication department.

**Functions**
The function of the system is to produce work to advance the mission of the organization and/or the client. This might be to sell a product or to advance a cause or affect opinion and action. However, at a basic level the deliverables are messages to change behaviors of a target audience.

**System Elements**
The sub-system elements include the graphic designer(s), the design process, the sustainability principles and values, and brand framework.

**Work Flow Stages**
*Learn*—Gather research, references, and resources on design problem

*Identify*—Isolate the problem, determine partners, find possible solutions

*Generate*—Ideate, test, and analyze possible solutions

*Implement*—Execute best solutions and test for effectiveness
What is the goal?
To create more agents for sustainable change, upgrade traditionally trained graphic designers by embedding in their skills sustainability principles, frameworks, and tools to create sustainable designers with the ability to see their work through the lenses of the environment, people, business, and culture.
Strategy #1

Leveraging social connections to develop sound instruction program

Leveraging social connections to develop an educational model for sustainable graphic designers

The current AIGA Living Principle’s for Design outlines sustainable principles, frameworks, and tools for designers to reference. It also presents a basic Roadmap for designers. It’s an excellent resource, but the implementation is mostly left to the individual. For the successful integration into the traditional graphic designer’s work, these pieces need sound thinking about how to ingrate the concepts into the daily work of a graphic designer. To do this effectively, an exploration into sound pedagogy is required. Through my social links, I plan to connect with the resources I need.

INGREDIENTS NEEDED AND WERE TO FIND THEM:
- **Current course syllabus and instructor feedback** — graphic design instructors (Chris, Julie, and Stephen)
- **Help developing syllabus and learning outcomes** — director of assessment (Kristen, Karen)
- **Standards for online learning (best-practices)** — faculty and CAC committee members
- **Access to AASHE resources on experiential learning** — environmental studies faculty (Kristen)

Initial Social Connection Progress Report

Through initial connections with Kristen C., the director of assessment at Augsburg College, I have identified processes for developing course material related to the work of educating graphic designers for sustainability work.

The first major outcome was looking at backward course design. This process, outlined in the book “Understanding by Design” (Wiggins and McTighe) suggests a “Backward Design” framework for course design. The framework suggests that the primary focus of course design be the desired learning outcomes. From this starting point, best methods for teaching the content can be determined.

The second major outcome was looking at the Association for the Advancement of Sustainability in Higher Education and their work around showing the effectiveness of having community connections embedded in the learning process.
Strategy #2
Decentralized system of diffusion using “seed” model

Using “seeds” to spread ideas about sustainable graphic design

How do plants pass on all of the information about building another plant? A plant might produce thousands or millions of seeds and each one need to have the complete blueprints to direct and build a new plant. As a result, the process of seed creation and dissemination needs to be efficient, and each seed needs to be “low cost” to the plant to have enough energy to make them all. A seed does this by having an efficient coding strategy in the packaged DNA, and it has a well-designed package that includes everything a seed needs to go from germination through to an adult plant (seed coat, embryo, and endosperm).

Using a similar design strategy, the sustainable design course(s) would be low cost to produce and share. The course(s) would include everything needed to go from having no sustainable design experience to having a working knowledge of basic sustainability concepts. To achieve a low-cost delivery system that could spread over great distance, the best option currently modeled online would be a modified MOOC-style course. A familiar example of this is the “NAND to Tetris” course (www.nand2tetris.org) focused on spreading computer programming concepts.2

This idea, coupled with some of the ideas around class building and pedagogy, would build a course suited for self-assembling learning communities. Which could be constructed around already established design communities, such as AIGA.

Seed Growth

Seeds contain all the needed material for directing and building the initial structure of the plant.
Strategy #3

Use network connections and structures to spread sustainability training program and certification

Using connections and thought leaders in the graphic design industry

AIGA has more than 70 chapters and 25,000 members. It’s a thriving organization that taps into some of the best creatives in the industry. This makes it an ideal place to house a sustainability learning program and certification. It also has a history of supporting the work of sustainability through design with initiatives like the Living Principles for Design. Below the national network structure, vibrant local chapters create most of the programming. This decentralized organizational structure would require multiple strategies to spread interest in the program.

Types of network connections

**MEDIA TO MANY**
Using media (mostly social media) to broadcast high-level messages about the program and the value of a sustainable learning program and certification.

**THOUGHT LEADERS**
Thought leaders are powerful in the design industry. They might be popular designers, such as Aaron Draplin or Ty Mattson. They might also be agencies, such as Pentagram.

**MANY-TO-MANY**
Word of mouth is a powerful tool in networks where freelancers, in-house designers, and agencies are constantly engaging other creatives on different products.

**ONE-TO-ONE**
One-to-one relationships are at the core of information diffusion. It would be important to foster discussions between individuals about sustainability via in-person discussions as well as other medium.
Conclusions

Using systems thinking to understand pathways to accomplish work around a sustainable graphic design course and perhaps a certification has already yielded results. In talking with Kristen Chamberlain, professor of communication and director of assessment at Augsburg College in Minneapolis, Minnesota, a clear strategy has emerged for approaching the content. Using backward course design, clear learning objectives can be the starting point for developing content that will connect graphic design specific strategies for sustainability. Augmenting this process with an understanding of how community engagement and connections can enhance learning unique to sustainability will add effectiveness and relevance to the course material.

To spread the coursework and interest in certification, an online class will allow for a flexible delivery of content that can be decentralized and utilize local social connections. This structure mimics the organization of AIGA, the largest visual design association in the U.S.

An end result is a group of graphic designers committed to sustainability. This group will understand the impact of choices made when considering inks and papers. However, the goal is a much deeper commitment and understanding of sustainability. This deep understanding can transform traditional graphic designers into agents of change.
Citations


