

Graphic Design and Transformative Learning: How a Logo Design Can Be a Transformative Experience

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Transformative learning is a holistic process that places students at the center of their own active and reflective learning experiences, it is not a new methodology for instruction, yet its practice has not widely been adopted in graphic design education. This paper will examine the Melton Gallery rebrand project at the University of Central Oklahoma as a case study on how to engage graphic design students in transformative learning, using a mentorship initiative that focuses on tenets of leadership and research to solve design problems, discuss hurdles that were encountered along the way, and further promote experiential learning as an effective tool for transformative learning.

Keywords: transformative learning, graphic design, logo design

INTRODUCTION

Transformative learning is not a new theory in adult education, however, its application and methods are currently being explored and revised in new ways. The University of Central Oklahoma in particular has adopted this learning method as part of its mission and has therefore devoted time and energy to exploring the possibilities of what transformative learning has to offer its students. As part of this exploration, the university has also developed a form of assessment, to determine if the mission is successful and if transformation is indeed happening within the student body. This assessment is through the introduction of a program known as the Student Transformative Learning Record, or STLR, which was expressly developed as an assessment tool to determine if the university was meeting its transformative learning goals. This study applies this theory and its modifications by the University of Central Oklahoma to the education of graphic design students, specifically to enhance their Leadership and Research skills, defined as two of the six core tenets of transformative learning at UCO. This paper will discuss a logo design project developed for the university's art and design gallery, undertaken with the express purpose of exploring these two tenets in-depth and as an experimental process to examine how extracurricular programs can aid student development in graphic design.

TRANSFORMATIVE LEARNING & STLR

Jack Mezirow first introduced his theory of transformative learning in his 1991 publication, *Transformative Dimensions of Adult Learning*, the foundations of which date back to at least the 1970s. The idea of transformative learning stems from constructivist theories of learning, and the key to the concept of this style of learning, according to author Patricia Nemeec, is that “Transformative learning refers to a dramatic change, where the learner achieves a shift in perspective.” (Nemeec, 2012, p. 478) To achieve a transformative experience, the learner must reflect on their previous assumptions about a given issue and make a conscious change in the way they think or perceive that issue to experience transformative learning. Since the learner must make a conscious change to their thinking to achieve transformative learning, the learner must engage in some form of self-analysis. An ideal for the transformative learning process is for students to engage not only in deep learning but to also have increased retention of knowledge, both of which should enhance confidence for students in their chosen field of study (Dunham, 2013).

The University of Central Oklahoma (UCO) adheres to the principles of transformative learning campus-wide, and the university is working to position itself as a leader in transformative learning. As such, the campus is home to many practices that advance the study of the effectiveness of transformative learning, including hosting an annual conference (which has grown from a national to an international conference), as well as publishing *The Journal of Transformative Learning*. UCO adopted transformative learning as part of its mission, then at the advice of the Higher Learning Commission began assessing and documenting the effectiveness of transformative learning campus-wide in 2015. Part of the problem with assessment is the lack of a tangible definition. Dennis Dunham, the co-chair of the Transformative Learning Steering Committee at the University of Central Oklahoma, has noted the need to define Transformative Learning practically. He describes it as a “high impact practice”, though he also recognizes that definition may not be very helpful for assessment purposes (Dunham, 2013, p. 9). A goal, identified by Jeff King, the Executive Director of the UCO Center for Excellence in Transformative Teaching and Learning, is that “students who leave campus with more expansive and appreciative viewpoints about themselves, others, and their environment are indications that an institution has been successful with the ‘transformative’ in ‘Transformative Learning.’” (King, 2013, p. 11)

To effectively assess transformative learning, a process was developed and put into place. First, the University identified six core tenets of transformative learning which are defined as Global and Cultural Competencies; Health and Wellness; Leadership; Research, Creative and Scholarly Activities; Service Learning and Civic Engagement; and Discipline Knowledge. These tenets were created to identify all aspects of learning that the university hoped to address within the bounds of transformative learning, to produce graduates that would be prepared for not only their future careers but also to be effective and engaged citizens. The second step taken by the university administration was to determine an effective method for assessing achievement in these tenets; to that end, UCO developed the STLR program, which is an acronym for the Student Transformative Learning Record. STLR was designed not only to assess but also to document the transformative learning of students within the University.

Furthermore, the STLR “record” was envisioned to become a secondary transcript for students to show potential employers in addition to their academic transcript, which would allow students to provide evidence of performance or growth in five of the tenets, Global and Cultural Competencies; Health and Wellness; Leadership; Research, Creative and Scholarly Activities; Service, Learning and Civic Engagement, leaving Discipline Knowledge to be assessed through the standard academic transcript. The development of STLR was funded by a national grant from Lumina as a pilot project (*One Institution’s Stellar Comprehensive Record*, 2016). The assessment methods used in the STLR program are designed to be flexible and students’ achievement in the tenets are assessed for transformative learning in a variety of ways, including; regular course work, extracurricular activities, independent research, projects conducted outside of classes, and campus events. However, the activity must be approved by a committee before it can be included in STLR credit. Once the activity is completed students are assessed through a standardized rubric, also developed by a committee, that determines the level of transformation achieved. These levels are defined as exposure, integration, and transformation; exposure being the lowest level of achievement

and transformation being the highest. The university recognizes that students may need to be exposed to new ideas many times, and begin to integrate them into their life and work before they can be transformed, that is the purpose of identifying the various levels of transformation and the rubric is designed to reflect that process. As such, activities can be identified as exposure-only, or integration-only in terms of expected achievement levels, and students may not necessarily be awarded the highest level available for the activity, they must first prove achievement at that level, which is usually done through a reflection paper that is then assessed by the instructor for transformation as defined by the STLR committee.

The ultimate goal of the STLR program at the University of Central Oklahoma is to be transparent and replicable; with the hope that other universities will be able to adopt this model and use it to aid the assessment of transformative learning on their campuses. At the time of this writing, the STLR program has been adopted at roughly eight universities worldwide according to Jeff King, the Executive Director of Transformative Learning, Center for Excellence in Transformative Teaching and Learning.

An Experiential-Mentorship Initiative

Since its inception, the University of Central Oklahoma had seen tremendous progress and almost university-wide buy-in for the STLR program. However, the design department was one holdout, as few of the design faculty were trained in STLR program on how to develop STLR projects or how to assess those projects for transformative learning, and the design faculty were unsure of how this program would work within their curriculum, resulting in some resistance in adopting it. When an opportunity came up on campus to design a new logo for the university gallery space it seemed like the perfect time to project to explore how transformative learning could be assessed within the design department. As a result, it was determined that an experiential project with a mentorship initiative would be the ideal platform for engaging students in the University of Central Oklahoma design department in transformative learning. Practitioners of transformative learning recognize that there is no “right way” to engage students in this method, yet it has been noted that professor-student relationships can be critical for student learning (King, 2013). The method for this project pushes beyond the idea that professor-student relationships are most critical and asserts that professional and peer-to-peer relationships are equally critical and that student-to-student mentoring can be as effective in terms of achieving a dramatic change in perspective, or transformation, for students.

In this case study, the experiential design project would include the development of a logo and an identity system for the universities art and design gallery space, the Melton Gallery, while working with the College of Fine Arts & Design assistant dean, who also serves as the Executive Director of Galleries & Collections, as the client. Very often when design projects are conducted in a classroom setting the faculty serves as the client for design projects, however, design students must have a client, beyond the instructor for experiential learning. Because the design of the logo and identity system was a significant undertaking it was decided that two students would be brought in to work with a faculty mentor on the project. The specific focus of the initiative was to assess students on the tenets of Leadership and Research for STLR; of the two students involved in the project, one would be an undergraduate and the other a graduate student. The intent was that the graduate student would aid and mentor the undergraduate student in engaging in research and leadership at the level that is expected for the development of a high-quality functional logo design, not just a hypothetical logo, as is the case in much of the classroom curriculum at the undergraduate level. To conduct this project, a proposal was submitted to the STLR committee for approval. The committee approved the project at the transformation level.

Leadership and Research

For the assessment of the leadership tenet, both students were expected to engage in leadership to different degrees. The graduate student would serve as a mentor and guide for the undergraduate student, creating a hierarchy similar to what is seen in professional graphic design studios, with the faculty member serving as the art director, the graduate student serving as a senior designer, and the undergraduate student serving as a junior designer. The graduate student would guide the student through the research and development stages of the design, however, the undergrad student was to take a lead role in the actual

design of the logo and identity system. The group worked as a team with the undergraduate student providing most of the production, the graduate student providing feedback and research, and the faculty member providing guidance and leading the process. As for the assessment of the research tenet, again both students were expected to engage in research for the development of the logo and identity system. Research is a necessary part of any logo design, as research is used to identify what is needed from the logo, what competitors' logos look like, identify the target audience and what they will respond to, as well as how it should be used and function.

Description of the Problem: The Melton Needs a Logo

The Melton Gallery is an on-campus art gallery that had been created initially to serve as the permanent home to the Melton Legacy Collection. The Melton Legacy Collection was donated to the University of Central Oklahoma in 2003. In 2018 the Gallery was closed for a remodel, to create a space that was more functional for the growing collection as well as to allow for exhibitions of work beyond the Melton Legacy Collection. Ultimately it was decided that the Melton Collection would be safer if it were moved to a different location on campus, where the proper security and archiving measures could be assured for the collection. This change would allow for the gallery to be a primary space for exhibitions of art and design on the university campus in support of the curriculum for the Art and Design Departments. The intention was also to better serve the local art and design communities through these changing exhibitions. This change to the purpose of the gallery, as well as the changes to its goals and mission, created a need for a new identity and a rebrand that would allow the gallery to effectively promote exhibitions and raise awareness of on-campus art and design-related events to the local community. This transition made the development of a new logo and identity system even more timely and relevant.

METHODOLOGY

The Melton Gallery Rebrand Project

Once the STLR project was approved it was time to begin the Melton Gallery Rebrand project. To begin the rebrand project students were identified for each of the roles and informed of the gallery's history as well as the transition along with the new mission and goals. Both students stepped in and immediately began to work using the design process to develop a logo and identity. The design process varies, but generally speaking includes research, ideation, development, and final design. Research, as previously mentioned, is needed to determine what other galleries are doing, how they present themselves to the world, and what the mark needs to do to set itself apart from these other institutions. The ideation process includes multiple stages of sketching, usually including thumbnail sketches, which are small and quickly made drawings intended to serve as initial idea proposals. From there the best ideas, or thumbnail sketches, are identified and then made into larger, slightly more detailed sketches called "roughs". The roughs go through a similar process, where the best ideas, usually one to three, are made into final comps. These comps are generally presented to the client for final consideration.

For the creation of the Melton Gallery logo, this process required an additional step, one that was not planned at the outset of the project. The university communications department, which oversees all communications, promotions, and logos used within the university, had to approve the need for a logo. In the past, the University of Central Oklahoma was a bit fast and loose with its logo use, and different departments and organizations created their marks, or variations to the university's logo, as needed, there was no brand management or oversight. However new administrations had begun tamping down on this, and all university-affiliated units were required to apply for a university-created standardized logo. By this new standard, the UCO Melton Gallery would be stuck with a standard mark, the UCO logo, with the words Melton Gallery printed beneath it, see figure 1 for an example of the university standard logo. The Assistant Dean, serving as the client, as well as all on the team, recognized that not only would this design not appeal to the target audience, but it would not meet the needs of the STLR project, which would cause the project to fail. The team decided to appeal to the university communications department, and request special permission for the creation of a unique, university-approved logo for the gallery. This additional step ended

up taking over the project and the team regrouped to defend the need for a unique logo for the gallery before the design process could even begin. This extra step had the effect of making the project even more representative of the real-world process when doing professional design, as situations change constantly and designers often need to pivot their approach and defend their design work.

**FIGURE 1
STANDARD LOGO FOR THE UNIVERSITY OF CENTRAL OKLAHOMA**



As the team transitioned to meet this new need, more research was conducted to support the argument for a new logo as well as a plan for what points to make and how to best argue for them. The team identified the new mission statement as key to the argument, “To promote the visual arts within our community and to create a dialog between the university and the broader artistic community through education, cultural enrichment, exhibitions, and programming.” The point here was that the new logo was intended to reach beyond the University and connect with the broader artistic community, in this sense the audience for the Melton Gallery was not the same as the audience for the broader university. Additionally, the group conducted a quantitative study of 35 universities that all had galleries and collections. In this study, the team examined the logos for each of these institutions to determine if they had their own unique identity. This study found that “Out of the 35 schools, 17 (about 48%) utilized different branding, 11 (about 31%) used slightly different branding (mostly converting to a sans serif font and different color scheme), and only 7 (20%) that utilized universal branding for both the school and the museums”, this data helped the team to show a precedent for university galleries to have an alternative logo from the university as a whole. The team also closely examined the branding of other institutions local to UCO as well as peer institutions. This comparison found that indeed several local and peer institutions also present unique brands for their museums and galleries (see figure 2). Finally, the team also examined the rebranding of The Cooper Hewitt Design Museum, which had recently become part of the Smithsonian collective of museums, as a case study for how to rebrand a museum within the umbrella of a larger institution.

**FIGURE 2
COMPARISON OF GALLERY AND UNIVERSITY LOGOS FROM LOCAL AND PEER INSTITUTIONS**



This information was presented to the Assistant Dean along with the University Communications team, for approval to create the new unique brand for the Melton Gallery. The presentation was a success and all agreed that the Melton Gallery needed its unique logo, but the University Communications team wanted to sign off on the process, so in a sense, they too became clients for the project. Next, the rest of the design process began, using the research that had been conducted the team began developing thumbnail sketches as part of ideation, rough sketches as further development, and final comprehensive designs, with the undergraduate student taking the lead on design with feedback from the graduate student as well as the faculty mentor. When the team finished producing the final comprehensive designs, which included three options, all options were presented to the assistant dean and University Communications from which a final design was selected to become the new Melton Gallery Logo.

The last stage of the design process was to finalize the logo design and any alternative versions, then put together a branding guide for other designers who might be employed to use the logo and branding materials. The final design includes official university color palettes, both primary and secondary, and official university typefaces. By including these resources, the team connected the new unique brand to the larger university brand (See figure 3).

FIGURE 3
FINAL DESIGNS FOR THE MELTON GALLERY LOGO IN PRIMARY AND SECONDARY COLOR PALETTES



CONCLUSION

The final design was an instant success, recognizable not only on the university campus but also in the local community, and it gives a face to the Gallery that artists and designers can connect with. The clients were pleased and it was the first alternative campus logo approved by the University Communications team; they have since used our process and arguments to help set a standard for how to go about getting an alternative logo approved. But were the students who developed the identity transformed? As part of the university's assessment for Transformative Learning, following the STLR program guidelines both students submitted reflection papers as a self-assessment of their experiences with the Leadership and Research tenets, using the STLR-approved rubrics, both students were assessed as having reached that transformative level of achievement.

While there were some unexpected setbacks with the project, going into the project the team was unaware that we would need to defend the need for a logo in the first place; we were simply planning on developing the identity, and this made the experiential project better. The students were able to truly see how their research and leadership skills were needed to argue for and defend the Gallery's need for its unique logo. They were able to see how research supports the design process in a way that could not have

been planned in the classroom. The project set new precedents for design practices at the university and established that design students could be engaged with the University's goal of Transformative Learning.

One of the most important aspects of the outcome of this case study is the acknowledgment that experiential projects in design, like the Melton Gallery Rebrand, are an excellent way to engage design students in transformative learning. Many universities and colleges have some sort of professional studio course that allows students to work on real projects with real clients, this means that the groundwork for involving students in transformative learning is already in place. For these institutions the logical next step for tracking transformative learning then is assessment, using an assessment tool, such as the STLR program and rubrics is necessary for assessing outcomes in transformative learning.

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