

TEACHING WITH WRITING

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An Interview with Stephen Chovanec

By August Baunach for the WIC program

This is the third of three interviews with OSU faculty who've participated in the Writing Intensive Curriculum (WIC) seminars offered through the Center for Writing and Learning. The following interview is with Stephen Chovanec, an assistant professor in the Art Department—Chovanec has been at OSU since 1990. The courses that he teaches are ART 246, Beginning Graphic Design, and ART 347, Typography II.

WIC: You were a participant in the WIC seminar back in the Winter of 1991, weren't you? Can you say what prompted you to take the seminar?

Chovanec: I worked professionally as a graphic designer for 15 years before I began teaching; and at a conference I heard a man named William Zinsser speak. Later I picked up his book, *Writing to Learn*, and was completely taken by his premise: if you can't write clearly, then you're not thinking clearly—or, conversely, no matter how complex the subject, you can write clearly about it.

Reading his book got me excited about writing; and when I decided to teach at OSU I knew I'd have to find a way to incorporate writing into my classroom—even

though, traditionally, art is not taught in this manner.

WIC: So you've found that writing about design concepts helps students with their design projects?

Chovanec: I've found that absolutely to be true. Compared to a straight lecture presentation of these ideas, freewriting and journal writing about design concepts help students to better apply the concepts to their own work. And when critiquing their own—or their peers'—projects, they are better able to articulate how and what was done.

Take figure/ground relationships—how white space interacts with the positive and negative elements on a page. Such relationships are not easy to understand because there is no direct correlation in, for example, the study of literature or science. So, for many people, this is the first time they've encountered these ideas. When they have to write about how they've attempted to use figure/ground relationships, I think they are able to grasp the concept more quickly. Their designs may or may not improve, but they are able to articulate what they attempted.

WIC: What do you see as being the relationship between writing and visual perception?

Chovanec: That's a good question. A graphic designer's job is to organize thoughts in terms of visual output. Every project has an author or client and it's the graphic designer's task to re-interpret the author's message visually—to reinforce the message or the author's intention. Whether or not the author/client has written any text, there is always at least an intent that needs to be communicated. Designers need to be able to write clearly so that they can interpret writing clearly.

A lot of students go into art with the misconception that they will not have to write. But as a graphic designer, you have to be able to write letters, proposals, copy—any number of things in the daily course of your job.

Also, I've found that some of the best designers in the field are also some of the best writers about the subject. You don't just move things around until they look good. The logic and intelligence of design is related to an ability to think clearly.

WIC: Because it fosters "clear" thinking, do you think that teaching with writing is an effective way to cross the boundaries between disciplines—such as those between art and literature or science?

Chovanec: Frequently I try to involve my students with projects that deal with other disciplines, such as literature, science, or

architecture. And sometimes it works very well.

Last quarter I gave an assignment in my typography class where students were responsible for creating a double-page spread. They'd studied traditional as well as modern typography and how each works on the page; their layout was supposed to be a response to some aspect of typography they felt strongly about.

I was surprised and delighted by their response. I had one student who used William Faulkner's fluid and shifting stream of consciousness writing to symbolize modern type and the modern page.

Another student used what she had learned in her geology class, using the concept of plate tectonics as a metaphor for the modern page.

WIC: So, in all cases, writing ends up being part of the design?

Chovanec: In many of the projects, but not all of them. You can't have them juggling too many things at once. You have to introduce the form, let them work with that, and then gradually get them to work with content that they've created. The two-page layout that I was talking about was a final project—a culmination of their ability to handle form and content simultaneously.

One of the astonishing things about the plate tectonics piece is that when the student went looking for an internship, she told me that in every case where she showed her portfolio, the person reviewing her work

stopped to read about plate tectonics—which is unheard of!

People usually don't have time to read portfolios, only glance at them. That they stopped to read hers is a real testimony to the student's intelligence and ability.

WIC: [*Looking at a copy of the piece:*] Very nice. After the fact, it seems perfectly natural that people should make "metaphors" out of such scientific concepts.

Chovanec: In art, just like in any other discipline, we're trying to get students to think. As a graphic designer, you need to be aware of many disciplines—not just because you'll be working with clients from a variety of backgrounds, but also because the more knowledge you have the more creative your work can be.

The profession of graphic design is fairly new. There was only advertising or commercial art up into the fifties. But now there's a great dialogue taking place in the professional journals; designers are trying to define their work in terms of historical roots and future possibilities. I would hope that, in the years to come, the best of my students would become involved in this dialogue—but they can't if they don't write clearly. And if they don't understand this dialogue they'll more than likely be subject to the whims of style—imitative instead of creative.

WIC: So the WIC seminar gave you some ideas about how to get your students more involved in writing?

Chovanec: Not only that, but I also got some tips on teaching—and on how to be

more specific in terms of grading. I wound up using a method that several people in the seminar proposed—a sort of continuum or list of qualities that describe an "A" or a "C," for example.

When teaching art, it's very easy just to give a grade for how well the craft is done. But, if I tell my students "these are the qualities I want to see," and then I use something similar to that initial list for a final grading sheet, they produce better projects.

Another WIC-style technique that I use is this: at various stages during the development of their projects, I give them a list of questions and ask them to use those questions to freewrite about their work. Later, when their projects are completed, I ask them to exchange and critique one another's work. Because they've already done ungraded writing about these design concepts, the critiques are more successful.

Critiquing goes right to the heart of one of the reasons why I want them to be able to think and write and speak clearly: when a client comes in to review something you've created, you need to explain what you've created and the ideas behind it. As a designer, you can't just say "I like this!" Your job will depend on your ability to be more objective about your work—depend on your ability to defend your ideas.

WIC: Do you think your students assimilate design concepts more readily through writing?

Chovanec: Yes, but I think it is because organizing visual information is so foreign to

most of us. When you talk about visual principles on a page, there aren't previous experiences for students to build on.

You start to write when you are in the first or second grade, and you carry that process on throughout grammar school, high school, and college—in your classes you're dealing with the written word. But art is usually neglected and many college students have no reference point. By using writing in tandem with design, I feel as if I'm grounding these principles in something they know. They are less overwhelmed.

And, actually, I think that is the future of the written word—we'll never lose it but I think it will become more integrated into design and multi-media presentations.

WIC: Can you give any advice to other teachers who might be considering using WIC techniques?

Chovanec: The seminar improved my ability to teach and it's improved the results I get from my students. It's been as valuable as anything I've done since I arrived on campus.

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