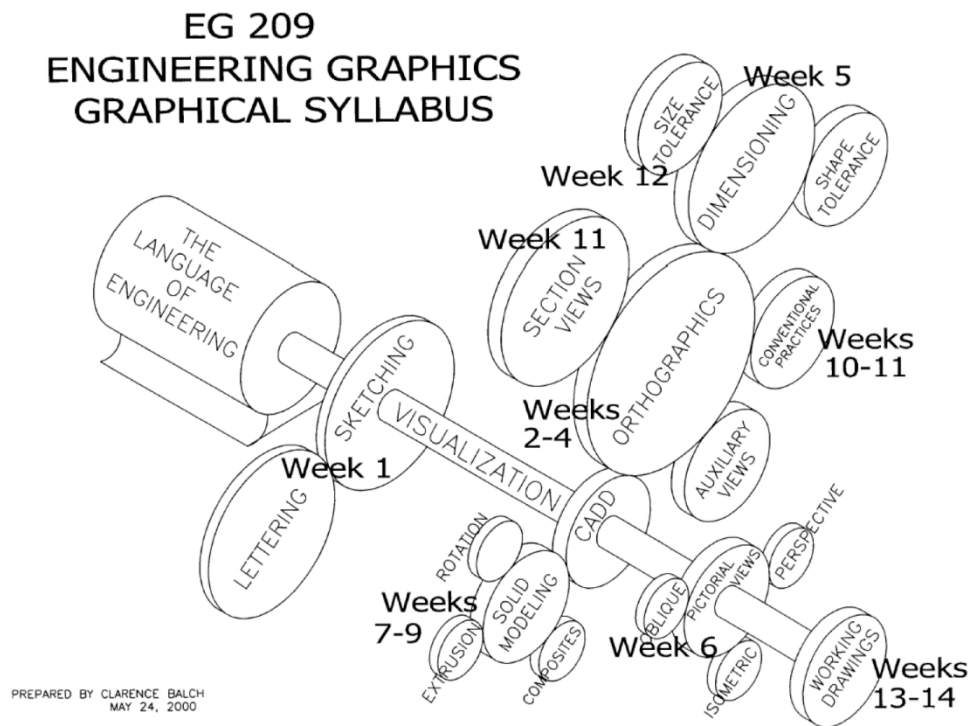


Reflections on being a Lucas Fellow.

First let me say how grateful I am for the Lucas Center Faculty Fellowship and for the opportunity to reflect on the application of design theory to teaching and learning. Through organizing a Faculty Learning Community and participating in various events, activities and conversations, I was able to engage with the literature on teaching and learning from a broader perspective.

A lot of the literature on teaching and learning is either highly concrete — it describes “best practices” and offers case-studies and examples — or highly theoretical and abstract. Having a grounding in design theory gave me a useful tool for evaluating the recommendations that I was seeing in the literature.

To take one case: the “graphic syllabus” has been proposed as an alternative to the traditional syllabus, by Nilsen among others. As an example, we are given this:



If we evaluate this diagram against basic design concepts outlined by Douglas Norman and others, we might question the “syllabus” label. Those who have previously used a syllabus to navigate in a course have a “conceptual model” of what a syllabus is, which doesn’t map very well to this example. It is unclear, from looking at this, what a student is supposed to do. Most of the key elements we expect in a syllabus are lacking. The student is not referenced anywhere in this. In design parlance, the actions (“affordances”) it allows are not obvious; the system it represents — the actual course — is not very “visible.” Remove the word “syllabus” and the diagram becomes what it really is, a tool that the faculty member can use to conceptualizing and communicate the relationship between topics in a field

of study, and for mapping out in very general terms how those might be encountered chronologically during a semester. What is missing is everything else that is needed to facilitate the interaction between the student and the course. This may seem very obvious but when I first read Nilsen's book on the graphic syllabus, I found myself confused and even defensive. Perhaps I needed to change my syllabus, but what was represented in the book didn't actually track with what I thought a syllabus was, and that created cognitive dissonance. Design theory showed me why I was feeling that way, and charted a path for integrating the valuable features of the new idea into my own practice, while mitigating what it was lacking.

One especially valuable take-away I encountered in my exploration of design theory was the "design thinking" model of design process. Design process is embedded everywhere in the philosophy and practice of teaching and learning, but this particular model has the advantage of privileging the concept of "empathy" — empathy for and understanding of the user, in a holistic sense. This is where design process meets "student-centered learning" and also "inclusive" learning. But unlike most of the professional literature, which gives guidance and examples that we can apply to our courses, this gave me a very useful roadmap for how to **develop** a course or a learning object from, as it were, within the course. It is the difference between applying an external idea to a course, and developing an idea that grows organically out of the course goals. This process framework conceptualizes the product not as a static "object" but as a living entity that is constantly subject to revision and development as more information about the users is acquired and results are evaluated. The design process is iterative, always being tested against the touchstone of empathy and knowledge of the user's needs.

I applied this insight to an experience I had trying to implement an idea from Nilsen's work: her concept of "specifications grading," an all-or-nothing grading system that requires students to master the skill before moving on.

Initially I thought this was great suggestion and applied it in my upper-level classes to the skills-based assignments, where acquiring the skills is very critical for progressing. But I had trouble getting it to work as advertised. The technique did not factor in the emotional impact on students of the experience of repeatedly receiving a "failing" grade when they did not achieve mastery on a first try. Nilsen's prediction was that students who otherwise might be a little lazy about achieving mastery would be **motivated** by this grading system to get it right the first time. My students, though, were **de-motivated** — they found the experience of "failing" small assignments to be so discouraging that it negatively impacted their feelings about the whole course. Where did I go wrong? Why are my results different?

The answer is probably that I did not start my assignment design process with empathy; I started with what I wanted to achieve, not with where the students were and who they are. Nilsen might well have been working with a different population, or maybe she is able through personal warmth and charisma to motivate students and offset any negative consequences. Or maybe her assignments were easier and the bar to mastery was lower. Maybe the assumption that students are not achieving mastery the first time because they are unmotivated is wrong.

Subsequently, following the “design thinking” model, I made three modifications. At the beginning of the semester, and for every assignment, I explained again what the grading system was and what is was intended to achieve, and told students not to be freaked out if they didn’t get it right the first time — that is part of the process. For the more difficult skills, I added a “partial credit” grade, which gave students some credit but still required them to resubmit the assignment and demonstrate mastery of the skill. Finally, I made the assignments somewhat easier to get ‘full credit’ on but added ‘extra credit’ options, to encourage students to put in extra effort. Having more general design concepts as a framework has really helped me understand how to modify my practice to get better results.

Thoughts on the fellowship experience

From my observations of the fellowship activity, I got the impression that all of us were extremely strapped for time, and that made it somewhat difficult to maintain momentum. I would have enjoyed working more intensively with my colleagues, perhaps partnering on projects where we had some overlap (as between Heather and myself for Information Literacy.) Perhaps that time-squeeze is natural, especially on a first iteration. The people who raise their hands to do this kind of thing are often the types who are already engaged in a lot of activities and responsibilities, and who tend to dig deep in their course preparation and facilitation. It seems like my classes are taking more and more time, or perhaps my work speed is slowing up.

Whether my participation as a Lucas Fellow ends up being useful for anyone else remains to be seen. The Faculty Learning Community devoted to design was animated and engaged, but attracted only a few participants. I would have liked to do more, perhaps lead a book group or contribute in some other way, that would reach a wider audience.

A few other random thoughts:

Virtual meetings as a format for faculty development

Having seen what happened once we went “virtual” I think we have a new tool we can potentially use in the Lucas Center, which is the zoom meeting/drop-in conversation format. That might make it easier for people to participate and open us to a wider audience. One of the obstacles that we have is that people’s days off are often spent away from campus. If they are on campus, they are busy, and when they are not so busy, and potentially available to come to events at the Lucas Center, they are not on campus. Even I have missed many events there because they occurred on days when I wasn’t planning to be on campus on a non-teaching day — avoiding that commute gives me almost two extra hours in my day.

Expanding our audience

We have a chronic problem reaching a wider audience among faculty. One way to address that might be to target talent that is not currently in the loop, but who could be invited to demonstrate some tool or technique that they have discovered. For example, my colleague Andy Owen (who is skeptical of faculty development as a category, having had one bad experience back in 2008) has developed

methods to teach printmaking online, and to that end has discovered a free app on the Internet that allows for images to be posted easily and discussed in a group, replicating the group critiques of face-to-face studio classes. This tool could have applications beyond art, but if Andy were talking about it that would surely draw in some of the art faculty who have not seen the Lucas Center as being applicable to their experience. If we identified a few people like him who would be willing to participate in a zoom demonstration-conversation about a specific tool or technique, we might be able to connect through those people to other networks around the campus.

The value of participation

You may have noticed that I am enthusiastically participating in as many things as I can fit in. The reason is that I am using these opportunities to study how you guys do things. Participating in the Course Design Academy was extremely valuable, not so much for the basics of how to design a course since I think I have those pretty well in hand, but because it gave me the opportunity, after years of teaching online, to be a *student* in an online course. What an eye-opener! I see that some other schools require faculty to take a course online if they are going to teach online, and that would be certainly a good thing here.

Among the useful things I picked up: how hard it is to figure out what to do in an online class, even a well-organized one, and how much time it takes. How you guys facilitate live conversations. How you deliver feedback. How participants in an online course sometimes disappear or just put a picture of themselves up, and what that does to the group dynamic. How hard it is, having to read and absorb content online. I was even a bit freaked out to discover how Canvas messes up formatting in the grading display. And I was also surprised to discover that my entire Syllabus did not display – I had submitted two different documents for my syllabus (the syllabus itself and the course schedule) but only one showed up when I went back to the gradebook. I'm not sure you could even see it.

Ideas for faculty support

Talking to colleagues, there are some needs that are rising to the top.

- How to facilitate a virtual meeting effectively
- How to use breakout groups and create group activities online
- How to use Canvas
- How to record a demonstration or lecture

The other thing I am hearing is that the Canvas trainings done by IT are not that helpful. I think the reason is that it is putting the cart before the horse, as it were. Faculty aren't ready to get much out of training until they know exactly what they are trying to do with their course. The big problem for them is reimagining their teaching for an online format. The mechanics are also needed, but the best way to learn those is when you need them, and you have someone who can walk you through how to do it.

Thank you again for everything you do for us! I have learned a lot and grown a lot from my interactions with the Lucas Center and I hope to continue my involvement in the future in some form.