History of Graphic Design Wiki

Report on Instructional Technology Grant
by Kerri Steinberg

My motivation for applying for an Instructional Technology Grant was simple: each spring semester I teach three sections of the History of Graphic Design, Illustration, and Advertising—three histories which must be woven together within the structure of a fifteen week course.

This is a tall order, to be sure. To attempt adding additional points of interest to the class, like guest speakers or videos, requires letting go of something else. For several years, I was intent upon finding a way to integrate some of the fascinating sources related to the history of graphic design, illustration, and advertising contained within the Otis Library Special Collection into my class, providing students an opportunity to see what the history we were reading and talking about looked like in actual sources, some of which date back to the Medieval period.

Establishing an Otis History of Graphic Design wiki was just the solution. During the spring semester of 2007, the Communication Arts sophomores, all of whom are required to take the History of Graphic Design, Illustration, and Advertising, initiated three Otis College History of Graphic Design wikis. In preparation for the wiki project, I surveyed the sources held within Otis Library Special Collections, and identified those which I believed would be most useful for the project. From there, the students within my three classes were divided into four groups for the purposes of specializing in a particular era of graphic design history.

These periods include: 1) the Pre-Industrial—Medieval and Renaissance graphic arts; 2) the Industrial—19th century Graphic Design; 3) Modern Graphic Design: 1900-1935; and 4) Modern Graphic Design: 1935-1970. The navigation page for each wiki provides links to a timeline, historical overview, discussion of technology, design issues, the special collection sources for each respective period, and a bibliography. Ideally, the timeline should serve as an index to meaningful historical, technological, and design issues, which are then evidenced in the analysis of the special collection sources.

The beauty of the wiki project, as I saw it, was to allow each group to acquire more familiarity and depth within their respective areas, offsetting the inevitable "survey" approach followed in a fifteen work course. Moreover, I wanted students to take a more active role in their learning, and to understand themselves not only as consumers of history and content, but also as producers of history and meaning. In fact, this outcome—to have students regard themselves as generators of meaning—coincides with various articles the students read over the semester relating to issues of authorship and responsibility. Essentially, students were asked to step into different shoes—more professional "kicks"—as they began constructing their own histories from the ground up.

Not being much of a technology maven, I awaited the results with bated breath. As the wikis started to blossom, I soon realized that I was in way over my head, for essentially, I had put myself in a position of needing to manage the contributions of 85 students. I quickly realized that I should have started small, and then grown the project. And, most significantly, developing three wikis according to the same goals now strikes me as superfluous; at the time, however, I couldn't imagine a way to involve all of my students. As for the quality of the wikis, I found the results to be quite uneven. This can be attributed to several factors: some groups simply weren't able to effectively manage the wiki software, resulting in insufficient citations, or poor grammar. Some groups followed all of the guidelines for developing a substantive discussion of the historical
context, technological and design issues, but then failed to pull all of this together in their consideration of the Otis Library Special Collections.

On the flip side, there were a couple of groups that took their charge quite seriously, and were motivated by the knowledge that their work could be accessed by the public. I now find myself in a place where I must help the students pair down the three wikis, and to consolidate the three extant wikis into one. Consequently, this academic year (2007-2008), my Communication Arts sophomores are, once again, returning to the wiki project, but this time, with the purpose of editing, revising, consolidating, and extending the current wiki. Each of my three classes will be assigned a discrete period (i.e. one of the four chronological periods mentioned above), and will be required to review the material currently posted under each of the wikis. Again, the class will be divided into four groups, this time corresponding with the different categories on the navigation page. Each group will be responsible for organizing the material under a particular category. They will retain the best information, insert citations where necessary, look for opportunities to create useful external links to helpful websites, online museums, dictionaries, etc., create internal links, and clean-up formatting inconsistencies.

The opportunities for this wiki are limitless. In the future, I can imagine asking students to feature biographies of important figures within the history of graphic design, illustration, and advertising, and also including a space where students will elaborate on contemporary issues affecting the art and design community. I am hopeful that by the end of this academic year, or by the beginning of the next academic year, we will have a single, fluid, Otis History of Graphic Design wiki, which will serve as an excellent reference not only for the Communication Arts students, but for the larger Otis student population.