

Experimental type: student group working in the natural environment

This paper explores the outputs from an experimental type project undertaken annually by a cohort of 1st Year BA (Hons) Graphic Design students from Northumbria University working in small groups on Tynemouth Beach, a scenic coastal area of south Northumberland in the UK. Students were supplied with a set experimental type brief and asked to utilise handcrafting tools plus a variety of practice-based techniques. A number of small student groups from a range of cohorts were tasked with creating experimental type images/formations across a large expanse of open coastal sand. The students initially sketched their groups' type ideas in sketchbooks and notebooks, further developing key stages on the computer, before all groups from each cohort visited the beach on given days to create their newly explored letterforms. This practice-led research investigates how different knowledge bases and skillsets were required to successfully produce experimental type outputs from the small groups of students working to a series of constraints across different scales/dimensions and environments (Stokes 2005; Nimkulrat 2012; Salman 2017). In particular, the study examines the working methods of these students when facing immovable physical constraints, such as the out-going and in-coming tide, different materials and varying qualities of sand from wet to relatively dry as well as coarse shell layers. This paper compares and contrasts the working methods of different cohorts, with data gathered and analysed from a variety of perspectives, including: case studies, observation, outputs from different cohorts, interviews, questionnaires and diaries, in order to establish how students working in small groups within the natural environment negotiate and shape their experimental type ideas in a challenging terrain, within a timescale of approximately two hours, against the incoming tide (Hammar Chiriac and Granström 2012). It also explores the working methods of 1st Year students, new to each other during their first week on the course, and explains how they design, prepare, organise, delegate, time manage and work effectively as small groups on such a physically challenging project (Hammar Chiriac 2010). Experimental type design is used as the foundation of this practice-led research while craft practices are examined in relation to student group working and creative constraints (Mose Biskjaer and Halskov 2014). This paper concentrates on the students' perspectives of why the creation of experimental type in the landscape can successfully intertwine tacit knowledge, craft knowledge, procedural knowledge and practical knowledge. A number of conclusions are drawn, such as comparing the approach instinctively taken by these students to that used by farmers in Ancient Egypt when re-defining land boundaries after the annual flooding of the Nile Delta, and also explaining the co-dependent relationship between large-scale handcrafting in the environment and the refining of type design on the computer for use as an efficient educational tool for undergraduate students working in small groups.

Key Words: Experimental Type; Group Working; Creative Constraints; Craft Practice; Education.

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