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Angela Norwood teaches Information Design courses in the Department of Design at York University in Toronto. A former professional graphic designer, she has over 15 years experience in practice. Her current research interests include examining the role of design in Ladakh, India through social, cultural and cognitive aspects of wayfinding and signage systems.

Building Visual Narrative Structures through Information Design Education

Abstract:

The program in which I teach embraces information design education as an integral part of a comprehensive graphic design curriculum. Effective information design education requires students to explore various methods of research. The abilities of gathering, filtering, organizing and interpreting large and complex bodies of information are essential skills for designers entering practice in today's media-saturated world in which information is a commodity and control of it carries status.

The premise that a design builds upon organizational structures developed according to the specificities of the project is central to our Information Design courses. Students explore organizational strategies and principles for managing bodies of information. They begin to understand that appropriate "internal" structures allow complexity to build upon itself, to increase in increments. The form of the composition is derived from the very data that comprises it. When they internalize that principle, students feel free to stretch the boundaries of their own design frameworks. They experiment with the visual instruments used to represent their data and recognize for themselves the subjectivity inherent in the presentation of information. In this way they achieve much higher design quality than when approaching the project as if "to make dry data look good."

This paper will feature selected projects from an introductory course in information design in which students engaged in research projects addressing the United Nations Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). Guided by the question, "What are the roles for graphic designers in addressing the MDGs?" each student identified a topic within the Goals and explored it through experimentation with explanatory/instructional diagrams, statistical charts and mapping. Their exploration culminated in the design of a poster presenting various facets of the research topic. Additionally, the students were awakened to expanded ideas about the potential of graphic communication as intermediary between data and understanding.