

Type Camp India: Pluralism in Design Education

Abstract

The world is shifting, and so is the world of typography and graphic design. Distressingly, the educational side of the design profession is following these changes, rather than leading them. Typographic design education must be reconsidered and reformatted to truly prepare students for their roles in tomorrow's designed world.

Designers must look at the global society with a multi-faceted perspective because the current fixed knowledge base of our profession is stifling their potential. They need to be both active and proactive while taking into consideration cultural, social, geographic, and technological contexts.

Type Camp was created as a new approach to the learning of design and typography. It is a fine-tuning, not a substitution, for a design education. We encourage designers to immerse themselves in a culture and philosophy outside of their own, thereby extending themselves as both human beings and as designers.

This paper focuses on the Type Camp India offering as a case study.

As global digital communication dramatically increases, graphic designers must improve their typographic knowledge. Multilingual issues, along with burgeoning technological changes, are on a rapid rise and awareness through experience is imperative. This begins with typographic education.

Although typography has long been relegated to a rationed portion of Graphic Design, it has recently enjoyed a boom in interest and publications. Typographers and type designers are reveling in a long-delayed respect and chuckling to themselves in smug tones, 'I told you so!'

However, the limited typographic offerings of design and trade schools continue to do a disservice to their students and, without significant changes to graphic

design education, the future looks disappointingly bleak. Design programs are limited in what they can provide for their learners. The result is that enormous amounts of information and experiences that typography students should become exposed to, as well as comprehend, remain untapped or simply too difficult to cover in the limited time available.

As a supplement to limited regional educational offerings, and more daringly, a radical replacement for those pervasive, boring, and often-outdated typography classes, Type Camp International was created.

At Type Camp, we believe that learning typography can be a freeing experience, rather than a limiting one, and is more about creative self-discovery and less about prescribed results. If deadlines and grades and clients are removed from the situation so that experimentation and exploration can be a priority, then the possibilities for innovative and unique solutions are unlimited. Since it is virtually impossible for a traditional academic program to free itself from its own traditional measurements of “success”, Type Camp now fills this gap in design education.

The instructors vary from camp to camp depending on the subject matter, location and theme. Each instructor brings a different approach to the topic. Although Type Camp locations vary, the sentiment is the same – it supports an environment of encouragement, examination, and analysis. We want instructors to have a range of viewpoints on any given topic, and even to disagree. It is imperative for all instructors, as well as their learners, to move beyond the ubiquitous “follow my lead” method of instruction and learning.

This new approach to typographic education is exactly what our intriguing, complex, and constantly changing design industry so desperately needs. Our aim is to shift perceptions of both typographic and design education, as well as the cultural context of design, through the often life-changing experience of Type Camp India.

The first Type Camp India took place in Chennai in December 2009 and another is planned for February 2014 (to coincide with TypoDay in Pune).

For our ten days together in 2009, we welcomed design professionals and students from various parts of the world, including Canada, USA, England, Australia. Campers lodged in a locally owned Indian hotel in the heart of the city. Every morning, the campers would walk the two kilometers through a central Chennai neighborhood to the studio, which took place in a nearby local residence. At the start of the camp, they began the journey as trepidatious tourists and, by the end, became laid-back locals.

Mornings were initially filled with learning to speak and write the local Tamil script, and then later were used to focus on their final poster project. Afternoons were dedicated to visiting a range of places and people in and around Chennai, all to help them experience as much of the city as possible. The locations were educational and included Asia's only handwritten newspaper, India's largest advertising agency, a successful independent publisher, ancient architectural sites, and modern buzzing temples. These excursions were also social and cultural, with a visit to a bustling evening market, a central shopping mall, a typical grocery store, and restaurants in different parts of the city, all of which were frequented by locals.

Our aim was not just to ask them to observe Tamil (and Indian) culture but for them to participate in it. Our invitation was not just for them to experience the Indian context but to truly live within it.

During Type Camp India, campers were given a project where they 'adopted' a Tamil character and researched it throughout the duration of the camp. The key was to spot the letter and to look for it in its various forms. They learned to write the alphabet, and later to form the alphabet spatially, just as the local Tamil lettering artists approach the alphabet. Since 11 of the attendees of the camp were extremely comfortable in the digital realm, it was the hand-generated image that was intriguing, not the ubiquitous technological one.

A core philosophy of Type Camp India is the philosophy that as designers and makers, we learn through doing and we think through making. One of the early projects given to campers was to create a type kolam in the local tradition. This meant familiarity with their adopted Tamil character, understanding of the

geometric traditions of the kolam, and some fluency with the method of ‘drawing’ with rice flour. Additionally, there was the challenge of doing this on the ground.

The final project was to design and produce a bilingual typographic message for the people in Chennai. There was immense pleasure at being able to create something from scratch but at the same time to give something back to the community around them.

As 2009 participant Todd MacFie stated in an article about his experience on the *I Love Typography* website:

I’m not a type designer so it may seem unusual that I would fly all the way to India to draw Tamil glyphs for eight hours a day. . . . I do lettering and illustration. . . . [so] drawing . . . Tamil glyphs allowed me to focus on the formal structure of the glyphs — the counters, the curves, how it was originally drawn (with a sharpened stick, with a brush, etc.), without the interference of the preconceived. . . .

The results were more than typographic. He now had the tools to see the culture for himself, a valuable skill indeed:

The streets, which, until now had been all random colours and cacophony, suddenly took on a little more order and interest. After practicing Tamil, the hand-painted signs on the street became a little more discrete, and more surprising in their evidence of good craft.

The thinking here will not be new to an Indian audience. In India, the basis of an independent nation was founded on the concept of ‘unity in diversity’. As Gandhi once noted, ‘Our ability to reach unity in diversity will be the beauty and the test of our civilization’.

Our concept of a pluralistic design education is within the same spirit. Design pluralism is when groups within the global design profession maintain their unique identities and approaches, and their values and practices are accepted, validated, and propagated by the wider design culture, industry, and education.

MacFie's experiences were profound. The hotel porter giving MacFie his young daughter's Tamil primer for extra practice. A passerby offering rice-flour-assistance for MacFie's kolam. He began to see India in the seemingly antithetical, yet all-encompassing, absolutes:

In India, all of time is happening at the same time. You turn down a street and it feels like 500 years ago. The next street over and it's the future. . . . As I heard many times, "It's this **and** that." India is . . . all at once.

Since his return to Canada, MacFie has broadened the thinking of his design practice. During his free time outside of his design studio work, he created a Tamil and English poster to welcome Tamil refugees from Sri Lanka. Despite Canada's reputation as a sanctuary, the Canadian news agencies reported on the refugees as a menace. MacFie and many others were outraged and MacFie's voice was one of the few that moved beyond tolerance and towards understanding and welcoming.¹

Through his Type Camp-based social analysis and creativity, MacFie now knows that an Indian tone isn't solely bright colors or kolam patterns or pictures of sarees or elephants.

Type Camp India is not a training camp, it is merely a tool to discover a new way of looking at typography and design, and, of course, our world. The success of the Type Camp India experience lies in the three themes used to organize the weeklong camp: culture, context and community. It is these three themes that aid a pluralist approach to design education.

While our primary theme of Culture is often mentioned in social and academic constructs, it is as equally overlooked or misrepresented. Our goal is to acknowledge all aspects of a culture, not just the comfortable, stylish, or even marketable ones, but the culture of the act of living. At a recent design conference in India, Hanif Kureshi – a young designer – introduced a documentation project he was undertaking on the disappearing tradition of sign painting in India. A well-known designer arose from the audience and remarked, 'Why are we looking over

¹ MacFie states: 'I didn't want to come right out and say, "Have some compassion, people!'. It was more like I wanted to design a moment of time in which the audience could contemplate their outrageous collective xenophobia. The poster reads: "Only if you stretch out your hand, others can stretch out their arm." Which perhaps can read as "One never loses by doing a good turn". For a personal project, with a \$50 dollar budget, it was worthwhile.'

our shoulders? The future is digital'. As designers, we must acknowledge that by disregarding the complex threads of our existence, both in India and elsewhere, we are only ensuring a future for which we cannot design – unless we apply the principles mentioned herein.

The second theme of Type Camp India is the significance of Context. In a new context, in order to do a good job, we have to assume we know nothing and that we have a lot to learn. During discussions with campers, it was imperative to stress the value of releasing one's own preconceptions and assumptions.

The students soon understood that as an Indian problem was caused, so could an Indian solution be found. While new frames of reference are welcome, sometimes one must work within a cultural context in order to find a designed solution. The most amusing example was when we heard of a local resident becoming frustrated that neighborhood men were urinating on her wall. It ceased abruptly once she painted the likenesses of an assortment of Indian Gods.

Community is the third crucial theme of Type Camp India, for a designer is first a citizen. In India, we believe that the concept of the individual is secondary to the concept of the community. Together, we visited *The Musalman*, a community Urdu newspaper, daily transcribed in calligraphy by volunteers. From our current digital interactive age point of view, to produce a daily handwritten paper could seem to be a Sisyphean task. However, if one considers it from a community perspective, and also with the goal of these individuals keeping the tradition of calligraphy alive, their labour is both admirable and imperative.

While travelling to India for Type Camp in order to learn more about Indian design was a luxury for MacFie and most designers in the world, it is not the only solution. Designers must understand how to bypass cultural stereotypes and their ubiquitous hyperbole so as to truly create for the authentic multi-cultural multi-lingual audience, not for the perceived one. The single most important aim for design education must be to grow an idea of 'independent and peer learning'. We all learn better together as a community, sharing information with each other, concerned with context and collaboration.

Biography

Dr Shelley Gruendler is a typographer, designer, and educator who teaches, lectures, and publishes internationally on typography and design. She holds a PhD and an MA in The History and Theory of Typography and Graphic Communication from the University of Reading, England and a Bachelor of Environmental Design in Graphic Design from North Carolina State University, United States. Shelley has presented at TypoBerlin, ATypI, TypeCon, and How; has published articles in *How*, *Communication Arts*, *Slanted*, the *EYE* blog, and *Step*; and has judged international typography for *Communication Arts* and Canadian book design for the Alcuin Society. This September, she will speak at TEDX SFU in Vancouver. When she is not traveling the world as the Founding Director of Type Camp International, she is proud to live in the Canadian Typographic Archipelago.