CELEBRATING
FAILURE SHARON POGGENPOHL
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ABSTRACT

This introduction to the special issue Communication Design Failures questions why failure is so hidden in design. It suggests that much can be learned from reflection on failure in its many guises and that failure points to gaps in knowledge and process. Failures want remedies, whether through empirical research, trial and error or pragmatic adjustment of process. The articles within this issue point out functional pitfalls in communication and process strategies—all the articles are pragmatic.

You may well wonder why *Visible Language* is doing a special issue on Communication Design Failure—a special issue that will encompass not one but three issues. The call for papers must have struck a chord in the respondents as many fine papers were submitted. Communication design failure is often ignored or glossed over because it is entwined with many hard to disentangle variables. It is avoided or hidden as a face-saving strategy, or because it lacks definition and reflection on its causes. There is a saying that "you are only as good as your last project"—so designers just keep moving on. Failures are, of course, relative to the perspective one brings to the situation; they are not often total failures, but can be examined as symptomatic of design problems, oversights or change in the context of expectation and performance.

Long ago in graduate school, I (Sharon) took a course in perceptual psychology. The professor wryly observed that there was no journal of negative results, so experimental psychologists went down blind alleys that others had explored but been unable to share and communicate. Our tendency is to celebrate success and build upon it. But failure is a powerful learning opportunity—if we have courage, a reflective turn of mind and the time to explore what went wrong. It is in this spirit that we offer these issues of the journal.

"PROFESSIONAL" PERFORMANCE

Design typically engages in "professional" performance for three reasons: performance patterns are taught in school, clients often have no time or money for research or experimentation within a design genre and professional societies award incremental advancement in their competitions. These deserve a closer look. Success in design school is framed in terms of aesthetics, technique and project models from popular trade magazines. There is little adventure in education. Clients, who do not support research or deeper investigation, do not have time for failure; designers perform within the conventional framework of their situation. The professional performance that results is safe and pre-conceived—in this context innovation would be astounding; yet, innovation is increasingly desired by business and a population tired of unsolved, intractable problems. Competitions and awards mark success in a conservative way and they feed the trade magazines with performance patterns for school, practice and industry. The cycle from school to professional performance and award is closed to any serious exploration of failure.

In contrast to these factors, glorious failures are rare. In such a case, it is designers who take the risk and spend the time to connect with true learning that requires incubation, exploration and reflection on project development.

Predictable failure can be prevented, but the context in which design is performed is changing. Large and complex projects use a multi-disciplinary approach that engages a team of people with various perspectives. Stakeholders are now more commonly considered and they too have needs and expectations as a diverse group. User studies bring practical information about context and habits of use that may contradict perceived wisdom. Cross-cultural applications open unusual communication needs. Projects can metamorphose in mid-stream due to technological change, the emergence of a new competitor, an economic downturn or other unforeseen event.

FAILURE FUNCTIONS

Failure points to a gap in our understanding. The gap, if recognized, supports change and investigation with the expectation that the failure (whatever it may be) can be circumvented or overcome with new thinking. Another gap exists between research results and their application in design performance. This also requires reflection and sometimes trial and error, as design is a situated practice and research results can be overly general or specific and difficult to understand in a new or specific other context.

Design cannot rely on critics to point out failure as design is not much subject to such a perspective. Critics are usually outsiders with a passion for their subject, but they seldom have deep process knowledge or an ability to remedy the failure. Designers, as insiders, are better positioned to understand the variables that contribute to failure and they can imagine and even produce the remedy. We shortchange ourselves as a practicing community by ignoring failure.

PARADOXICAL SUCCESS

Success breeds failure. The previously mentioned professional recognition from awards that contribute to the conventions others follow (incremental small steps) support group think in a comfort zone. Success becomes bound by social conventions with the repetition of "success" in communication patterns becoming too expected, lacking the surprise that becomes attention getting and memorable. Artists and designers are subject to becoming trapped by their success; they are unable to move on as clients hire their successful style—their look or reputation. They are locked into a mental model with celebrity as a creative and intellectual dead-end.

Success is about the mainstream, but we are suggesting that it is peripheral ideas that might open new territory. Arthur Koestler's theory of bisociation (1964) comes to mind. In it he discusses the edge where two seemingly incompatible ideas rub together, creating a friction that supports a new insight. It can be interdisciplinary or very different perspectives on something. It is more risky than staying neatly in a special context, respecting the norm. The stages of success and failure are cyclic and not conclusive—they are risky. Failure or success can be in the eye of the beholder, particularly when various stakeholders enter the situation.

CONTEXT CHANGE

In education, an extremely reverent system insisting on nearly blind respect for the encrypted information held in libraries, culled and protected by gatekeepers, is being challenged as too slow. Until now, information was precious, valuable and not abundant. Digital technology has opened a floodgate of information. What is now scarce is attention. Pressured by time and the compression of space (see Harvey, 1990, for a cogent discussion of compression; see Appadurai, 1996, for a discussion of the complexities of globalization) access to information can become a burden because it is excessive. Now it is easier than ever to ignore failures and move on, avoiding recognition of mistake or miscalculation. But with this disappears opportunities for learning and developing new approaches or knowledge.

The communication design field has been rehearsed to function primarily within the traditional framework of advertising or institutional and corporate communication. Meanwhile, we increasingly recognize that there is not one disciplinary field without great need to solve specific communication problems; this opens multi-disciplinary collaboration (Poggenpohl and Sato, 2009). Design has an open invitation to participate on a much larger scale and within much broader categories. Designers should not be surprised that in entering the unknown they will also encounter failure, but that is not reason enough to avoid beginning the adventure.

Observations on failure or success are always tentative. The following articles share knowledge that is missing within the community of design practice. We seek to learn from each other, to support an investigation of failure and to develop an intellectual standing in design in relation to other disciplines. We are not speaking of design snobbery, but a legitimate standing based on understanding where we go wrong and where we are right. One thinks of the Eames (1982) *Powers of Ten* as an innovative successful outcome, based on integrated science and visual understanding that provided surprise; an aha moment. Or one thinks of *Visionary Architecture* (1999) as a celebration of idea.

Like other disciplines, design needs to share research, reflect on process and projects; codify its knowledge resources to become a resource for other designers and those in other fields. Recognition of failure breeds opportunities for future success.

The articles in this special issue can be examined through their character in portraying semantic, syntactic or pragmatic issues in design performance. None of the following articles stress syntax, but all examine the pragmatics of design process and a couple of them add semantic aspects from a user perspective. The pragmatic turn of attention in these articles may signal an understanding that doing design and expectations for design performance are changing.

In Michael Doherty's article, 'Realist' stakeholder analysis in design, he argues for the fundamental importance of identifying all stakeholders and their different perspectives, needs and expectations; such identification and analysis effects process and outcome of design. A generalized population of user or audience is no longer sufficient as design takes into consideration cultural difference and the extended network of association in which design takes place; from client to shareholder, to marketer, to distributor, to multi-disciplinary team member, to technical facilitator and so on. Design is the meeting ground for many participants; design itself is only one perspective among many.

Len Singer's article, Product communication form, failure and safety, underpins its discussion of failure with Edward T. Hall's anthropological theory and a sensitivity to user expectations in the examples that translate theory into specific and concrete situations.

In these examples form speaks, providing expectation that is not realized and its resulting confusion. While there has been some discussion of product semantics, its use generatively has often been unsatisfactory. Here, using the semantic perspective analytically, we see clearly the safety issues that slipped by the designers.

The trio of Carolyn Barnes, Simone Taffe and Lucy Miceli in their article, Multiple information failure: A case of different investments in form and content in graphic design, develop the need for clear and agreed to design process by all stakeholders with a particular emphasis on decision-making. The case is about changing to a 'green' implementation for cleaning procedures in childcare situations in Australia; it is about behavior change on the part of the childcare workers, and ultimately on the dismissal of what was learned from those whose behavior needed to change. Support for 'green' change, as pragmatically understood by the childcare workers, was ignored by hierarchical decision-makers, causing a lack of implementation. The article focuses on user study and its translation into design action that is thwarted by non-consultative decision-making.

Alex Roesler examines a critical and historic communication failure, that of Three Mile Island. While well documented and analyzed, the article looks at the dynamic nature of the system and the problem of operator understanding and intervention. He develops a time-line that shows how quickly the accident developed and the confusion and stress the operators had to deal with. In retrospect, the various signals lacked systematic coordination and hierarchy causing difficulty in decoding the event. An underlying problem was that possible causes of system failure were not thoroughly developed. Such a high-risk technical communication requires multiple perspectives to ensure problem recognition and remedial action to provide maximum safety for all.

Another trio, Joyce Yee, Matthew Lievesley and Louise Taylor discuss in their article, Recognizing risk-of-failure in communication design projects, an analytical process in which failure is anticipated and managed, then subject to a reflective post mortem. Because design is accomplished in a dynamic context in which understandings change and contingencies arise, anticipation and reflection on the changing situation is necessary. This pragmatic approach to risk management is reviewed in three case studies that demonstrate the variability of failure.

Stephen Brown's article, Paper prototypes and beyond, explores the tension between early, simple handmade prototypes and later digital ones. He identifies a gap in design development between these two that can cause problems. The case in which he explores this problem is development of a search strategy for an extensive, historical photographic database. He follows the project development and user experience with various prototypes identifying the gap that can cause false assumptions to be made in the early stages, derailing later decisions and driving up project costs. He concludes by suggesting a new tool.

Dietmar Winkler's article, Failure? Isn't it time to slay the Design-Dragon? expands on the pragmatics of design education traditions that are holding design development into more intellectual regions back. He identifies some of the fundamental presumptions and habits that impede an evolutionary future. Seminal historical events in design are noted, and other disciplines are consulted for their view of disciplinary evolution. An outspoken article, the author challenges design education to move past its conventional comfort zone, to step-up to the changing design performance context and to take a leadership role in design's future.

All these articles are pragmatic—like design itself. They emphasize that design is more than just aesthetics or technique—that the product of design is intellectual.

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AUTHOR NOTES

Sharon Poggenpohl is editor and publisher of this journal. With over twenty years experience in graduate design education at notable schools and universities, she now is focusing on writing. With a colleague, she has recently published a collection of international papers on design's present and future initiatives, *Design Integrations: Research and Collaboration* (Intellect Books, 2009).

Dietmar Winkler has decades of experience as a notable communication designer and design educator in the roles of professor, director and dean. His interdisciplinary interests have been to expand narrow traditional visual and form/function literacies to include user-based design in behavioral, social and cultural contexts.