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FACING THE FUTURE: POSTGRADUATE RESEARCH IN COMMUNICATION DESIGN

Reframing the Conversation about Doctoral Education: Professionalization and the Critical Role of Abstract Knowledge

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Abstract

Within the community of visual communication design, there is debate concerning the utility of doctoral education to the profession. The outcomes of doctoral education as well as the academics themselves are frequently measured by their ability to directly affect practice. This theoretical paper reframes the conversation through the application of sociologist Andrew Abbott's (1988) model of the system of professions. Abbott's model of professionalization is explored and applied to the current state of visual communication design practice and education. In particular, the functions Abbott describes as abstract knowledge—contrary to practical professional knowledge—are used to explain the need for a tandem development of the professional doctorate (Doctorate of Design, D.Des.) and doctorate of philosophy in design (Ph.D. in design) degrees. Abstract knowledge and its counterparts—the academics—help contribute to the profession's power and prestige, which in turn support practice and thus allow the profession to maintain professional jurisdiction and control over its work. Using this theoretical framework, the nature, structure, and roles of professional and philosophical doctorates are described within the context of visual communication design, using examples of published research to illustrate the differences between knowledge created through practice (D.Des. study) and abstract knowledge created through philosophical enquiry (Ph.D. study). In applying Abbott's theory, it is evident that without the continued development of both types of doctoral degrees, especially increased support for the Ph.D. in design, visual communication design's abstract knowledge will suffer, putting the profession's status and control over its work in jeopardy.

Introduction

In the 'art and design' design fields such as visual communication design, the brief history of graduate study that began with the Master of Arts, followed by the Master of Fine Arts, and most recently the Doctorate of Philosophy or Doctorate of Design, has led many to question the nature, purpose, and use of doctoral study (c.f. Biggs, 2000; Margolin, 2010; Friedman, 2011; Parker, 2011; Popov, 2011; Sless,

2011). Across doctoral programs in visual communication design there are a variety of approaches to plans of study and coursework. Within the international community, the use and application of doctoral research and study is frequently questioned [1]. The conversations about doctoral visual communication design education tend to pit one approach against another. Frequently the outcomes of doctoral study (e.g. knowledge generated and presented in dissertations, papers, books, etc.) are measured in terms of their direct utility to the profession. In other words, practitioners and researchers wonder how well study and research help visual communication designers better perform their jobs, work with clients, and solve design problems. As a result, within the visual communication design community debates about doctoral education generally fail to consider how different approaches to doctoral study—research through practice, traditional models of doctoral study, and any hybrid in between—produce distinctive types of knowledge about, and for, visual communication design. Further, the roles of these different types of knowledge are seldom mentioned, perhaps because they are not well understood and have not been explored within the context of visual communication design.

In this theoretical paper, sociologist Andrew Abbott's model of the system of professions (1988) is used as a framework for understanding the various types of doctoral study possible within visual communication design. Other design researchers have demonstrated the utility of Abbott's theory in understanding the interior design profession, defining its body of knowledge, and identifying different types of knowledge at play within interior design (Guerin & Martin, 2010; Guerin & Martin, 2004; Martin & Guerin, 2005). Building upon this precedent, Abbott's definition of different types of knowledge, how these types of knowledge operate and function within a profession, and each knowledge types' importance and roles in professionalization—or, the system of professions—is applied to visual communication design. While focused on the context of visual communication design doctoral study in the United States, this paper draws upon international examples of research to illustrate various types of knowledge in action within the profession. Abbott's (1988) theory provides a new means for understanding how visual communication design knowledge created through methods other than practice—and which may not be directly applicable to practice—not only supports and contributes meaningfully to the profession but also is critical to its growth and survival. This paper shifts the discussion about doctoral education toward a theory-based approach that supports plurality in methods for doctoral study in visual communication design.

Abbott's System of Professions and Abstract Knowledge

Abbott's theory of professions (1988), unlike other theories on professionalization (16–17), identifies a messy, complex, expansive system, depicting professions and work as a constantly changing landscape, rather than a set of discrete steps necessary to achieve the goal of professionalization. According to Abbott, professions exist in a system, wherein jurisdiction, or control over work, defines if, when, and how occupations become professions (2–9). Within the system professions are constantly in flux, wherein the boundaries between occupations are continually negotiated and contested. Jurisdiction—control over work—is a delicate balance amongst interconnected parts (2–9), and determines if, when, and for how long an occupation becomes a profession. The type of work performed, claims to jurisdiction, the effectiveness of a discipline's work addressing the problems over which it claims control, and a discipline's abstract knowledge affect jurisdiction (9). To use a phrase familiar in the design disciplines, Abbott's approach elucidates the wicked complexity of professions, identifying the myriad settings in which professionalization is negotiated (in the public's eyes, amongst other professions, in the law, etc.), the seemingly contradictory roles of different types of profession-based knowledge, and the constant battles that shift professional boundaries. While each part of this system must function properly to achieve professionalization, it is the definition and roles Abbott ascribes to abstract knowledge that are relevant to visual communication design doctoral education.

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1 See the online discussion thread titled "Are PhDs a Threat to Design Education?" on the PhD-Design listserv found archived through the JISCMAIL service at http://tinyurl.com/8cxata4.

In the simplest terms, abstract knowledge is the formal academic ordering of knowledge needed to do the work of a profession (Abbott, 1988:54–57). Abbott defines abstract knowledge as hyper-rationalized, disassembled practical professional knowledge that is reorganized in a fashion that belies the complexity of actual work (54–57). Abstract knowledge is contrasted against practical professional knowledge; where abstract knowledge is organized, structured, and rationalized in the academy, practical professional knowledge is messy, resides in the workplace(s), and is tied to the tangible demands of clients and tasks. Almost as if in another world, abstract knowledge generally resides in the academy where it is developed and advanced by faculty, researchers, and the like. It is used to prepare aspiring professionals, and as such has been divided into teachable components that attempt to replicate the complexities of practice but do not. Academics dissect, scrutinize, hypothesize, and theorize about practice, creating abstract knowledge that is oftentimes converted into a form that is unrecognizable as knowledge applicable to the practical demands of work. In this process, the craft—skills, techniques, and processes—of practice is transformed into abstract knowledge. Practical professional knowledge is tied to particular objects, clients, or tasks, while abstract knowledge simplifies the contexts and issues of practice and can be disassociated from the realities of practice. Both practical professional and abstract knowledge are tied to their discipline and its work, but are separate and differ in their nature, structure, function, and role.

Abstract knowledge organizes the messy work of professional practice, making the work appear both more complex and at the same time more rational than it is in practice. Only in the academy do students and instructors work in the arbitrarily complete system of abstract knowledge that exists in textbooks, lectures, and projects (Abbott, 1988:56). For example, visual communication design students and instructors regularly remark on the dissimilarity between course projects and "real world" client work. In the classroom, design projects occur on a different type and length of schedule, oftentimes without a client, and lack the ramifications of professional work (e.g. having work declined by a client, projects that escalate beyond original parameters, receiving compensation for work, etc.). In the classroom the oftentimes messy, quick, and erratic nature of professional visual communication design work has been deconstructed to its most basic components and transformed to meet the demands of higher education teaching and learning (course schedules, the length of terms, the demands of outside commitments on students and faculty). The oftentimes highly rational schedule of class projects, the clarity of a design brief provided by an instructor, and cycles of critique and feedback belie the complexities of professional work while at the same time mobilizing abstract knowledge in visual communication design teaching and learning. Due to the fact that abstract knowledge dwells primarily in the academy, its most apparent role is preparing future professionals. However, abstract knowledge and its counterpart—academics—play other important roles within the system of professions.

Beyond its use in educating aspiring professionals, abstract knowledge legitimizes a profession by tracing its foundations to cultural values (e.g. rationality, logic, science) and through research it develops new ways of treating and diagnosing the problems/clients of professional practice (Abbott, 1988:56–57). Because of its distance from the contexts of practice, abstract knowledge provides opportunities for innovation. It allows comparisons or connections that seems illogical in professional practice and is unencumbered by the constraints of clients and the day-to-day demands of practice (55). Further, effective abstract knowledge creates a full and fully-rational system, leads to similar conclusions for the practical application of knowledge, is complete in its classification of the problems of practice, and defines the borders of professional jurisdiction with clarity (56–57). While separate and different from professional knowledge, abstract academic knowledge nonetheless augments, grows, complements, and defines the limits of professional knowledge and practice.

Importantly, a profession's ability to retain jurisdiction, and therefore remain a profession, lies partly in the power and prestige of its academic knowledge. Abbott (1988:102) states that professional work without formalization—abstract knowledge—is perceived as craft. Clients—the public—will not treat skills that seem obvious as professional skill. As a result, abstract knowledge is more symbolic than practical (54). Abstract knowledge symbolizes professional work by formally organizing it, but by existing and thriving within the academy abstract knowledge becomes something different than—but still connected to— professional work. The public mistakenly believes that abstract knowledge is the same as practical professional knowledge (54). For the public, prestigious abstract knowledge implies effective professional

work, even if this is not the reality. Abstract knowledge, as visible in the academy, establishes and maintains the profession's prestige. Academics, those who primarily develop and advance abstract knowledge, play a critical role for professions. To quote Abbott, "Academic professionals demonstrate the rigor, the clarity, and the scientifically logical character of professional work, thereby legitimating that work in the context of larger values (1988:54)." The public views academics as the exemplars of professional knowledge. Academics that create, organize, and grow abstract knowledge contribute to the perceived level of professionalization, even though they might not actually do the practical work of the profession. The public's perception of a discipline is one arena in which a profession can make claims to its work and thus retain, gain, or lose jurisdiction (60–62). Therefore the prestige of a profession's academics as the public models of professional work, as well as the profession's standing within the academy, contribute to the maintenance of a profession's status.

Most importantly, "Knowledge is the currency of competition (Abbott, 1988:102)". In the system of professions there is constant competition from related, supporting, and adjacent occupations and professions. Too little abstraction—work perceived as craft—can make a jurisdiction weak. As interior design researchers Martin and Guerin (2010) state, "Abstract knowledge is the specialized knowledge that is required to practice and defines the interior design profession's jurisdictional boundaries through the development and maintenance of knowledge (2010:E2–E3)." Within visual communication design, maintenance of abstract knowledge is equally important to the protection of work. Competition from fields such as interaction (or interactive) design, service design, and others is apparent. Illustrating the design fields' situations, Margolin (2010:74) pointed out that the work of design research is often done by those trained in other disciplines such as anthropology, computer science, and psychology. Visual communication design is in a position to either develop its abstract knowledge and retain jurisdiction, or risk losing control to another profession.

Abstract knowledge is one of many facets that affect a profession's jurisdiction. This type of knowledge is based upon practical professional knowledge and work, but is different in its nature, structure, and function. Dwelling primarily in the academy, abstract knowledge is used to prepare future professionals, trace the profession to cultural values (rationality, science), and provide opportunities for innovation. Abstract knowledge is essential to professions because it demonstrates to the public (and other professions) that the profession's work is expert rather than craft, in other words—professional. This occurs because the knowledge of practice has been transformed, systematized, flattened, and hyper-rationalized in the academy. Knowledge that might initially seem simple is made to appear complex through abstraction. Academics play an important role, as the visible exemplars of their profession. The power and prestige of abstract knowledge and the profession's academics affect how and if the public perceives an occupation as a profession. Thus, the development of abstract knowledge is essential to the growth of a profession and the control of its jurisdiction, as it ultimately affects if, when, and how an occupation becomes a profession. The role of abstract knowledge and academics defined by Abbott (1988) provides a new lens for evaluating the role and significance of doctoral education in visual communication design.

Abstract Knowledge and Higher Education in Visual Communication Design

For young professions in the field of visual communication design, Abbott's (1988) definition of abstract knowledge is particularly significant and useful in understanding the roles and functions of doctoral visual communication design education. In the modern history of work and professions, the design disciplines are young. Despite the fact that the act of designing references humankind's earliest construction of tools, and design work is rooted in the long history of the apprentice, master, and atelier traditions, *professional* design work only dates to the early twentieth century (Friedman, 1997:54–55; Margolin, 2010:73–74). With such brief professional roots, visual communication design might be the youngest of the design professions. Not surprisingly, the development of visual communication design programs in higher education, particularly at the graduate level, is ongoing. In the United States, where doctoral study is nascent and has yet to gain momentum, the studio-based Master of Fine Arts (or Master of Graphic Design) is still the degree of choice for those pursuing graduate education. Few are aware of the

possibility of doctoral study, much less the differences between masters and doctoral study, and even fewer the differences between various types of doctoral studies and programs (Davis, 2008a).

As visual communication design—and other design disciplines—develops, conversations about higher education for design are ongoing, with voices from all sides expressing their positions. Debates about design higher education on the PhD-Design listserv sparked by an online essay about undergraduate design education (Norman, 2011) illustrate both an interest in departing from the craft-based or art school-based roots of design education, as well as the many concerns with doing so. Within visual communication design the issue of naming the discipline (graphic design versus visual communication design) demonstrates ongoing interest in the evolving nature of the profession (c.f. ICOGRADA, 2007; Poynor, 2011). Further, AIGA's Designer of 2015 project (AIGA, n.d.) and the related work of noted visual communication design educator Meredith Davis (2008a; 2008b) show the impulse to examine and reconsider design higher education in the United States. In spite of the desire to more closely examine visual communication education, especially graduate education, current discussions tend to be superficial, contrasting one approach against another.

As these conversations continue, it is critical that dialogues are grounded in relevant theory, rather than in opinion, anecdote, or experience. By applying Abbott's theory of professions (1988) to visual communication design, we can begin to see how graduate education functions within the complex system of professions. This permits a better appreciation of the contributions graduate education, the academy, and academics make to the profession beyond educating the next generation of designers. In visual communication design, however, there is confusion about the types of doctoral education possible and few understand the important differences between professional and philosophical doctoral degrees (c.f. Biggs, 2000; Davis, 2008a). It is critical to understand these two dominant traditions of doctoral education, applying Abbott's theory to understanding the roles and functions of different approaches to doctoral study.

For a variety of professions there are two types of doctoral education leading to terminal degrees. In education and psychology, for example, there are the doctorate of education (Ed.D.) and the doctorate of philosophy in education (Ph.D. in education), and the doctorate of psychology (Psy.D.) and the doctorate of philosophy in psychology (Ph.D. in psychology). The doctorates in education, psychology, or even design, are focused on the problems and situations of practice. Historically, these types of degrees, called professional doctorates, include more professional training with less emphasis on research (Biggs, 2000). In comparison, doctorates of philosophy degrees (Ph.D. in psychology, education, or design) focus on building a profession's body of knowledge. This occurs through the study of the discipline's philosophy, considering issues such as knowledge creation and production, among others. The doctorate of philosophy is generally removed from the everyday contexts, clients, and issues of practice, which allows this type of research and study to focus on building abstract knowledge.

Within visual communication design there are a variety of approaches to doctoral study, however there is little clarity regarding the differences amongst them. Distinctions between the Ed.D. and Ph.D. in Education, or the Psy.D. and Ph.D. in psychology, are clear when compared to visual communication design's messy landscape of Master's of Fine Arts (MFA), Master's of Graphic Design (MGD), Ph.D. in Design, and Doctorate of Design (D.Des.) degrees. Using existing academic tradition and Abbott's theory as guides, the roles and functions of professional and philosophical doctorates in visual communication design can become well defined. Professional doctoral degrees, such the Doctorate in Design—as the name suggests—should focus on research through practice. This type of degree allows those interested in the advanced study of the problems, contexts, and issues of visual communication design practice to interrogate, study, and build professional knowledge. This knowledge production is key to retaining visual communication design's ties to the problems and contexts of its work. An example of this is the research of Neal Haslem (2011). In a recent publication, Haslem articulately described his practice-led research, using Schön's (1983) theory of reflective practice as a framework for understanding designing a business system (2011:1–2). This scholarly research, complete with a theoretical framework and engaging visual explanation of the design process, focuses on a specific problem related to a client and design practice. Halsem's scholarship is representative of a corpus of research through practice that can be found

sprinkled throughout peer-reviewed design journals (e.g. *Iridescent, Visible Language, Design Issues, Visual Communication, International Journal of Design*).

To complement intense study of professional work, the Ph.D. focuses on the philosophical underpinnings of the discipline and the development of abstract knowledge. While professions across the academy approach Ph.D. training and study differently, an emphasis on investigating philosophical underpinnings binds them together. It is in this common act that each discipline traces its roots to core cultural values, thus supporting the profession. This type of doctoral study and research can involve engaging theory and methods from other disciplines as well as exploring issues of philosophy—ontology and epistemology—of visual communication design. Research of this nature can also involve meta-analysis of the nature of the discipline that asks broad questions about visual communication design practice and knowledge. An example of this is the work of Teena Clerke. She explored the application of phenomenological theory to understanding women visual communication designers' lived experiences (2009:32–33) as design professionals. While focused on the practice of visual communication design, Clerke's research considers larger questions about what it means to be a woman practicing design. Through the application of theory from outside visual communication design, Clerke helps trace the discipline to established paradigms of scientific enquiry, even if her research method interrogates the conventions of research and academic knowledge production (2009:37). As Clerke points out, this work concentrates on underlying epistemological suppositions in the field of visual communication design. As such, Clerke's research is an example of the development of abstract knowledge.

The coexistence—and growth of—professional and philosophical doctorates for visual communication design can, as considered through the lens of Abbott's theory, contribute meaningfully to the profession. Both types of doctoral study support the profession by increasing its power and prestige. The professional Doctorate of Design could continue the practice-based research commonly undertaken with the MFA or MGD so common in the United States. Scholarly enquiry focused on the contexts, issues, and tasks of practice is critical—as Abbott points out—to innovation within the profession as well as developing new diagnoses (solutions, resolutions) for the specific and complex issues of clients (design problems, issues, domains). As such, the professional doctorate clearly contributes to professional practice. However, the philosophical doctorate must be advanced alongside the professional doctorate precisely because it contributes in different ways to the profession—and may not directly feed advancements in professional practice.

The Ph.D. in design should trace the foundations of visual communication design to the core cultural vales of rationality and scientific enquiry. The Ph.D. permits visual communication design researchers to step away from the contexts of practice, question assumptions, ask how and why particularly phenomena occur, and interrogate the nature of the profession on a philosophical level. As with the professional doctoral, the Ph.D. has the potential to develop new innovations related to practice. However, the Ph.D.—due to its nature and structure—has the unique ability to build and advance abstract knowledge. And, without the continued growth and development of abstract knowledge, visual communication design risks losing its status as a profession. Lack of abstract knowledge will lead the public to mistakenly believe that visual communication design work is craft-based, rather than expert. Further, without abstract knowledge and visual communication design's continued growth within the academy, the profession risks weakening its status in the eyes of the public—and within the academy itself. To continue as a profession, visual communication design must retain its jurisdiction, fending off competition from related disciplines.

It is essential that both pathways for doctoral education in visual communication design be advanced. As Margolin (2010) has noted, the work of design research (in general) is already being poached by other disciplines. Visual communication design must resist this occupation by building its abstract knowledge. While reflective conversations about graduate education in visual communication will inevitably continue, if opinion-based debates prevent action and forward movement the risks to the profession are real. Abstract knowledge production will fail to advance, visual communication design research will be done by academics in other professions, and visual communication design work will be perceived solely as craft-based rather than expert work. The status of the profession will diminish because graduate education, as well as the state of visual communication design researchers and educators, will not keep up with the rest

of the academy. Without continued growth, visual communication design academics will lose any prestige and power they have attained in the eyes of the public. Therefore, critiques of the philosophical doctorate must be reframed and rooted in theory. By applying Abbott's system of professions to visual communication design graduate education, we can understand the important role of abstract knowledge, visual communication design within the academy, and visual communication design educators and researchers. While supporting the profession directly by preparing future professions, these facets of the profession support visual communication design by contributing to it status and prestige, which in turn helps the profession retain its jurisdiction.

Moving Forward

To advance, visual communication design must be vigilant. Meta research about the design professions that moves beyond the acts and artifacts of design practice is essential to controlling and building an abstract body of knowledge. When this type of research is criticized because it may not directly feed back into practice, it must be remembered—and vocally declared—that this is not the role of the doctorate of philosophy, nor the sole role of academic researchers or abstract knowledge. Together, visual communication design's abstract knowledge, its academics, and its presence within the academy, help secure its status as a profession. By increasing the visibility of visual communication design within the academy, the profession's power and prestige are supported, which directly supports every designer within the profession. For, if the public does not view the work of visual communication designers as expert, practitioners will face increasing challenges in the workplace. They risk being perceived as the purveyors of an easily understood craft, and might ultimately lose control over their work.

The path forward is through the dual growth of the Doctorate of Design and the Doctorate of Philosophy in design. In particular, visual communication design must focus on building its body of knowledge, especially its abstract knowledge. In visual communication design, academic writing largely takes the form of professional commentary, essays, and reflection. Abbott's theory can be seen as a call to develop a better system of disseminating abstract academic knowledge. A panel of design researchers at the 2010 New Contexts/New Practices AIGA Design Educators' Conference (Raleigh, North Carolina, US) discussed this very issue and highlighted the need to develop more peer-reviewed venues for visual communication design research (Lasky, 2010). This is important because the public will not perceive academic work that is published in the trade press as abstract knowledge. Moreover, as emphasized throughout this paper, it will take a system of doctoral study, peer review, publishing, and research dissemination focused on building abstract knowledge to strengthen visual communication design's jurisdiction.

While there is a small cadre of design philosophers and theorists, visual communication design needs more Ph.D. study focused on building abstract knowledge. Without the development of a body of abstract knowledge, design work runs the risk of being easily grasped by clients and the public, viewed as mechanical, and thus perceived as craft rather than professional work (Abbott, 1988:103). And, while there is value in craft, craft—as seen through the lens of Abbott's theory—will never be elevated to the level of professional work without the support of abstract knowledge. Moreover, the ability to relate design knowledge to philosophical underpinnings, theory and methods from across academic disciplines is necessary to legitimize visual communication design research and professional work within the academy.

In tandem with the development of Ph.D. programs in visual communication design, the professional doctorate must be supported. The differences between the two degrees should be clearly articulated within design education communities, as well as amongst practitioners. Doctoral programs in visual communication design have the responsibility to coherently communicate types of degrees offered as effectively as the differences between professional doctorates and doctorates of philosophy. Potential students should be able to fully grasp the difference between research through practice (the D.Des.) versus research that builds abstract knowledge (the Ph.D.). This can be achieved through better communication of the nature and roles of different types of doctoral studies, as well as better articulation amongst institutions and programs.

In addition to clarifying communication about doctoral programs, accreditation bodies and professional organizations must participate by developing and articulating standards for different types of doctoral study. In the United States, too little attention is paid to doctorate degrees in graphic design by the National Association of Schools of Art and Design, the accrediting body for higher education, and the AIGA (AIGA & NASAD n.d.:4). And while the number of doctoral programs in graphic design in the US is small (fewer than a dozen exist), better communication of the differences between degree paths and amongst existing programs in the US is essential. In the international doctoral education community, there needs to be a clear discussion about doctoral degree goals and directions. The development and application of international standards for doctoral study would aid students, faculty, and professionals in navigating the oftentimes-confusing world of doctoral study. Visual communication design, as a global community, has the responsibility to articulate the nature, functions, and roles of different types of doctoral degrees.

As visual communication design in higher education continues to transform and expand, conversations about different types of graduate study must move beyond opinion and find root in theory. Abbott's theory of professions (1988), especially the functions and roles he ascribes abstract knowledge, are one method of reframing these debates. Abstract knowledge, as opposed to the messy complexity of practical professional knowledge, is highly structured and organized. It is used to teach aspiring professionals, provides opportunities for innovation, and is not bound to the demands, tasks, and clients of practice. Academics, alongside abstract knowledge, contribute to visual communication design by maintaining the profession's power and prestige within the academy and within the eyes of the public. However, without the continued growth and advancement of abstract knowledge, visual communication design faces many challenges. The way forward is through the dual growth of both professional and philosophical doctorates. By supporting both routes to higher education in visual communication design the profession can retain direct ties to practice (via the D.Des.) as well as improve its abstract knowledge (via the Ph.D. in design). Academics and practitioners alike must work together to support both routes for doctoral study. Better understanding about these complementary degrees can be achieved through clear communication of the differences between them, their roles and functions within the profession, and the differences amongst programs and institutions. Furthermore, venues for peer-review and dissemination of research must be expanded and improved. Faculty, researchers, accrediting bodies, and professional organizations must work together to create a unified voice and vision that reinforces the roles and functions of professional and philosophical doctorates. If abstract knowledge within visual communication design is not cultivated, its production will be colonized by other disciplines. As a result, status and prestige may suffer and all those involved with the profession—practitioners, educators, and researchers—will feel the effects of losing jurisdiction, or control over their work.

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