EDITORIAL

The Disciplinary Status of Visual Communication or Graphic Design

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This opinion piece reflects on the disciplinary status of design, focusing on visual communication, or graphic design, within academia. It responds to optimistic assessments of design's progress by highlighting persistent challenges and opportunities for strengthening its disciplinary identity.

Design has become a more formalized area of study, while it has also become more difficult to pin down. It reinvents itself repeatedly, traversing disciplinary boundaries across the humanities, social sciences, and the applied sciences, which makes it dynamic and perennially mobile within academic structures. Design may be one of the most mobile fields, at least when compared to more firmly established areas. Few disciplines want to be as big as design. Design is so many things in terms of its practices and interests that it is hard to find consensus about "what counts" as design knowledge or what research reporting and scholarship should "look like" — let alone the metrics by which to evaluate it. As a result, some areas of design continue to inhabit a liminal space — vibrant in practice, but uneven in scholarly rigor or coherence.

Design is not a monolithic entity. Cash et al.'s (2025) assessment of the discipline's present state — one on the cusp of transitioning from an *emergent* to a *maturing* field — may apply to some areas of design practice and not to others. I would argue that the disciplinary status of my own corner of the design world, visual communication or graphic design (VC/GD), persistently remains under-specified, under-theorized, under-developed.

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What are the indicators of a field's disciplinary status? Scholars dedicated to the study of this domain (Klein, 2005; Becher & Trowler, 2001) generally agree that disciplines: (1) have a particular object of research and a body of accumulated specialist knowledge referring to their research object that is specific to it; (2) have theories and concepts that can organize knowledge effectively with technical languages that accommodate the research object; (3) have established specific research methods according to their research requirements; and (4) have established infrastructures in the form of subjects taught in higher education institutions, academic departments, faculties, and professional associations. Thomas Kuhn (1962) used the concept of *paradigm* to describe how disciplines are organized around certain patterns of thinking or larger theoretical frameworks, which can best explain empirical phenomena in that discipline. Paradigms shape the kinds of questions a discipline asks and guide how disciplines evaluate knowledge claims. More recently, David Bridges (2006) proposed that disciplines, in making a community of "arguers" possible, enhance the credibility of research by maintaining the discipline-specific rigor of inquiry (p. 264). Disciplines matter because they instill some coherence in terms of theories, concepts, and methods that allow the testing and validation of a hypothesis following agreed rules.

Not all disciplines are equal. Some fall short of one or more of the above criteria — a lack of original theory or specific methodologies usually diminishes disciplinary status. There are also wide differences regarding a discipline's standing within universities, which we can discern in the number of students they enroll, the amount of research funding they can attract, and the overall resources that university administrators allocate to them. A discipline's location in its academic home matters tremendously. In research universities, which play an outsized role in defining and organizing disciplines, subdisciplines, and their bodies of knowledge, VC/GD programs are often situated alongside the parent discipline of fine arts, where they are low in the disciplinary pecking order. Depending on local and historical circumstances, VC/GD can also be found in colleges or schools of architecture, design, communication, engineering, or journalism. We also see disciplinary instability in the bewildering number of names (and name changes) that VC/GD has undergone (I felt it necessary to use two in this article). Our field does seem to go through frequent bouts of handwringing over what it wants to be called.

A discipline's primary charge is generating new knowledge for the field; its responsibility is validating claims to truth. We can measure the health of a discipline by its productivity. Although VC/GD appears to have a robust number of options for publishing and presenting research, many venues serve multiple design communities; finding high-impact, peer reviewed publications can be difficult. Other design areas (architecture, industrial design, interior design) have had better success in adapting to the metrics and results-oriented academic landscape of the twenty-first century. Scholars

in these areas have also been more thorough and systematic in their citation of works of others within their field than traditional VC/GD has been.

In the VC/GD curriculum, students are typically not indoctrinated into any one specific ontology or epistemology — a good thing, as researchers in design can investigate their questions from a wider lens of theoretical perspectives, equipped with a diverse toolkit of methods. The problem is that students are too often not indoctrinated into any research paradigm at all — except perhaps at the doctorate level, far behind other disciplines that introduce theory and methods from undergraduate on. Strickler (1993) contended decades ago that the development of visual communication design as an academic discipline will only occur when there is an "empirical bridge between theory and practice" (p. 38). Today, designers in VC/GD have developed exciting and creative new ways for connecting their work to today's important societal issues by engaging with researchers in disciplines outside design. However, by not being more explicit about the mechanics or more aware of the epistemologies of our collaborations, design often falls short in its contributions. Here, it seems Strickler's bridge is still incomplete. The issue lies in the idea of VC/GD's concepts of research collaboration and the role of design. Design tends to choose its methods uncritically and apply them as a "secret sauce," which is counter to epistemologies of the academic disciplines. We can pinpoint an unreflected unawareness in established knowledge generation processes that, if it is not amended, will hinder, not stimulate, VC/GD scholarship.

If disciplines matter because they provide shared objects of inquiry, organizing theories, specialized methods and language, and institutional homes for producing and vetting knowledge, then design's uneven theorization and methodological variability limit its standing in the academy. Disciplines shape the questions we ask and the standards by which we judge truth claims, from Kuhn's paradigms to Bridges' emphasis on community and rigor. For VC/GD, the challenge is not whether it participates in these structures, but how convincingly it demonstrates disciplinary coherence — particularly in developing (and testing) systematic methods and publishing in venues that archive, scrutinize, and advance its knowledge base. We need a more confident VC/GD, one that is strong enough in its convictions to be open minded and stand its academic ground when needed, while humble enough to know what it doesn't know. Such a stance will strengthen our connections with other disciplines and ways of knowing. It will also make our little corner of the design world more relevant in contemporary social and academic debates. We need to make an effort of understanding and appreciating other disciplines' work. This means embracing and elevating theoretical and methodological clarity and transparency. Only such a mature and self-conscious VC/GD discipline will be worthwhile pursuing.

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