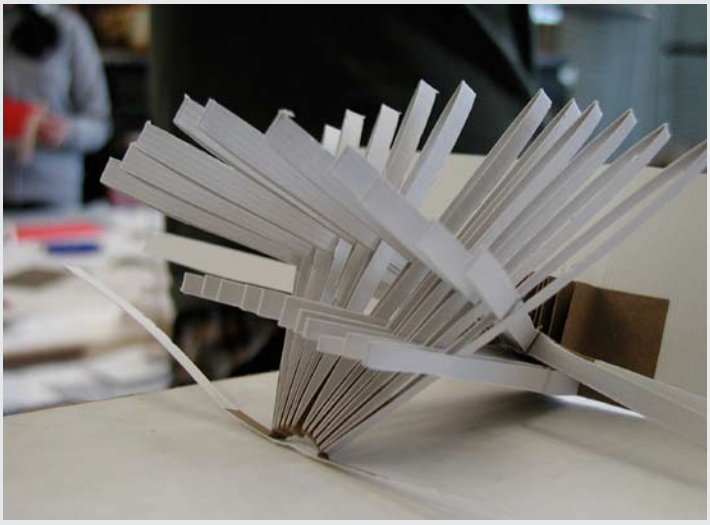
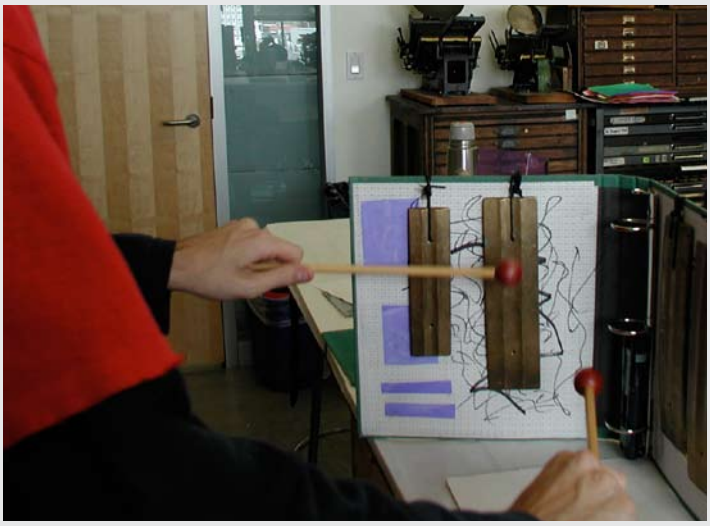


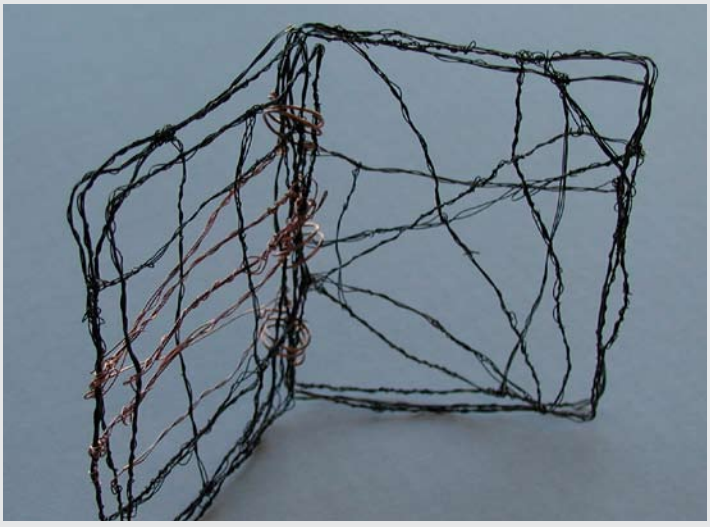


Thinking through Making

Dan D Shafer
Cornish College of the Arts

I teach two sections of an introductory book arts class every semester, alongside other classes in the design department. There are many ways I approach this elective – and there are just as many reasons that the school has invested the resources and space it has into the studio and classes we have. On one level, it is a class that focuses on the craft, history and tradition of letterpress printing, typography and bookbinding. It is also a "fun" elective that gives students a break from their normal, demanding studio coursework. They have a chance to work by hand with new tools, mastering unfamiliar techniques. Third, as a highly sought-after elective, it is one of the rare places in the school where disciplines frequently mix. Fine artists and designers are hard enough to get together, then add in musicians, dancers, and other disciplines. Cornish is an art school, so mixing design and theater or music is as interdisciplinary as we get.

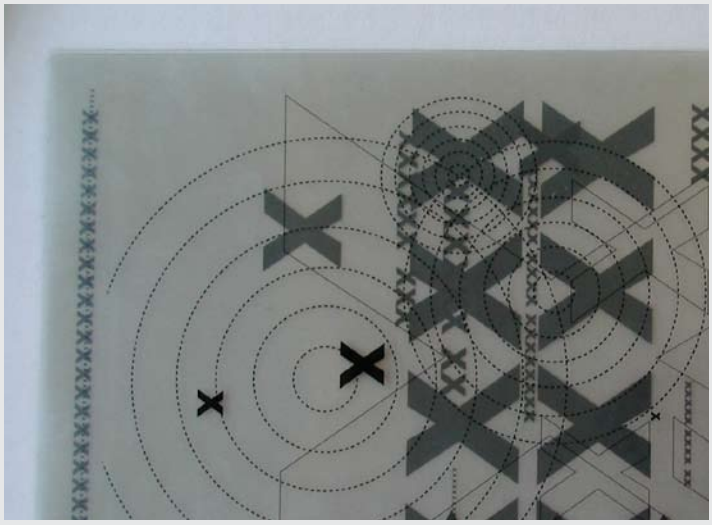
While these factors are all constantly present, my primary emphasis for the class is on the relationship between making and thinking. I believe that it can be incredibly helpful for students to learn to be pushed to make something, then think about it and analyze it, and make something else in response. There is a distinct type of learning that happens when students make something – not just "comp it up", but actually construct it, from the small kernel of an idea they start with to its fully realized form, so they understand it from the inside out. It is not unusual for me to see students thinking about the conceptual angle they will take on a project for weeks, changing their mind over and over. By the time they actually start working on something, they don't have anything to show for all that thought. When students start to learn by making something, thinking about it, responding to it, and making something new, it creates a type of "feedback loop" that helps students get out of their typical creative rut.



"You can't steer a parked car" is the way one of my teachers put it. It is important to be constantly moving, especially in the creative process. The more free and spontaneous your process allows you to be, the more ground you will cover. It's kind of like that movie "Speed" where Keanu Reeves couldn't let the bus slow down below 50 mph – it feels a little reckless, but if you stop moving you're in trouble.

The methodology that this suggests is one of constant, deliberate, but not necessarily efficient or direct progress. It might take awhile for the project to resolve itself, but along the way a lot of different ideas will be tested out. If a student is going to think by making, it can not happen the night before a project is due. It must be part of an ongoing process, with lots of time to think, experiment, react, change directions, experiment some more, have a eureka moment or two, and hopefully – though not necessarily – arrive somewhere that resembles an end-point.

All of us emphasize the design process highly to our students, and it can be integrated into projects through different requirements like checkpoints, timelines, different research or brainstorming requirements, and even process books, which become entire design projects in and of themselves. Don't we tell our students that great ideas don't just pop into our heads – in fact, that is where really bad ideas usually come from. Great ideas are arrived at through a process. Unfortunately, often the design process is less exploratory and creatively productive than we tell our students it can be. A few drafts trying out different fonts or colors and some pages from Google printed out for research. I experience this all the time, and I tell them that if they are not surprised by anything they make or learn from their process, they have not loosened up enough. It is really difficult to actually surprise yourself – but it essential. Otherwise designers – not just students – can fall back on the same thing over and over.



So how does the idea of thinking through making come into this? It starts with the types of projects that are assigned. It is incredibly difficult for a student to be truly experimental when there is a prescribed expected result. If, in the end, the student needs to hand in polished graphic design artifact with meeting very specific criteria, it is going to be hard to convince them to spend significant time or effort shooting video or interviewing people in the neighborhood or finding out what kind of marks a paper clip can make. But if the project is open-ended in its outcome, the student can trust that the process will suggest the place that it needs to go.

This is not easy for students – they like to have an end-product in mind from the outset, and all the better if we tell them exactly what it will take to get an A. And it's not easy for teachers – we have to let go of some control over the project and even allow for it to completely fail. The real end-product in this kind of project is the development of an idea, and the confidence a student gains by refining their own creative process and creating something truly original an innovative. Students begin to own the process instead of just meeting requirements.

I am a book arts teacher, but this isn't a rant against the computer – this methodology can happen entirely digitally. The most important thing to remember is whatever material or technique is being used is good for some things at not good at other things. For example, one thing a computer is particularly good at is very complex patterns. It is also good at creating multiple versions testing color, font, layout, and other variables. But the computer does allow laziness in the design process – it is easy to only "look" like you are following a process.

Project Examples

One Hour Books

One Hour Books is a project where students work collaboratively on a project with very little direction. Students are told to bring in materials, art supplies, found objects, and anything else they want to share with each other for the activity. Each student works on something – anything – for 15 minutes, and then passes what they've made to their partner (and their partner hands over what they've made.) The work is passed back and forth a total of 5 times, and then the results are discussed.

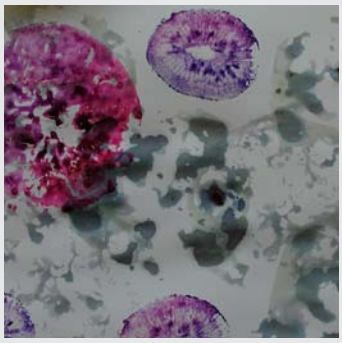
The goal of this project is to get students used to making things quickly, without planning or thinking too much. In our discussions, I encourage the students to think about what they have made and see if there are any ideas they can apply to their final project.

The collaborative nature of this project helps the students let go of their own control as well. They are forced to deal with changes made by someone else.

Backing into a Book

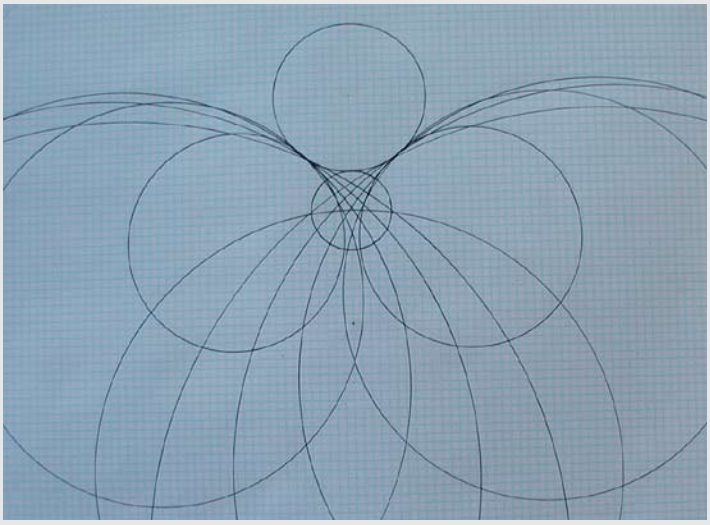
The final project has students start with a single idea, technique or material and explore it through a series of stages. The things that the students learn in their research and experimentation are folded into the final "product," which at best is a sketch for a project.

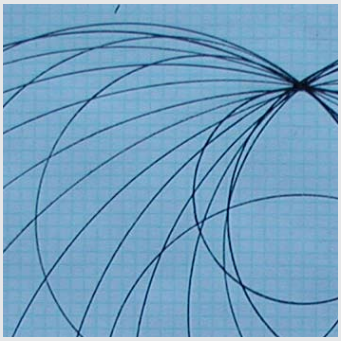
By having the project stress experimentation and idea generation, instead of a polished final product, students can take risks in their process without having to worry about failing when it comes to the final execution. In fact, many of these projects don't fully resolve themselves.

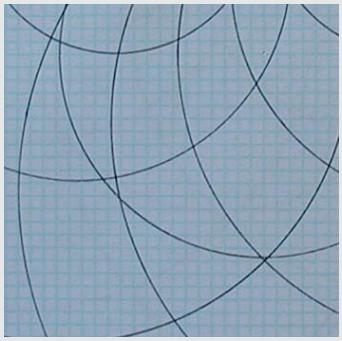


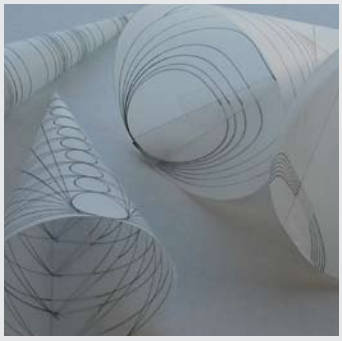
Tara Smith

Somehow the question was asked, "What happens if you print with fruit?" This student experimented with different inks and also the natural fruit juices and yielded some very interesting results.



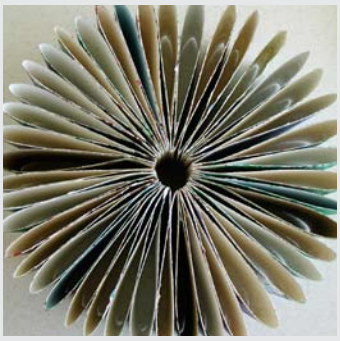






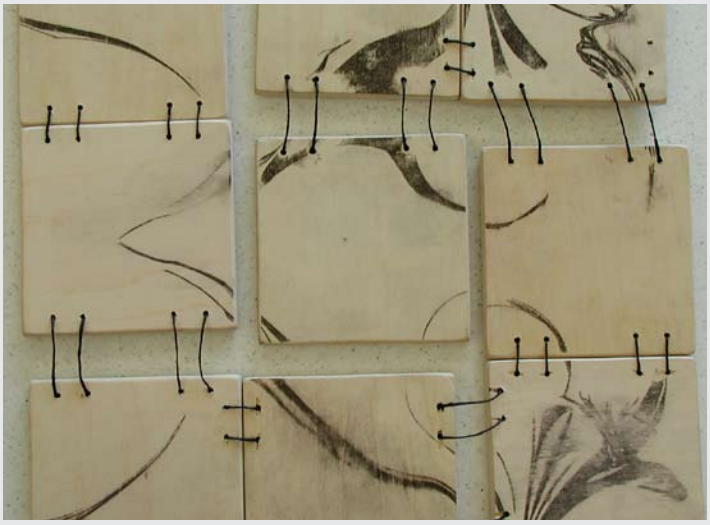
Hansi Singh

This project started with geometric constructions drawn with a compass on graph paper and ended with an amazing series of nested cones.



Jessamyn Johns
An exploration of patterns and ornament ended with a series of screen-printed layers on printmaking paper. The final format of the book came about because the thickness of the paper made folding difficult.

Andi Rampulla
This costume design student wanted to explore the concept of the "chevron" (in sewing where pinstripes meet in a V pattern) in a material besides fabric. She created the pattern with paper and on the letterpress, among other things.



In conclusion, a few concrete suggestions to make this idea work for your students:

1. Start at a single point and end – wherever – rather than the other way around

2. Allow for various starting points – materials, technique or subject matter are all valid starting points

3. Hybridize – move from one medium to another and back again

4. Make, make, make, but be sure that every step builds on the last one.

The goal of this type of project is to help students loosen up their creative process. It is not practical to have every project work this way – that is why I emphasize it so heavily in my book arts electives. I try to support the core studio classes by teaching the same design process they do, but from a different perspective. The emphasis is on the idea and on the process itself, rather than on the final project that it must become.

By removing the normal pressure and expectation of a finished, polished product these projects emphasize the process and the generation of ideas through a series of steps. In the end, my ultimate goal is to give students a fearless approach to any subject matter. They should know that they can approach any material, technique, or subject matter and make it their own. There are volumes to learn from the simplest things, and I encourage them to develop an appetite for that knowledge.