

Teaching Typography—The Didot Project*

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Abstract

This paper briefly outlines the Didot project on teaching digital typography. A key issue, namely the nature of the interaction between computer and design specialists, is discussed and related to the type of material that could be included in a curriculum for digital typography. Teaching methods and material that have been developed in this area are outlined and an evaluation of one of these methods is described.

1 The Didot Project

1.1 Introduction.

The acronym Didot stands for ‘DIgitising and Designing of Type’ and this project has been funded as part of the European COMETT II programme. The project started in 1990 and is due to finish in September 1993. The partners come from research centres, academic institutions, commercial organisations and studios in France, Switzerland, Germany, UK, Spain, Greece and Italy.

1.2 Aims.

The aims of the project are to:

- design, implement and evaluate a curriculum for digital typography, designed for both computer-oriented specialists and graphic artists and typographers;
- organise seminars and workshops for both groups; and
- publish and distribute information.

2 Key Issues

2.1 Promoting discussion.

One of the main interests within the project is encouraging discussion between computer specialists and design specialists. Seminars and workshops have encouraged both groups to attend, but there has tended to be a predominance of one or other group at the meetings. Whilst designers have received information about digital techniques, and computer specialists have heard about design issues, we need to question how far we should go in these directions. One of the more obvious problems is interpreting the ‘language’ of the other

discipline. Design concepts are not expressed in the ‘normal language’ of computer scientists.

2.2 Roles.

Graphic artists and typographers are undoubtedly users of tools of digital typography, and may have something to say about the development of such tools, but they are not normally the developers, as they lack the technical skills. Computer specialists, as developers of the tools of digital typography, tend also to be users. However, they may not have the appropriate design knowledge to make best use of the tools. At a Reading Didot seminar, we discussed some of the options: computer scientists using the tools (with direction from designers) as opposed to designers using the technology themselves.

2.3 Contributions.

The contribution that designers can make to the development of tools was discussed at a summer school in Lausanne. The nature of the tools that are being produced should be influenced by the working procedures adopted by designers. For example, designers may have clear ideas as to what type of work they wish to do on paper, and what can best be carried out on screen.

3 Questions Arising

The above issues can be discussed in terms of three interrelated questions. We need to decide who we should teach, what we should teach and how we should teach.

3.1 Relevant material.

The first two questions need to be considered together in deciding what material is relevant to each of the groups engaged in digital typography. The Didot project focuses on type design, looking at methods for creating

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and drawing characters. However, some of the work at Reading has extended the scope of the project to include how we use typefaces in designing documents. The study of digital typography is therefore relevant to, not only those involved in creating and manipulating fonts, but also users of document preparation systems. However, it may be necessary to distinguish between what is taught to users and what is taught to developers and implementers (cf. Brown and Utting, 1992).

3.2 Curriculum development.

One way to approach this diversity is to design a curriculum for digital typography which can cover a wide range of requirements. The nature of a generic curriculum is discussed by Dyson (1992), who argues that the same topics may be relevant to different disciplines, but the subject matter may need to be treated differently depending on the background of the students.

The subjects that could be included in a curriculum for digital typography have been explored by André and Hersch (1992) who concentrate on the computer science aspect of the subject. They put forward the argument, which is fundamental to the Didot project, that digital typography should not be taught without teaching classical typography. Within the Didot project, this is dealt with in terms of historical and cultural aspects of letterforms and the fundamentals of letterforms and the design of type.

4 Teaching Methods and Material

The Didot project has explored a range of teaching methods and materials in relation to digital typography which include:

- seminars and workshops,
- tools, and
- vacation courses.

4.1 Programme of seminars.

The nature of seminars has varied, depending on the specialisms of the seminar organisers, and also the country where they have taken place. The seminar/workshop in Reading explored ways of introducing people to some of the issues surrounding letterform design and studied digital techniques alongside traditional methods of design and manufacture. The summer school in Lausanne provided a more thorough grounding in technical matters, combined with the cultural, historical and aesthetic aspects of the subject. The Basel seminar built upon the previous seminars and developed and evaluated educational concepts. The French seminars were aimed at graphic designers and provided a means of demonstrating and working with the new technologies. The workshops of the Didot works seminar in Hamburg again focused on digital tools, with the lectures providing a rich design context.

The seminars in Italy and Greece were somewhat different in nature as they highlighted the important role

of education within their respective countries. In particular, they raised awareness of the problems of using the tools of digital typography without the necessary background knowledge.

4.2 Local workshops.

In addition to these international seminars, a series of local workshops in Reading have introduced typography to beginners through the three areas of lettering, traditional handsetting and computers. The main objective of the workshops was to explore the relationship between major typographical variables through practical experience of different techniques and tools. Lettering introduces students to the influence of the tool on letterforms. Handsetting allows students to directly manipulate type and space, an experience which can then be translated into the less tangible medium of computer typesetting.

Basic issues of legibility, dealt with in theory classes, were re-examined. The relationships between choice of typeface, type size, interlinear spacing, line length, setting, hyphenation and format were explored in a series of exercises using the computer to set type. The students then evaluated the results of their exercises through conducting empirical tests. These activities were aimed at establishing effective design procedures for digital typography.

4.3 Tools.

As part of the Didot project, specific tools have been developed as teaching material. An interactive program comprised of exercises in character-hinting techniques has been developed at EPFL. At Reading, a hypertext on the subject of document preparation systems has been written to support a series of lectures and is currently being evaluated. As a student project, a video has been made based on material from the Reading seminar. The video explains the process of punchcutting and type manufacture to people with no knowledge of the subject.

4.4 Vacation courses.

Some of the teaching methods used at Reading in relation to the teaching of historical and cultural aspects of letterforms have also been evaluated. Students attend two vacation courses as part of the four year BA(Hons) in Typography & Graphic Communication. One of these is in Northern Europe and the other is in Italy. These courses abroad provide direct experience of the material they are learning about through lectures and seminars in the Department and aim to stimulate interest in the subjects they are studying. The evaluations have looked in particular at working methods, and how useful the students perceive these methods to be. Comparisons have also been made with other forms of teaching, such as lectures, seminars and practical work. The questions have evaluated:

- the type of activities engaged in on the vacation courses;

- forms of preparation;
- sources of information;
- methods of learning;
- methods of recording information; and
- methods of analysis and synthesis.

The results support the use of first hand experience as a means of learning. The courses help with student's understanding of specific issues in theory and history, as well as providing inspiration for practical work. There does however, need to be sufficient preparation before the course and a means of consolidating what has been taught afterwards, to make best use of the time spent in observation and analysis whilst on the course.

5 Conclusions

Digital typography encompasses a diverse range of specialisms and we must consider the balance between teaching the core of the subject and developing and distributing specialist material. The requirements of specific types of users need to be clearly defined and mapped onto a range of appropriate teaching methods and materials.

References

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