# TOWARDS AN EDUCATIONAL STRATEGY FOR PROMOTING SOCIAL, ENVIRONMENTAL AND ETHICAL AWARENESS IN VISUAL COMMUNICATION EDUCATION

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## Social, environmental and ethical awareness and visual communication education

> There is an old Chinese curse: may you live in interesting times. No one could deny that the times we are living in would qualify for that description. Perhaps that's why many of us yearn to temper the increasing pace of life with a return to gentler values and a world where a desire for the greater good underpins all thoughts and actions (Witepski 2008:24).

Debates surrounding social and environmental concerns permeate contemporary life at many levels, highlighting important issues such as globalisation, consumerism, the changing environment and the exploitation of natural resources (Diamond 2005; Klein 2001; Kovel 2007). These issues are becoming increasingly significant within the field of visual communication and, as such, also within visual communication education. The American Institute of Graphic Arts (AIGA) has established a Centre for Sustainable Design to address the growing concern surrounding sustainable design within the industry (AIGA 2008). Social and environmental ethics can be linked to sustainability, an important, though perhaps overused term. Benson (2009:1),

following the United Nations World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED), defines sustainability as follows:

> Sustainability is a systemic term that means 'meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.' It demands that society strives to reach a collective balance called the triple bottom line. This is the overlap where we intelligently mesh the economy, environment and equity for all our species.

Although social and environmental design consciousness in South Africa is perhaps still in its infancy compared to more developed first world countries, a growing awareness is steadily emerging. This is becoming particularly evident through an increase in debate at educational conferences, in the media, and in literature. The Fifth International Design Education Forum of South African (DEFSA) Conference held in Cape Town in 2007 focused specifically on a sub-theme 'Design for/and Development' (DEFSA 2009). A 2008 issue of the *Design > In Business* magazine, dedicated itself to exploring the status of social ethics, sustainability and environmental issues as they relate to the design profession and to design education

in South Africa. Sensitive to growing social and environmental concerns, the February 2009 Design Indaba Conference promoted the question, What can your creativity do? and featured a number of people in Africa who have made significant impact within their own communities through creative thought (Design Indaba 2009).

Post-apartheid South Africa has made positive design contributions, particularly in the field of socially conscious design, for example in the public spaces that have been created in the Apartheid Museum and Freedom Square in Johannesburg and the Red Location Museum in Port Elizabeth. In general, however, South Africa does not yet have a strong history and developed culture of social and environmental ethics and much still needs to be done, especially at educational level, to address this. Jacques Lange, at the time president of the International Council of Graphic Design Associations (ICOGRADA) interviewed by Lisa Witepski (2008:26) comments:

> The education foundations provided by the South African design education system have not appropriately accommodated for enough training on ethical practice issues in the past and currently remain insufficient. Financial profits, titles and the number of awards that you have won dominate the minds of the majority of the profession.

It is not difficult to appreciate that social and environmental action, as a largely personal value-driven activity, needs to be preceded by sensitisation, increased awareness and the will to change. Susan Szenasy (2004:2) accordingly comments, 'ethical decisions are personal. It is you—each one of us—who has to decide to do the right thing'. People have to be persuaded by a personal conviction to change ideas, behaviour and take action, unless of course policies exist to enforce and impose behavioural change. Gerald

Gardner and Paul Stern (2002:27) highlight government, or law-based interventions, community-linked mediations or processes, moral, religious or ethical appeals and education as four possible approaches used to address environmental sustainability. Although it is important that the design sector equip students with knowledge, skills, and resources to facilitate the practical implementation of sustainable design, a vital step in the process is the cultivation of a personal value system that incorporates social and environmental ethics. Benson (2007:1) refers to this personal component as building 'the foundation for an evolving code of personal ethics' in his course goals for EDGE (Ethics of a Designer in a Global Economy) at the University of Illinois. Without this fundamental personal ingredient, social, environmental and ethical awareness is in danger of being reduced to a purely theoretical proficiency, to factual knowledge, where little long-term influence or impact can be expected. Michael Schmidt (2004:19) explains how personal experience is able to bring authenticity to social and environmental issues:

> I had already studied globalisation prior to meeting our visitors. But listening to Ms. Hernandez made me realise something new. For the academic means we can employ to discuss globalisation, the only way I can see our field achieving a more substantial understanding of the relationship between globalisation and design, is if we first come to the subject with a personal and highly impassioned caring for the welfare of those afflicted by injustice and a respect for those who fought such inequity.

Going a step further, Barbara Sudick (2008:1) presents sustainability as a 'new literacy' for the twenty-first century and appeals for it to be incorporated as a fundamental and practical capability within the current shifting and intricate social and global situation. Another way of looking at this would be to consider

social and environmental ethics as critical components of life skills (or transferable skills) in the design education environment. The value of transferable skills, in contrast to transient commercial market demands for technical skills, which perhaps only satisfy short-term employability, has been highlighted in education debates (Davies 1996; Design Council 2007). Transferable skills can be described as skills that, in contrast to the latest software programme or technology driven-techniques, transcend time and become part of a student's ability to function in an adaptive way to future life endeavours. With the focus shifting away from technical training, an alternative possibility exists where visual communication students are enabled to contribute in a more integrated and positive way in society. According to Anthony Inciong (2004:94):

> In this way, they practice and live the discursive nature and respond in kind with a body of work that bears the mark of one who truly knows, which will no doubt alter the market's perception of the designer from an abstruse jobber / hired hand / technician to indispensable resource.

Transferable skills can include a combination of knowledge, values, attitudes and skills with a particular emphasis on those aspects that relate to critical thinking and problem solving, self-management and communication and inter-personal abilities. It is not difficult to see that social and environmental ethics have a place within the current transferable skills-set in design education, not only as knowledge, but also, more importantly, as personal value or even as Sudick's (2008) 'new literacy'. The question is how can we facilitate the development of social and environmental ethics, as a personal value within our visual communication programme at the NMMU?

# Contextualising social, environmental and ethical imperatives in Visual Communications at the NMMU

Social and environmental ethics underpins the philosophy and values of the Applied Design Department at the Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University (Cadle 2009). The visual communications programme places emphasis on the design student as part of a complex, interconnected and multi-layered system of social, cultural and physical components. The responsibility that comes with this position requires sensitivity towards social, environmental and ethical imperatives resulting from the intricate interrelationship between visual communication and society. According to Bruce Cadle (2009):

> We acknowledge that designers and photographers are visual communicators with a particularly responsible role to play in society as influencers and formers of public opinion, and individual and group behaviour … we are bound by duty to present to society a view of the world that respects intrinsic human values, morality and ethics.

Values in the Applied Design Department's vision statement, which focuses on encouraging students to think critically about their ethical role as visual communicators in society, include 'creating an awareness of the environment in which we live that encompasses the physical realm and socio-cultural issues … acknowledging an obligation to contribute to the upliftment of society' and 'focussing on the indomitable nature of the human spirit as a means to influence and provoke positive change' (Cadle 2009).

In order to implement social and environmental principles in a concrete way in the visual communications programme, students are involved in a variety of different projects throughout their course of study. Visual communication solutions – graphic design, photographic or film-based artefacts – are developed and produced for charitable organisations. Projects like this include, Sappi Ideas That Matter, a well-known international pro bono initiative, the Design Achievers Awards Programme, which encourages South-African socially orientated design leadership, and the Vuka Awards, a film or animation-based public service announcement competition that focuses on South African societal issues. In addition, students participate in community-linked documentary photography excursions in the community that expose them to social and environmental issues within real life scenarios. Within each of these approaches students are sensitised and exposed to social and environmental issues through the conventional design process of exploring and researching the subject at hand – be it a client, product, organisation or environment. This process facilitates exposure to and interaction with environments and people in real-life scenarios. Students who engage and actively participate in the process develop an increased social and environmental consciousness. Anecdotal evidence, such as informal discussions with students and other lecturers, student reflection journals and formal student feedback, such as essays, and project evaluation reports, supports this observation.

Interrogation of our practice reveals, however, that there are shortcomings within the approach. Firstly, submission requirements, assessment criteria (and consequent feedback) focus almost exclusively on the 'excellence' of the creative end-product, drawing emphasis away from the social and environmental sensitisation as an important outcome. Secondly, the process of developing social and ethical awareness as an enduring personal value is not always explicitly contextualised and facilitated in these projects.

As a possible solution to addressing these issues, this paper, which reiterates reports on research in an early stage, explores and describes a proposed project framework to facilitate the personal development of social and environmental consciousness within visual communications students and outlines criteria that can be used as indicators in determining evidence of this. In the NMMU context, where the Department's vision and mission focuses on social and environmental imperatives, it is vital to have an educational strategy that matches learning objectives and outcomes with assessment criteria and to reinforce this in the learning process. This could contribute towards real development as opposed to a mere window-dressing approach.

## Methodology

The overarching frame of this paper is qualitative, focussing largely on assimilating information from relevant literature sources and reports on research in development. The proposed project framework and evaluation criteria described and outlined here are under development in the Visual Communications programme at the NMMU at second year level. This article draws from experience and observation in the teaching and learning environment over a period of approximately three years and it is guided by student reflections. Content analysis of student journals provides insight into the student perspective – an opportunity to see what is important from the student experience. The proposed project framework incorporates aspects of Robinson's Seven Doors Model (2007), adapted to suit our purposes, and influenced by literature highlighting reflective journaling strategies.

Robinson's behavioural change model is well suited to our context as its intent is to support personal growth and promote enduring value-driven change. It emphasises positive reinforcement in contrast to negative images, which is the preferred approach in our teaching methodology. In addition, the model's aspects of self-motivation and self-initiation, what Robinson (2006) refers to as 'voluntary change', are important in developing social, environmental and ethical awareness as an enduring personal value in the student. It is important to note, however obvious, that personal engagement, awareness and change cannot be coerced and that each student's background and experience is unique and should always be treated with sensitivity. Likewise, the social or environmental contexts that students are exposed to are also typically sensitive in nature and ethical concerns should be carefully considered in individual project contexts.

# The development of a project framework for emphasising social, environmental and ethical awareness

Teaching and learning experiences and student feedback, specifically discussion and reflective journals, have provided insight that has guided the development of the project framework. What emerged as important includes:

• providing opportunities for students to actively engage with the experience on a personal level

• focussing on positive experiences rather than the negative

• building a sense of self-efficacy

• facilitating experiences that challenge stereotyped conceptions of social and environmental issues and

• providing time and 'space' for students to contemplate, reflect and contextualise their experiences.

Two main streams, one, social and environmental ethics, the other, the design artefact, are evident within the proposed framework. Although these are indicated within the framework as quite separate, activities within these two streams naturally inter-relate and shape each other.

Key components of the framework include:

A. Project brief

B. Learning activities to facilitate the development of social, environmental and ethical awareness

C. Learning activities to facilitate the development of the design artefact (not discussed in this article) and

D. Submission requirements, assessment and feedback.

The first component in the process, *Project Brief*, provides requirements for both streams – social and environmental and the design artefact, and includes aims and objectives, outcomes and assessment criteria for the project. Relevant theoretical background and resources, including literature and audio-visual media pertaining to social and environmental ethics and sustainability are provided and discussed in order to contextualise the foundations of the project.

Key stages in component B, *Learning activities to facilitate development of social, environmental and ethical awareness,* are personal engagement, building confidence, addressing obstacles, and reflection journaling and group discussions. The first key stage here is to facilitate the process of *personal engagement*, the importance of which has been highlighted in
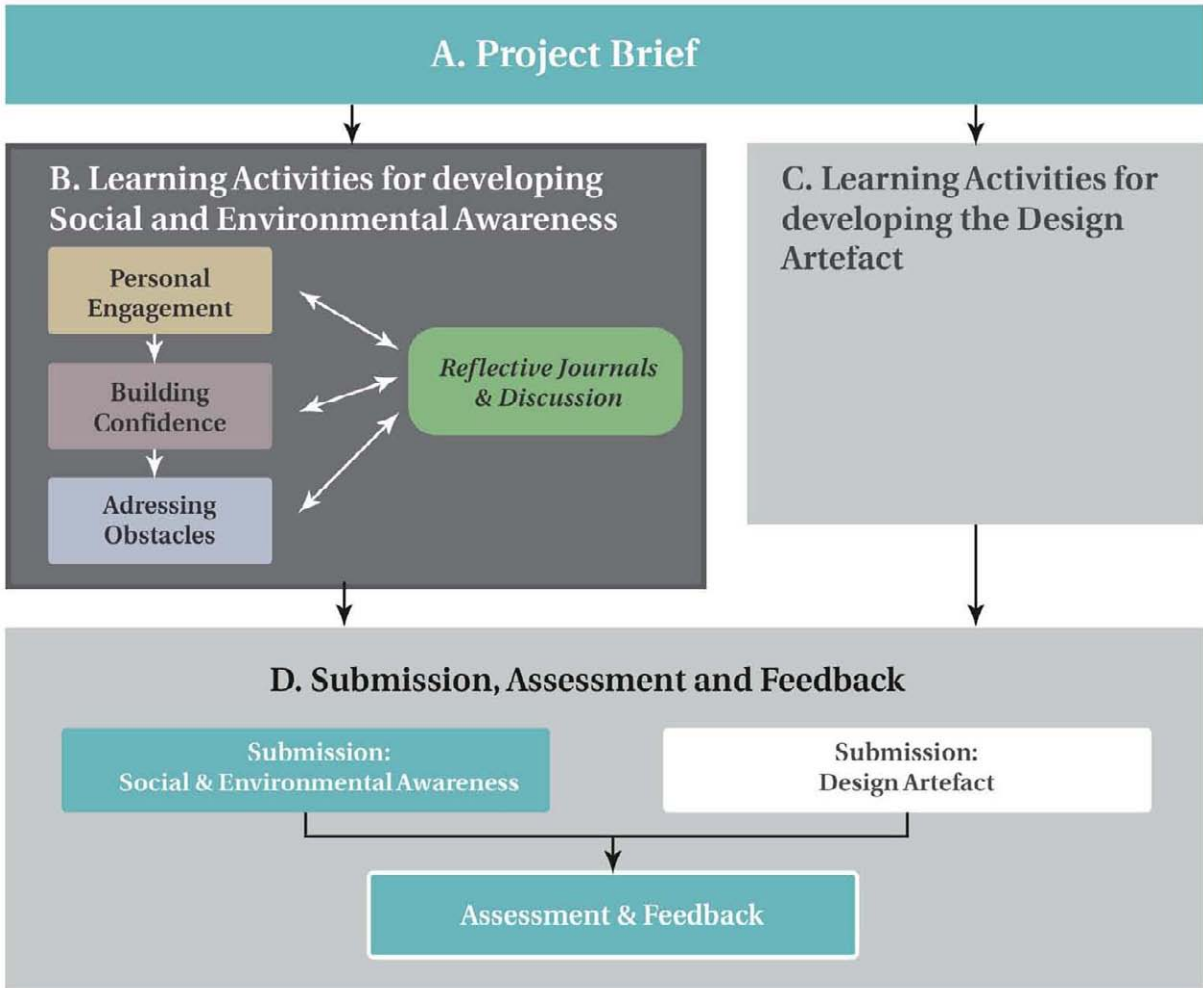
**A. Project Brief**

**B. Learning Activities for developing Social and Environmental Awareness**

Personal Engagement

Building Confidence

Adressing Obstacles

*Reflective Journals & Discussion*

**C. Learning Activities for developing the Design Artefact**

**D. Submission, Assessment and Feedback**

Submission: Social & Environmental Awareness

Submission: Design Artefact

Assessment & Feedback

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**Diagram of framework:** A project framework for emphasising social, environmental and ethical awareness in visual communication students.

Heather Stevens, a visual communication student at the Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University, took this image at the Missionvale Care Centre in Port Elizabeth.

earlier discussions (Benson 2007:1; Schmidt 2004:19; Szenasy 2004). Opportunities for this to emerge are presented in each project experience in different ways in order to address the complex nature of each context. Students are placed in unfamiliar environments in projects or excursions as part of a documentary photography process in an excursion context, or as part of the initial research and information-gathering step in the process of developing design solutions for charity or community-based organisations. These environments are often very different to their own, for example a rural working farm with natural landscapes, an animal shelter, or a community centre in an underprivileged township area. As part of environmental experiences, for example on a rural farm, students go for hikes in the mountain, explore fossil fields and swim in natural river pools. Within social contexts, students are encouraged to relate beyond the surface level and to engage in practical ways and not simply as 'spectators'. For example, on the community centre excursion, some students assist by packing food parcels for HIV/AIDS affected families and other students accompany and assist care workers in weekly home visits. In light of literature on the failings of anthropology, sociology and psychology in understanding the situation of 'others', together with significant literature on the 'victim' stream of documentary photography, the complexities of dealing with sensitive social contexts should not be underestimated. It is reasonable to expect that students may initially come to the situation as 'spectators', however the teaching approach aims to facilitate interaction beyond this level of mere exposure. The ethics of photographing the poor, for example, must

be explored and discussed in the classroom situation before and during the project.

Within the project experience, students interact and become acquainted with people and environments in order to challenge preconceptions. Content analysis of student journals identifies the breaking down of stereotypes within the *personal engagement* stage as a crucial component in facilitating social and/or environmental sensitisation. When people distance themselves from issues via pre-conceived ideas, or stereotyping, the personal element is undermined. bel hooks (1992:170) explains that a stereotype is an inaccurate, often simplified, form of representation, a 'fake' or 'invented' stand-in for reality and that 'stereotypes abound where there is distance … when the steps that would make them real cannot be taken or are not allowed'. Stereotypes and preconceptions can impede social, environmental and ethical awareness in that they enable people to justify their actions, or in this instance inaction, to themselves and others. The personal engagement process helps to inhibit the stereotyping process and accordingly can encourage awareness and promote behavioural change. This is highlighted in student feedback and reflections, as many students comment with surprise at how the project experience challenges their initial expectations. With regard to an excursion to a farm, one student observes:

> I feel somewhat useless in a sense that I don't know much about this lifestyle. Havent been exposed to it often enough. We know about it but have never fully experienced it. We are so ignorant; we feel. Sorry for the people living here, thinking they suffering when we see their small houses, surviving on the absolute basics. Meanwhile they are actually living 'the dream'. They have more freedom and happiness than city people could imagine. I dream to have this lifestyle that entails far less complications although am trapped as if I

was programmed to have an everlasting desire or attraction towards urban content, the 'fake'.

Within the context of social and environmental awareness, it is important to work in environments and social contexts where the positive can be emphasised. A care centre in the underprivileged Port Elizabeth township Missionvale, is included annually in the visual communications excursion programme because, despite dire circumstances and poverty, the positive contribution made by the centre and its care workers leave students (and lecturers) inspired. Robinson's model emphasises that opportunities should be provided where the focus remains on the positive and on visualising a desirable future. Negative images should be avoided as they are disempowering, undermine motivation and may reduce a sense of self-efficacy.

The importance of building a sense of self-efficacy cannot be emphasised enough – to enable students as individuals to believe that they can make a difference and contribute at small scale and also towards global change. Daniel Voronoff (2005:12), following Elliot Aronson *et al*, highlights the importance of perceived control in relation to self-efficacy. He describes perceived control as 'a sense that one's actions will make a difference' and self-efficacy as 'one's sense of ability to take a specific action' (Voronoff 2005:12). The sheer magnitude of social, environmental and ethical issues at global level causes many individuals to feel a distinct sense of helplessness, and as a result a weak sense of perceived control undermines the sense of self-efficacy (Voronoff 2005:26). For instance, some people believe that installing energy-saving light bulbs will make a difference to energy consumption, however not all people feel or believe that this will make any real contribution to global sustainability. This factor can critically hinder the desired follow

through from knowledge and awareness into behavioural change and finally to sustained practice. That idea often surfaces in the project experience; one student notes, for example:

> throughout my days here in the Karoo – I've found that, more and more I'm taking more notice of where I put out my cigarettes, you feel guilty when you see a beautiful landscape, rocks so much older than you will ever be – and then there's a cigarette butt lying there.

Students' preconceptions are challenged when they realise that small contributions do in fact make a difference. Similarly, a relatively small gesture of giving an underprivileged family a photographic portrait brings unanticipated joy and in turn inspires confidence in a student to do more. Another student established a monthly collection of toilet rolls from fellow hostel students and in the end inspired a much larger collection drive that includes everything from clothing to tinned food for a community centre.

In the project experience, the processes of *reflection journaling and group discussions* are facilitated at key moments. The learning strategy of reflective practice is relevant as it encourages active participation and deep learning approaches (Schön 1987; Cliff & Woodward 2004). Grant Ellmers (2006:7), following Allen Davies, comments that a reflection journaling approach becomes 'a more reliable means of establishing student understanding than relying exclusively on the final design artefact'. When students actively engage with the process of journal reflections, the journal itself becomes an end-product that evidences and documents the learning process and thereby facilitates making the developmental aspects of learning more explicit to the student. Reflection journals provide opportunities for students to reflect experiences back to their own personal context and encourage a

personal dialogue (personal engagement) with questions such as 'How does the situation affect me?', 'How do I affect the situation?', 'How can I make a difference?' and 'Why is it important?' (Robinson 2007). Reflection journal activities and facilitated group discussions are important in highlighting key stages in the process and provide an opportunity for students to identify stepping-stones to achieving the intended outcome and encourage independent learning (Ellmers 2006). Concerns regarding the journaling approach include 'procrastination, superficial and unreflective entries, waning enthusiasm, and unwillingness or inability to reflect' (Ellmers 2006:7). These concerns may be addressed by facilitating the journal process closely, for example, by asking students to reflect within narrower contexts or providing questions to initiate internal dialogue, and by facilitating group discussion where opportunities are provided for shared experience and developing richer understanding.

Other important steps in developing social and ethical awareness within the project framework include *building confidence* and *addressing obstacles*. Confidence building happens in different ways and is unique for each student. Observing positive contributions made by others – be it community centre employees, members of the community, or other students – plays an important role in motivation. The cyclical nature of confidence building occurs when students contribute and receive 'positive feedback' and personal satisfaction, which in turn inspires sustained activity. The step, *addressing obstacles*, provides an opportunity to pre-empt problems that students may experience on a personal level. Within the personal development process, it is only natural that students may, for example, experience barriers or doubt their abilities. The group support structure provides opportunities for students to raise concerns in a supportive environment, where issues can be shared, discussed and addressed.

Zurika Grimes, a visual communication student, interacts with children from the local community at Missionvale in Port Elizabeth. Photograph by Salvelio Meyer – guest lecturer at the Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University.

*Submission, assessment and feedback* is the final component of the framework. Depending on the specific nature of the project, the social, environmental and ethical awareness submission requirement could take the form of an oral presentation, multimedia piece, podcast, essay, or poster, to name a few possible examples. The focus of this submission is for students to contextualise their personal experience of social, environmental and ethical awareness in the project and to make it accessible to an audience. This submission is not assessed by way of marks, as this has ethical implications. However, certain criteria can be identified and function as indicators for social, environmental and ethical consciousness. The following criteria have been identified for this purpose:

- Does the student's experience reflect a process of becoming engaged with people and/or the environment on a personal level?

- Does the student's experience challenge stereotypes and preconceptions in order to understand the context better?

- Does the student's experience incorporate self reflection, in terms of answering questions such as:
    - How does the situation affect me?
    - How do I affect the situation?
    - How can I make a difference?
    - Why is it important?

- Does the student exhibit an interest, desire and/or optimism to implement voluntary change? (I want to?)

- Does the student exhibit confidence, and a sense of self-belief and self-efficacy? (I can do this?)

- Does the student identify possible obstacles in the process as well as ways in which to address or overcome them?

- Does the student exhibit aspirations for the development of sustained social, environmental and ethical consciousness and behavioural change for the future?

The final stage in concluding the project is a summative feedback session, where the students' work and their experiences of social, environmental and ethical sensitisation are discussed in context of the project experience.

**04**

Samantha Davis, a visual communication student took this image of Simphiwe, who she befriended through her passion for social documentary work. Samantha dedicated her documentary portfolio book to this young boy from Walmer in Port Elizabeth.

# Conclusion and Future Directions

At the core of our thinking is the belief that visual communication has significant power to influence and affect change, as Noah Scalin (sa) comments:

> Graphic design [read visual communication] is the filter through which nearly all communication is now disseminated. Therefore graphic designers are in a unique position as the gatekeepers of information. What, how, and for whom we choose to communicate are crucial decisions that have a serious impact on our civilization.

Educators have the potential to make an important contribution to shaping the attitudes and actions of the future role-players in the visual communication profession. Reiterating Witepski (2008:24), people, including design educators, have the potential to contribute towards developing 'a world where a desire for the greater good underpins all thoughts and actions'. In order to ensure that this is done appropriately, exploration, self-reflection and interrogation of methods and approaches aimed at developing social and environmental ethics in visual communications are required.

The process of implementing and testing the framework proposed in this paper will provide further research opportunities. Knowledge and experience from other disciplines, such as sociology, anthropology and behavioural psychology, will be increasingly relevant during the implementation and assessment of the framework. This research, as a work in progress, provides a starting point – aimed at cultivating a personal enduring value system, with social and ethical awareness at its core, within visual communication students. This step can be viewed as an important foundation on which to build additional knowledge, skills and values at third, fourth and fifth year level within the visual communication programme. It is envisaged that at these levels, social, environmental and ethical issues with regard to professional practice may be addressed. For example, students can be encouraged to develop visual communications strategies for developing industry awareness on sustainability issues and to gain practical and theoretical knowledge on sustainable professional visual communication practice, such as environmentally friendly printing processes and the use of sustainable resources.

As design educators we hope to contribute to enabling students to develop as engaged, critically thinking individuals, who are sensitive to social and environmental issues in the world. We hope that the design profession in the future can make a contribution that will go beyond commercial interests, titles and awards. In closing, an excerpt from a paper delivered by Szenasy (2004) at the AIGA National Design Conference, rings true now more than ever:

> These are early days, but incredibly exciting ones. The last time that humanity was challenged to rethink the world, we came up with the Enlightenment, which served our kind very well up to now. So use whatever words you like, but understand that you are at the center of a revolution where an ethical compass is useful and even essential. This may be a time when intellectual pursuits become as important as financial and entertainment pursuits. For without understanding the new world taking shape around us, we will surely go the way of dinosaurs.

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## Footnote:

1 This paper was originally presented at the DEFSA conference in Graaff Reinett, South Africa (4-5 November 2009) and at the Cumulus 38 Degrees South conference in Melbourne, Australia (12-14 November 2009) and was published in both conference proceedings.