Considering My CAPSTONE

A Reflection
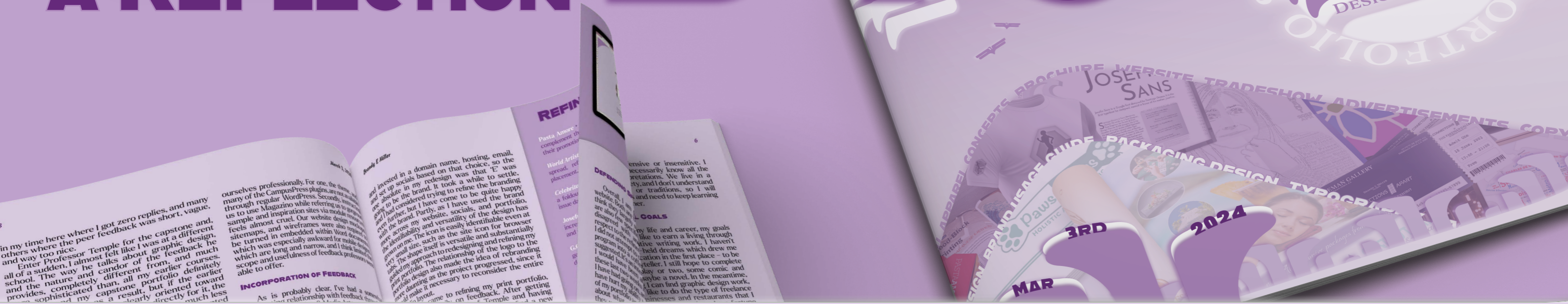
By Brandy E Miller

My capstone experience has been intensely busy and a bit overwhelming at times. 'Refinement' sounds simple on the surface but figuring out the sweet spot between 'better than it was' and 'good enough for my capstone' has been very challenging. I am eager – even a bit desperate – to pursue work immediately after completing my capstone, so I wanted, and needed, to get it to a place I'm happy with for that purpose, not just adequate to pass the class.

It was very confusing when the course began and Professor Temple attempted to make some changes from the course rubrics via announcements, but I know that Brightspace does not let the professors make direct changes, a limitation that has been painfully evident on several occasions in my time here at SNHU. Personally, I think the professors should have some ability to adjust the courses. Despite the confusion, I think the changes he was making made sense and I think he has applied a more holistic approach to the goals of creating the capstone than the rubric lays out. His candid feedback definitely pushed me to a level of effort and refinement beyond what I was expecting, which is great, though I feel it also shined a light on some of the weaknesses in the earlier program.

I had felt pretty good about my work coming into the capstone, but when I look back on it now, I feel like it should have been better to begin with. Maybe that's the point of the capstone course, but it was definitely a huge amount of work to take on in eight weeks. I still don't feel very well prepared

for doing actual client work on a tight deadline, though, but I'm hoping that's just how everyone feels at this stage of trying to go from student to real work. I have a lot of stress and insecurity about that, since I know I can create quality work, but I feel like I take too long to do it.

How the Capstone Fits with the Graphic Design and New Media Program at SNHU

Frankly, the capstone feels largely disconnected from the rest of the Graphic Design and New Media program at SHNU. Sure, it uses the pieces we created in earlier coursework, but looking back, none of that work felt oriented toward eventual use in a capstone. In hindsight, the feedback and grading in earlier courses feels extremely unhelpful – too little, too generic, too uncritical, too nice. I realize, in theory, some of the discussion post assignments in each of the courses were intended to be a forum for receiving peer feedback, but the reality is there were several such discussion posts

March 3, 2024   *Brandy E Miller*

in my time here where I got zero replies, and many others where the peer feedback was short, vague, and way too nice.

Enter Professor Temple for the capstone and, all of a sudden, I almost felt like I was at a different school. The way he talks about graphic design, and the nature and candor of the feedback he provides, completely different from, and much more sophisticated than, all my earlier courses. My work and my capstone portfolio definitely turned out better as a result, but if the earlier courses had been more clearly oriented toward the capstone, prepared us more directly for it, the capstone experience would have been much less overwhelming. Work that was highly complimented and given perfect scores or little to no feedback in earlier classes suddenly felt extremely inadequate as we got into the capstone.

I feel this was especially true of the website portion of the portfolio, which was handled quite crudely in GRA-410 and GRA-420, with instructions to use the Magazino theme on CampusPress. Magazino and CampusPress don't seem consistent with the aim of creating a site that is intended to be how we position

ourselves professionally. For one, the theme, and many of the CampusPress plugins, are not available through regular WordPress. Secondly, instructing us to use Magazino while referring us to gorgeous sample and inspiration sites via module resources feels almost cruel. Our website design mockups, sitemaps, and wireframes were also required to be turned in embedded within Word documents, which was especially awkward for mobile designs, which are long and narrow, and I think limited the scope and usefulness of feedback professors were able to offer.

INCORPORATION OF FEEDBACK

As is probably clear, I've had a somewhat frustrating relationship with feedback throughout the Graphic Design & Media Arts program here at SNHU, and wish I had received more constructive feedback, overall, but I have still incorporated a substantial amount of the feedback I have received into the refinement of my works.

The first, and most major, refinement was a major revision to my brand and logo in response to Prof. Temple's feedback. For my new logo I made an abstract 'E' using a shape I drew in Illustrator repeated three times in a stack but flipped and rotated differently. I had already firmly decided to make my middle initial, 'E,' the centerpiece of my branding

Portfolio and Services paths provide different ways to learn about my work, catering to different audiences.

and invested in a domain name, hosting, email, and set up socials based on that choice, so the one absolute in my redesign was that 'E' was going to be the brand. It took a while to settle, and I had considered trying to refine the branding even further, but I have come to be quite happy with the brand. Partly, as I have used the brand more across my website, socials, and portfolio, the identifiability and versatility of the design has grown on me. The icon is easily identifiable even at very small size, such as the site icon for browser tabs. The shape itself is versatile and substantially guided my approach to redesigning and refining my print portfolio. The relationship of the logo to the portfolio design also made the idea of rebranding more daunting as the project progressed, since it would make it necessary to reconsider the entire portfolio layout.

When it came to refining my print portfolio, I also relied heavily on feedback. After getting my first feedback from Prof. Temple and having changed my brand, I felt I needed to find a new approach to my portfolio to match. Using the shape from my new logo to frame the page was a fairly easy choice, but I was not happy with how my work looked on the page and unsure how to move forward. I remembered a classmate in COM-230 had done his Lil' Guppies brand guide that showed various objects and made the work pop, which I had been impressed by, but did not know how to do. I asked my boyfriend, who knows an annoying amount about too many things, and he said it was "easy, just use mockups." That made me mad, but it turns out it was pretty easy, and once he showed me what he meant it was a total lightbulb for me and I started finding and trying different photoshop mockups for all of my designs. I probably went down the rabbit hole with it more than I had to and may have overresponded to the original feedback to my branding, but I tried to let the mocked-up versions of my work guide the design of each portfolio page in a unique way. I have a few common elements on every page, but they vary in position, and interact with the overall design in different ways on each page. My hope is that my portfolio itself now serves as an 11th piece and shows I can be more flexible in my approach. I realize many designers go for a level of understatement in their portfolio designs, with work sitting on a white page with a minimal annotation, but understated simply is not me and is not my style.

I made many minor adjustments to the ten pieces themselves, mostly responding to feedback from Prof. Temple, but the overall strategy I took was more focused on adding elements and repositioning the purpose and presentation of the pieces. One of my complaints about the program

REFINEMENTS

Pasta Amore • Added a takeout container to complement the menu design and tie in with their promotional concept, *Amore for Later*.

World Artist • Designed A4 variant of magazine spread, refined column sizing and image placement, improving balance and readablity.

Celebritainment • Reimagined purpose as a foldout poster. Added magazine name and issue date.

Josefin Sans • Tastefully introduced color to increase visual interest. Adjusted column gutter and revised some text to improve balance.

G.O.A.L. • Smoothed sihouettes, added geometric G, added glows and shadows for depth. Added an apparel mockup for each icon.

WryeJob Designs • Reimagined the brief to give collage purpose as a career fair booth backdrop. Added designs for several accompanying banners.

Connections Apart • Significant typographic and layout refinements throughout exhibit program brochure. Added event ticket design.

Paris, France • Reimagined brief to give word cloud purpose in an advertising poster. Designed poster maintaining strictly typographic approach.

Amethyst Bay • Font and layout refinements to magazine ad to better match audience and look more like a real magazine advertisment.

Paws & Claws • Added designs for a range of pet food packages utilizing both standard and reversed color schemes, strictly per their brand usage standards.

at SNHU has been the near total flexibility of the project briefs – within the basic guidelines of each assignment, we mostly got to make them up for ourselves – but I decided to take advantage of that as part of refining my pieces and refine the briefs as well as the work itself. My aim was to make each of the ten projects feel as 'real' as possible, both in how the annotation situated the 'client' and 'problem' and in how I displayed the work. I still think it would have been beneficial to have had at least one assignment where we worked with peers as each other's 'clients' to develop and respond to firm briefs and expectations for our designs.
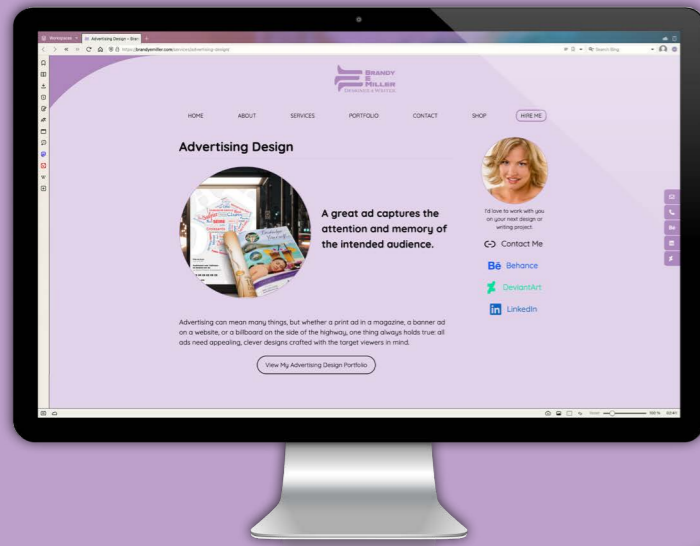
Defending Specific Choices

Overall, I am proud of my portfolio and my website. Both are better thanks to feedback, and I think they largely speak for themselves, but there are also few specific pieces of feedback I strongly disagreed with and did not incorporate. With respect to the refinement of the pieces themselves, I did not attempt to convert my Connections Apart program into a coffee table book, as Prof. Temple suggested. It's an interesting idea, but I don't believe I would have been able to execute it well during these last two weeks in addition to everything else I have had going on, and I think attempting it would have hurt my ability to focus on the overall quality of my portfolio and website. I tried to be thoughtful about what refinements I undertook where I felt they would require too much time, by considering how much time the original pieces took and being strategic about refinements to the works which were most time-intensive to create.

The feedback I have incorporated most sparingly has been the feedback about my website. I realize my website includes a bit more than just my portfolio; with a structure intended to scale easily as I have professional work to add to my portfolio; 'Services' as a separate path from 'Portfolio;' 'Shop' and 'Hire Me' pages; but I strongly disagree that it is "too much" as Prof. Temple asserts, or that a website's design should be evaluated from an exclusively graphic design lens wherein conciseness or singularity of navigational path are desirable goals.

Looking first to the final project rubric, the website portfolio is supposed to reflect how I wish to "position myself professionally," reflect my "branded personal style that reflects [me] as the artist," and be "housed in [a] platform" (SNHU, 2024). Part of how I wish to position myself professionally is as accessible and unintimidating to small business clients, who may not be looking to review my portfolio but rather learn about what services I offer – what I can do. However, I also want my portfolio to be reviewable as such by potential employers or other graphic designers interested in reviewing my portfolio – what I have done. Targeting both audiences requires having two distinct paths, and the individual landing pages for each of my service offerings, with my photo and calls to action, are intended for the former group, not the latter. The idea that good web design has only a single path to the same information is outdated. Paths should be designed with different audiences in mind and the calls to action intended for each audience (Guthrie, 2021). For potential small business clients, my aim is to get them to contact me more than it is to get them to review my portfolio, which is why my portrait and calls to action links are more prominent on my individual service pages and the option to continue to the relevant portion of my portfolio less prominent at the bottom, below the brief service description.

With regard to the sections of my website beyond those required by the assignment – my 'Shop,' 'FAQ,' and 'Hire Me' pages – the rubric states the site "must include at minimum" the pages it requires, "housed in" the platform we created. That it is acceptable for the site to contain additional pages is clearly implied by both. The optimum number of navigational links is considered to be seven and the links at either end are considered most important, which is why I begin with 'Home' and end with 'Hire Me,' and outline 'Hire Me' to make it a call to action (Crestodina, 2024).

My Future Professional Life

I know I was successful in making significant refinements to my work during the capstone. I also know there are ways it could still be refined. The two biggest takeaways I think I will keep in mind as I move on, hopefully, to a professional career are to be unafraid to make major changes to my work when feedback points me in that direction and to get more comfortable with drawing the line on when not to do so. I realize those are opposite, and I'm still very much struggling with the second one, but as I have been working on my portfolio in these final two weeks, I realized that I just don't have time to second-guess the major choices I already made when rebranding and refining the work, portfolio, and website earlier in the course.

Ethical Principles and Social Responsibility in My Working Life

I've always felt like the questions about "ethical principles and social responsibility to advance the graphic design industry and have positive lasting effects on people and societies" are dauntingly bigger than me, but I do know what I want to do and what I will avoid doing.

I want to do work that helps small businesses. Partly, I admit, it's the work I think I can get and have the most confidence I can do – things like stationery, menus, brochures, advertisements – but since about halfway through at SNHU I found myself noticing that many local businesses, especially restaurants, don't have very good materials or websites, despite not needing anything very fancy. I've also noticed that restaurants often don't have good pictures or descriptions of their food, which I think both hurts them and reflects an equity and accessibility issue. I got to travel quite a bit when I was younger, and one of the things I remember was that menus in Europe often had pictures and in parts of Asia there were even plastic models of the food. Looking back, I realized it made it easy for people to understand and order regardless of language or literacy and let children and people with disabilities point to order. I think there's an opportunity to achieve that for small restaurants with good menu design.

As far as what I will avoid doing, I will definitely try to avoid doing any designs that are racially or culturally insensitive or offensive and I will turn down clients or employers if they want me to make designs that I believe to be offensive or insensitive. I also know that I don't necessarily know all the considerations or interpretations. We live in a multicultural, global society, and I don't understand everyone's sensibilities or traditions, so I will probably make mistakes and need to keep learning and growing as a designer.

My Professional Goals

At this stage of my life and career, my goals are fairly modest. I'd like to earn a living through my design and creative writing work. I haven't abandoned the long-held dreams which drew me to pursue more education in the first place – to be a professional storyteller. I still hope to complete and sell a screenplay or two, some comic and children's books, maybe a novel. In the meantime, though, I'm hoping I can find graphic design work, and I would really like to do the type of freelance work for local businesses and restaurants that I mentioned above. I know I won't make a fortune doing it, but I think it would be satisfying and a good way to build a professional portfolio.

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Above left: Each service page directly addresses potential clients with my portrait and multiple calls to action. Below: various steps in the evolution of my logo. Versions actually used are larger.

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