Simplification centre

Technical paper 12

Professionalising functional communications

What practitioners need to know

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One of the reasons why so many complex communications fail is that the people who draft them within large organisations have access to very little professional development or support, and are not perceived as having a specialist professional status within their organisation.

In 2009 and 2010 the Simplification Centre developed and ran a programme of design education to help address this problem. Nineteen people have now qualified for a Certificate of Higher Education in Information Design from the University of Reading.

This paper describes the programme, and relates it to models of professionalisation, and to competence frameworks used in government and service industries.

University of Reading

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What do we call them?

We have used the term 'functional communication' here, referring to such things as forms, information leaflets, statements, customer letters, and contracts – as distinct from persuasive communications designed to attract you to a product, or to take a particular course of action.

We realise that all communications have a function, of course. We could perhaps have used another term, such as 'transactional communication', but each one has its own problems.

1 The situation

We have professions because there are things we need to do, and do well[1]. Specifically, things which can't be done by just following a formula, but which involve specialist knowledge, judgement and experience to get right.

Functional communications certainly fall into the category of things we need to do well, and with some urgency. Both government and the private sector have been under pressure for some time to do better at functional communications – the forms, bills, letters, contracts, manuals and information packs that as citizens and customers we need to understand and get right, but which often fail to get their message across to us. It's a problem which has been highlighted again and again in the recent past, but without any real sense of progress. This user comment from the Anderson Review's research into government guidance for small businesses (Better Regulation Executive 2009) graphically summarises the problem for users:

> 'Don't take me through the untreated sewage of regulation. Tell me what to do.'

The Better Regulation Executive and National Consumer Council's 2007 report into regulated information for consumers reflects the same issue:

> 'In summary, our work found that although information can be a powerful tool it is neither failsafe nor costless. When presented to consumers, many of the pieces of information from our case studies were not having the desired outcomes. Consumers rejected much of the information because there was too much of it and because it was presented in a complex and unappealing format…Some of the more vulnerable groups we spoke to found overly complex information not only difficult but also humiliating…across society our research found a desire for simple, succinct information.' (Better Regulation Executive 2007).

The argument is both ethical and financial. Better forms save not only customer frustration and humiliation but also reprocessing costs. Understanding the terms of our insurance not only protects us better but also turns us into loyal, profitable customers. It's hard to see a downside. Although numerous government bodies and regulators have addressed the issue in recent years, most address it at a policy level, as if poor communication is deliberate or can be cured by a simple decision to do it better. There is some good guidance in their reports, and some practical suggestions for solutions, but little hint that there might be a problem of professional skills.

1 Abbott (1988)

The opportunity is there for communications professionals working inside large organisations to map out this area of expertise and claim it for their own, energised by web technology, multimodal platforms and the potential of new ways of communicating.

2 The problem

On the evidence, though, functional communications isn't making much professional headway in either the public or private sectors. No professional body takes responsibility for it, and there is no standardised job title to be found across different organisations. Depending on the organisation, documents such as forms or system-produced customer letters may come under IT, customer services or marketing.

Career development can also be a problem. Whereas someone joining as a junior marketing manager or press officer can see ahead of them a clear promotions path to the top communications jobs, no similar path is as obvious for people working on functional communications.

This lack of recognition can extend to budgets too. In our experience as consultants, it has not been uncommon to find that the identified communications professions such as marketing attract status and budget, leaving functional communication to make do with what it can.[2]

That said, though, there has been some progress over the last twenty years. Increasingly marketing departments are including staff who are responsible for customer communications, and job titles such as 'customer experience manager' are now found. The introduction of multiple channels has exposed more managers to concepts such as user experience design, and information architecture, and it's possible that this will have a wider effect on the view businesses have of their customers.

3 The solution

At the Simplification Centre, we believe that the lack of professional recognition in the workplace is a major reason why progress is this area seems so slow. Over the last three years, we have designed

2 Responding to the need for financial cutbacks in government, Matt Tee's *Review of Government Direct Communications and the Role of COI* (March 2011) proposes radical changes in the scope and organisation of marketing and advertising communications. However, the review makes no mention of functional communications.

a professional development programme aimed at functional communications teams in large organisations. The rest of this paper describes our thinking behind this work, what we did, and what we have learned from it.

3.1 Models of professional expertise

Our first task was to understand the nature of professional expertise.

It seems that professionalism involves quite a complex mix of knowledge and skills. According to Andrew Abbott, Professor of Sociology at the University of Chicago[3], professionals need to align their field with academic disciplines to show that they fit with our core cultural values of 'logical consistency and rationality'. Without this connection, professions can seem dubious or lightweight, and without access to new research, they risk becoming stagnant and out of date.

Abbott goes on to use the medical model of diagnosis and treatment to describe how professionals deal with problems in the field. He sees the practical application of inference as the real mark of a professional – applying professional knowledge appropriately to particular sets of circumstances. To be able to make inferences from available evidence requires there to be an underlying conceptual model of the problem the professional is dealing with. If diagnosis and treatment are too routinised, solutions are just technical – the equivalent of a designer using a template. On the other hand, one-off solutions without an underlying rationale are also a problem. One design task well done will have no further influence, without insight into the reasons why it worked.

For this reason we decided that theoretical concepts would play a central part in our programme, and we looked for ways to communicate them simply and memorably.

In a similar analysis, Donald Schön[4] identifies three types of professional knowledge:

- *Abstract theory*
  Based on rational, scientific principles found in academic disciplines
- *Applied theory*
  About how abstract theory applies in specialist areas

3 Abbott (1988).

4 Schön (1983).

- *Professional skills*
  Tacit knowledge relating to how to get the job done in the 'messy' real world.

Ideally these come together in a culture of 'reflective practice' where designers articulate the ways in which their knowledge of design principles and experience of similar problems help them to arrive at particular solutions.

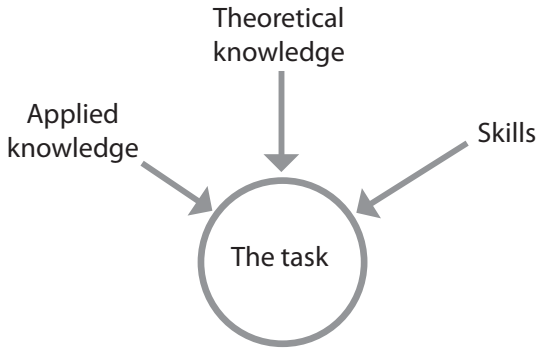


Figure 2: A model of professional knowledge

For Schön, reflective practice is also dynamic. As they work, practitioners identify new problems or areas of interest which are then passed back to the universities for research, resulting in new theories and abstractions which keep the professions up to date and relevant in the face of social and technological change.

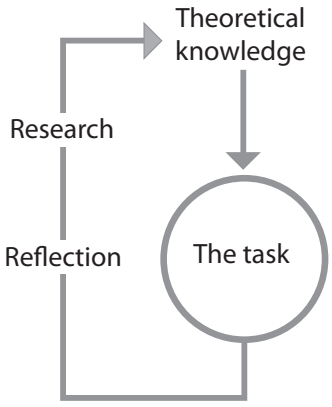


Figure 3: Design practice and design research

3.2 *Defining the functional communications knowledge space*

Applying this thinking to the field of functional communications enabled us to make detailed decisions about the knowledge and skills that practitioners would need to deal effectively with complex information problems.

3.2.1 Theoretical knowledge

In a conference paper 'Information Design: how the disciplines work together', Rob Waller scopes out the theoretical territory of information design by relating academic disciplines to user problems. The table below extends this approach.

Customer problem	Sources of knowledge about the problem
I don't like the way this looks	Graphic design theories Gestalt psychology
It doesn't look like anything I've seen before	Design history English literature/genre theory
I'm struggling to see what's going on	Psychology of perception
I can't find my way around this	Human Computer Interaction (HCI)
I don't see what it has to do with me	Marketing/segmentation Relevance theory
I don't think it's talking to me	Sociolinguistics Linguistic philosophy
I don't see how it relates to other information I've got	Marketing/customer journey
I don't understand the content	Cognitive psychology
I don't understand the sentences	Psycholinguistics, text linguistics
I don't understand the words	Etymology Psycholinguistics
I can't see how to use it	Applied psychology Ergonomics Human Computer Interaction (HCI)
I can't make sense of this diagram	Graphic design theories Semiotics

Table 1: Customer problems related to academic knowledge (based on a similar table in Waller, 1995/2011)

These disciplines potentially combine to establish fundamental principles about how we see, understand and use information, although the work of interpretation is challenging. Unlike applied knowledge, which can become redundant, these underlying fundamental principles of human communication should mostly endure in the face of technological change and apply equally across all kinds of media.

3.2.2 Applied knowledge

Applied knowledge refers to areas of specialist practice, with their own history and traditions which dictate how things are done. These traditions are important sources of wisdom, but it's important also to validate them by going back to the fundamentals of how we access and make sense of information: just because practices endure doesn't always mean they are helpful.

Areas of applied knowledge relevant to document design include:

- Graphic design
- Illustration and diagramming
- Information architecture
- Information design
- Human-Computer Interaction
- Cross-platform communications design.
- Journalism
- Legal writing
- Report writing
- Web design
- Forms design
- Dynamic document design

3.2.3 Skills

The problems we noted earlier about the standardisation of job roles and identification of careers pathways are reflected in the skills and competency frameworks for communication professionals which are currently available.

For example, the Financial Skills Partnership[5], which is the sector skills council for financial services, defines numerous roles in this important service industry, including marketing and communications and customer services. But we cannot find any mention of the skills needed to write and design clear information (as distinct from compelling sales information). The Professional Skills for Government[6] (PSG) framework similarly defines a range of communications competencies, but these too emphasise public relations and advertising, rather than functional communications.

While these frameworks clearly include skills which all communications professionals should have, they do not identify specialist skills for functional communication roles.

By way of a response to this problem, the Simplification Centre has developed a set of additional skills for functional communicators, shown in Appendix 1, which might potentially be added to existing competence frameworks, such as those we've mentioned, covering other strands.

5 See for example the communication job roles and their associated competencies for the financial sector at http://www.fssc.org.uk/99321_13.html?i=8 (accessed 13 April 2011)

6 http://www.civilservice.gov.uk/about/improving/psg/psg-identifier/framework-communications.aspx (accessed 23 March 2011)

3.3 *Designing the Certificate of Higher Education in Information Design*

In 2009, in response to this perceived need to professionalise functional communications, the Simplification Centre began work to design and deliver a Certificate of Higher Education in Information Design, both as a way to accredit the skills that functional communicators already possess and to introduce them to new ideas and approaches. In terms of levels, the Certificate is equivalent to a first year undergraduate programme. This level was chosen (as against a postgraduate diploma) because we found the majority of individuals in this job role are not graduates.

Although forty people from a range of organisations have attended individual modules, the nineteen people who have completed the Certificate are all from the Customer Information Team at HM Revenue & Customs, and this organisation's encouragement and support was instrumental in getting the programme going.

Programme modules were delivered as one or two day courses, consisting largely of lectures and group discussions and exercises. Modules also included pre-reading, and a post-course assignment to be undertaken in the workplace or in the students' own time. Assignments usually included some information analysis, a writing or design exercise, and a report explaining the redesign and justifying it through reference to theory learned on the course. Students received tutorial help with the assignment by submitting an interim version for comments, and feedback was delivered both on a short written form and in a one-to-one meeting with tutors who visited them on-site in their workplace. Lecture notes and slides were published for students on Basecamp, an online project management system.

The preceding analysis had given us the starting point for our curriculum, which we then translated into a series of core and optional modules. (The course programme and an overview of the modules are provided in Appendix 2.)

Our core modules cover not only the main activities of writing and design, but acknowledge the importance of testing (through a usability module) and empathy with users (through a module entitled 'the customer journey'). The optional modules fall broadly into three areas: writing, design and project management.

The approach and theoretical backdrop of the course is set up by the first module, entitled 'Introduction to Simplification', and it is here that we directly address Donald Schön's challenge to develop reflective practice through reference to theory.

Integrating theory with practice is a problem for all professional education. As Andrew Abbott observes, medical students go through pure science, medical specialisms and clinical practice on the assumption that each builds on the other. In his view, the relationship between them is actually often tenuous.

Teaching styles are usually different too: theory tends to be taught traditionally, with textbooks and lectures, while skills are associated with practical experience, which tends to keep the approaches apart.

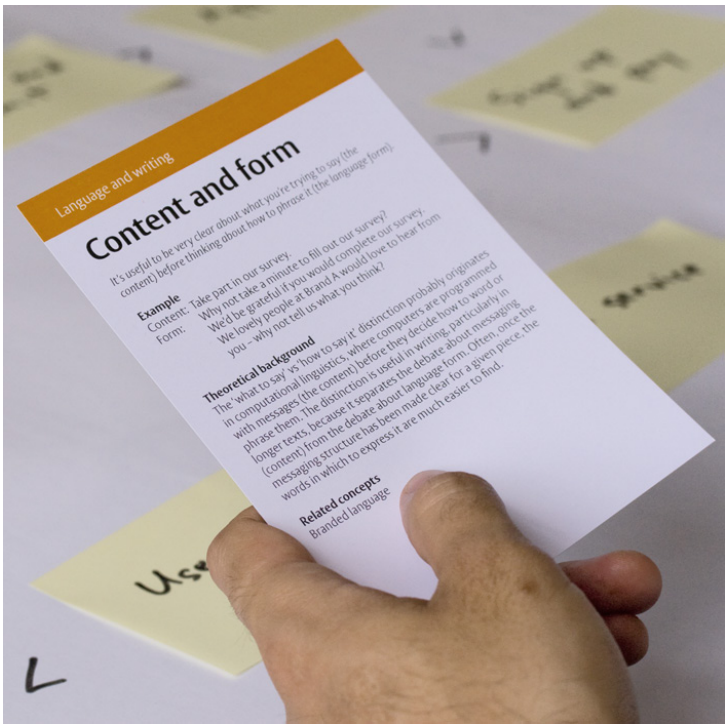
Schön's study of an architectural studio points up the importance of the tutor's role in making these connections for students. However since our students, mostly working at a distance, wouldn't have this kind of tutor support, we had to find another way.

3.3.1 Theory cards

Our approach could perhaps be said to follow the principles of the visual workplace, where all the elements of the task are present and visible.

Tutors were asked to summarise key theories and specialist knowledge on cards which can then be literally and physically brought into a relationship with the task. The cards – A6 in size – enforce extreme summarisation on the tutor, perhaps even a risky level for those used to the cautious style of traditional academic writing. Most cards carry a short definition, and a practical application of the concept – in effect it is the 'elevator pitch' for the idea.

The cards are used in the introductory module to introduce theoretical concepts as they arise through practical encounters with documents. We asked students to bring in examples of documents with them, which they critique in groups. As they do so, tutors introduce theory cards opportunistically – for example, if someone mentions that two things appear related but inappropriately so on a page, the tutor can take that the opportunity to introduce the appropriate gestalt perceptual principle. Or if someone mentions that a sentence is very long and convoluted, the tutor might introduce the concept of cognitive load.



Soon students start to use the cards themselves. When critiquing a document, they can identify problems using their judgement and use the cards to find an articulated rationale. In the absence of tutor support, the cards became the point of reference and the voice of authority as students wrote their assignments and reports.

The initial set of cards for the introductory course fell into several groups: Language, Cognition, Perception, Conversation and Relationship. Subsequent courses expanded the set to include key tools and technical concepts that were mostly less theoretical in nature. We will be publishing a further technical paper on the theory cards concept, our choice of concepts to feature in the series, and our ongoing debate about this. Two things in particular are worth mentioning here, though.

Firstly, the cards become a compact physical instantiation of the concept, literally on the table as students discuss documents.

This physicality is materially different from the availability of the same concepts in textbooks or online. Their physical presence makes them candidates for the analysis in hand, not reliant on memory.

Secondly, the tutors became aware that some ostensibly distinct theoretical approaches are virtually identical when explained at the level of practical application necessary for this course. In particular the cards for 'schemata', 'assumption', and 'world knowledge' largely amounted to 'prior knowledge allows people to place new knowledge in a context, and to make inferences about the communicator's intention'. And we got into something of a tangle trying to explain why we felt that the Cooperative Principle is so important[7] – explained to real designers in the context of real documents it seemed almost too obvious to be worth drawing attention to.

3.3.2 Sample documents

In a similar way, we used sample documents (paper or electronic) as representations of specialist knowledge. Students analysed these in various ways – for example, by mapping reader journeys, analysing content, and applying usability heuristics. This encouraged them to explore what others were doing and to explain their own design decisions in the context of existing practice.

3.3.3 Assessment

Finally, we got students used to the idea of a three-dimensional assessment for their work – research into what others were doing, an analysis of what they were doing, and a piece of practical work using their writing and design skills.

3.3.4 Making new connections

The most unexpected and exciting result of this approach was to see students start to make new connections between theory and practice. For example one group of students applied the concept of the customer journey to a single form, mapping the high and low points of the user experience as they made their way through the notes and questions as a way of quantifying problems and identifying things to improve. None of us had thought of doing this before. Another student presented a multimedia communications strategy as a mind map which again worked extremely well.

7 If you want to know why we thought it was important, see Waller & Delin (2003) for an account of H.P. Grice's Cooperative Principle applied to branding and marketing communications.

'I've worked with customer facing documents for a number of years and I found this course really informative, insightful and interesting... I benefited from your experience and returned to work fired up, ready to put the concepts I'd learned into practice.'

Student comment

4 Reflection

As the first cohort of nineteen students prepares to graduate in July 2011, it seems a good time to pause for reflection. Of course, there is always going to be a lot to say about a new programme and the many adjustments that might be made for the future, but we will limit our reflections here to two.

4.1 The power of theory

There is no question that for many students the power of the programme lay in its theoretical, rationalising approach. Senior managers have commented that the course has had a significant impact on the students' confidence and on the quality of work. Students have taken an increasingly professional role within their workplace teams, as they became more adept at articulating their expertise. On at least one occasion we have heard of theory cards being introduced to an internal meeting in the workplace, while one student commented on the problems resulting from the fact that the rest of the organisation lacked their knowledge – truly the complaint of a professional.

4.2 The difficulty of technical skills

Students came to courses with varying levels of technical skills in, for example, design software. While the HMRC students were technically proficient, some people from other organisations were from a management background and came mainly to develop their awareness. Our programme was not geared to develop technical skills, which takes time, as the apprentices of old knew well, and would need longer-term arrangements for specific software training, and workplace coaching than we could provide.

5 What next?

Piloting the Certificate has been an important step towards professionalising functional communications, but there is still plenty more to do.

We found it hard to find suitable reading material for the course, and so we believe there is a need for an entry-level textbook about information design. As well as explaining basic techniques, it would map out the intellectual territory and act as a gateway to the detailed theory and practice which people can go on to explore in depth.

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank Gavin Jefferies and John Willmer, successive Heads of Customer Information at HM Revenue & Customs, who supported this work, encouraging their team to take the Certificate of Higher Education. Their support, advice and feedback has been invaluable.

The programme was organised and delivered by the following staff of the Department of Typography & Graphic Communication at the University of Reading, and visiting experts:

Jane Cave
Judy Delin
Mary Dyson
Martin Evans
Paul Luna
Emma Minns
Jeanne-Louise Moys
Kevin O'Donnell (and his colleagues at Xerox)
Bethany Shepherd
Mark Stanton
Myra Thiessen
Jenny Waller
Rob Waller
David Woodward.

We also valued the input of our external examiner, Clive Richards, and of the Faculty and Department Directors of Teaching & Learning, Patricia Woodman and Eric Kindel.

And we would like to thank the students, too numerous to list here, who undertook the courses so enthusiastically and with an open mind about the value of theory to their everyday practice.

We also think the Certificate might potentially develop into an e-learning programme. Given the practical nature of the course, and the amount of group-working involved in our face-to-face teaching, this is something of a challenge. A Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) would have to be found that supports our approach.

Of course, we could just ask the students. As their final exercise, we asked them to design a multimedia strategy for delivering the Certificate programme in the future. There was no shortage of ideas, including text messages to remind students when their assignments were due, but replicating the buzz was always going to be difficult.

> 'The first thing I think is: the talking about it like this, we're not going to get that.'

We need to find ways of going beyond text formats to show how ideas inform practice in a dynamic way, and engage students in the process.

Finally, we believe there is a need to extend the work of the Certificate for different audiences, for example managers of functional communications teams, graphic designers who are interested in developing their practice to include this field, or members of the legal profession looking at language simplification.

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Appendix 1: Proposed additional skills for functional communications roles

Note: Level 1 is entry level; Level 4 is a strategic leadership role.

1 Writing and design skills

Level 1	Level 2	Level 3	Level 4
Is aware of and applies appropriate readability measures to customer communications Is aware of and uses corporate style guidelines and best practice research for forms design Can rewrite and redesign complex documents to improve accessibility Is able to use typographic techniques to solve complex graphic information problems Works with the legal department to simplify legal language as appropriate Recognises opportunities to use images, diagrams and data visualisation to communicate complex information Is able to use graphic editing techniques to identify underlying text structures with graphic equivalents	Understands the strengths and weaknesses of readability measures for customer communications Demonstrates in-depth expertise in designing forms in line with both corporate style guidelines and best practice research Is able to identify problem areas in complex documents and adopt strategies for simplification Uses advanced typographic techniques to solve complex graphic information problems Advises and persuades clients about the need to simplify legal language as appropriate Confidently uses images, diagrams and data visualisation to communicate complex information Ensures the use of graphic editing techniques to ensure that text and design work together to support meaning	Champions functionality in all customer-facing communications and drives the simplification agenda Provides overall editorial control to ensure functional communications meet the requirements of best practice research	Demonstrates an informed understanding of and commitment to simplification issues

2 Channels and technologies

Level 1	Level 2	Level 3	Level 4
Able to apply best practice communication principles to different channels and technologies Understands the technology available to develop personalised dynamic documents Is able to specify document design and content for different audiences and scenarios	Able to design information architectures across a range of media which meet customer requirements Able to manage complex information design solutions across different media	Champions functionality and the customer experience across a range of media Has a clear understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of different media in terms of their functionality and role in the customer journey Able to identify and solve problems areas in the customer journey for key products or services	Maintains a focus on functionality and the integrity of customer experience across all media

3 The needs of the business

Level 1	Level 2	Level 3	Level 4
Aware of the importance of functional communications to customer satisfaction and the aims of the business	Ensures that functional communications achieve the standards necessary for customer satisfaction	Able to create a robust business case for the development of key functional documents, based on customer feedback, research data and financial data	Uses knowledge of the business case for key functional documents to influence business strategy and operations Contributes and responds to the business sector's agenda for functional customer communications

4 Quality maintenance

Level 1	Level 2	Level 3	Level 4
Able to maintain customer focus in the face of demands of different stakeholders	Holds regular document reviews to maintain standards of relevance and clarity	Ensures processes are in place to ensure quality at each stage of the document development process	Oversees relationships with content owners across the organisation Champions functional communications at senior levels

5 Evaluation and research

Level 1	Level 2	Level 3	Level 4
Understands the role of usability research in informing the design of forms and other functional customer communications	Able to commission research from relevant research agencies Identifies problems areas from research data and ensures appropriate solutions are developed in response	Ensures relevant research data is channelled down through the organisation to the relevant design teams Ensures that functional customer communications take all relevant research into account	Ensures the results of relevant research is routinely available to communications departments

Appendix 2
Certificate of Higher Education in Information Design: the modules

Candidates need 120 credits to achieve the qualification.

Core modules, totalling 60 credits				
01 Introduction to simplification *10 credits*	**02 Introduction to clear writing** *10 credits*	**03 Introduction to graphic information design** *20 credits*	**04 Introduction to usability** *10 credits*	**05 Designing the customer journey** *10 credits*
This introductory module covers theories from disciplines such as psychology and linguistics that explain how we process information, and why we find particular design solutions things simple or not. It also introduces a range of simplification strategies for transforming complex documents.	This module starts with a brief history of the English language to understand the connotations of different types of words, and the choices available to us. It looks at attempts to restrict vocabulary and syntax and proposes instead a simplification strategy that ensures clarity at each stage of the writing process.	This module is a hands-on design module that covers the elements of graphic editing and design, and introduces strategies for designing complex information.	The usability module introduces key concepts from psychology and ergonomics, and covers the design of usability tests and the how to interpret results. It looks at web heuristics and provides the opportunity to evaluate selected interfaces.	In this module we show how to map customer experiences across the organisation in order to understand the context of particular communications, and identify touchpoints and moments of truth – the communications that really matter.

Optional modules: students choose 60 credits from these courses			
06 Simplifying complex documents *20 credits*	**07 Clear writing for online information** *10 credits*	**08 Advanced writing skills** *20 credits*	**09 Introduction to personalised dynamic documents** *20 credits*
The focus of this module is on tools and techniques to deconstruct and rework existing documents which have become complex. Techniques include mind mapping and organising principles.	This module takes a close look at the differences between writing for print and for the web, and the implications for text.	This module looks at how to tailor the way you write for different audiences, taking into account such things as literacy levels, previous experience, and the kind of relationship you want to build. * It includes techniques for building audience profiles.	This module forms an introduction to dynamic document technology, and includes a visit to Xerox in Reading for demonstrations of digital communications technology. The module covers segmentation as well as specifying design and content for personalised communications.
10 Forms design *20 credits*	**11 Creating inclusive documents** *10 credits*	**12 Images, diagrams and data visualisation** *10 credits*	**13 Managing information design projects** *10 credits*
This is a module for forms designers which looks at why we need forms, error analysis and the business case for improvement, as well as key forms design issues.	This module raises awareness of the requirements of the Equality Act, and the problems of bias and stereotyping in communications. Also included are ways of testing to ensure materials are accessible.	This module introduces the theory of how visual signs convey meaning, and covers the main types of diagrams.	This is a managerial-level module which looks at the skills, roles, timings and processes involved in managing information design projects. Agency briefing is also included.
14 Briefing for and interpreting customer research *10 credits*	**15 Measurement, testing and quality control** *10 credits*	**16 Report writing** *10 credits*	
This module covers commissioning and interpreting customer research, and looks at how best how to use industry surveys.	This module looks at the roles of measurement, testing and quality control in maintaining and improving functional communications.	This module focuses on the particular issues to consider when writing reports for different audiences: internal, professional, and public.	