Lesson Introduction: Define the problem

In order to solve a problem designers need to understand it.

Sometimes what is presented and described as the problem actually

is not. Designers must learn to figure out (evaluate) for themselves

(and their clients) what the root problem is and then proceed to solve

it. The tendency is to blame the easiest scapegoat. This is called the

band-aid solution—temporarily cover it up only.

In December 2015, Steve Harvey was hosting the Miss Universe

pageant and announced the wrong winner. He proceeded to

correct his error while speculation soared. As usual, the public

wanted a scapegoat, Steve owned up to the mistake but an error still

happened. What was the real problem?

It would be easy to point fingers at the host and ignore the real

issue—the wrong person was announced as winner. Though it may

have made the show more exciting, it was an embarrassing error. The

elimination card and bad design have been identified as possible

culprits. Figure 1 portrays the actual elimination card. At first glance

one may judge this as perfectly obvious, but if put in context in the

heat of the moment with millions of eyes on us. How easy it would

have been to overlook the actual winner, in the bottom right corner,

and crown miss Colombia.

Defining the problem is the first step in the design process. If the

designer doesn't understand the real problem, there isn't much



FIGURE 1: **2015 Miss Universe Elimination Card**. Though the MISS UNIVERSE 2015 is set in bold capital letters,

it's also the furthest away from the top left corner, where we first look for information in print. The huge amount of

empty space surrounding it actually helps to hide it in this instance.

that can be solved and the status quo stays the same. Evaluation

leads to understanding, which leads to action. If the Miss Universe

pageant doesn't implement change (whatever that may be), the

potential for the same mistake is still there.







FIGURE 2: **Miss Universe Elimination Card alternative designs**. The top two design solutions are provided by

The Hussle (http://thehustle.co/steve-harvey-was-set-up-to-fail-in-miss-universe), which states that Steve Harvey

was set up to fail because of the poorly designed elimination card (which even included a spelling error—see

Figure 1). The third redesigned card by Branding Specialist Eric Thomas (https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/howbad-

design-wrecked-steve-harveys-universe-eric-thomas) exemplifies simple utilitarian design that matches the

rest of the show.

Figure 2 showcases three

alternative designs for the results card. The underlying design issues

in the original card lie with the lack of logical order including sizing,

placement, and organization issues. The three examples easily lead

the eye from 2nd Runner Up to 1st Runner Up to Miss Universe. The

innate visual hierarchy emphasizes the winning name instead of the

position. It should be pointed out that there may be more than one

possible solution to a problem. The design process can help students

find the most appropriate.

Students need to understand the real problem in order to look for

appropriate solutions. The tendency is to do what has been done in

the past because that is easy to see and do. By learning how to search

out and define the problem, students will be better prepared to come

up with unique solutions.

These skills can be useful not only with design and art making

but also other areas of their lives as well. Let's take a look at

interpersonal relationships for example. Though this is especially

important in the business world, communication between people

and building relationships can sometimes be bumpy. Students can

learn to "define the problem" in an effort to understand, define, and

keep healthy relationships.

**Vocabulary**

Band-aid solution: a temporary solution that does not

deal with the root cause of a problem.

Define the problem: Well-defined problems lead to

breakthrough solutions. A big problem is when the

wrong problem is approached leading to band-aid

solutions. Designers can seek out the real problem in

an effort to provide solutions which will actually fix the

problem. [hbr.org/2012/09/the-power-of-definingthe-

prob]

Interpersonal: relating to relationships or

communication between people.

Perceptive: having or showing sensitive insight.

Solution: something used or done to deal with and

end a problem—solving the problem.

Visual hierarchy: is the arrangement of visual

elements in a way that not only implies importance,

but leads the eye from one place to another creating

visual contrast and order.

**ACTIVITY PROCESS**

**Engagement (the hook—motivation and relevancy)**

Ask students if they have ever jumped to conclusions or if others have

jumped to conclusions about them. How did they feel when someone

else jumped to conclusions concerning them? Ask them why they

think people jump to conclusions. Often, it's because there is a lack

of understanding. The Define the Problem step of the design process

is the understanding that keeps people from jumping to conclusions.

Once a deeper understanding has occurred, people often regret

jumping to conclusions and the trouble and hurt it has creates.

day 1

**Assignment 1—Band Poster**

**scenario**: The band Nirvana (client) comes to you (agency) seeking

help. Their music sales have dropped so they want a new advertising

poster to drive up sales.

**objective**: To find out what the real problem is and suggest possible

solutions (not actually design a band poster). Note: The first

inclination students will have is to literally design a band poster

because the client suggested it. The client/professional relationship

is often perceived as authoritative—"I'm paying you so you do what

I want, and I want a poster." This activity can be a good springboard

to discussion on value of professional design services and

professionalism in general.

**specifications**: Each group must identify and present at least five

possible reasons why sales are down and five possible solutions to fix

the real problem.

**process**:

1. Form small groups (three–four students per group).

2. Analyze the presented problem—the obvious problem is that sales

are down, the real problem is why sales are down. This is what

you're after.

3. Analyze the real problem and have students list possible reasons

why sales are down. Possibilities include: Nirvana music style is

no longer popular, etc. Preposterous reasons

are all right at this point. The idea is to have students think about

the possible underlying issues driving the presented problem.

Once the real problem has been identified, appropriate solutions

can be developed.

4. Come up with solutions to the list of possible problems. Example:

problem—lead singer is dead; solutions—a. current lead singer is

terrible (define terrible) and a new one is needed, etc… The real issues

are what you're after. Thinking about

hypothetical solutions is an added bonus and can be fun. There are

no "wrong" ideas at this point.

**Hints**: Let students be silly. Play is a useful tool in the creative process.

**Closure**

Things may not be as they first appear. The first goal (step) in the

design process is evaluating and defining the problem. As students

start to come up with possible solutions, have them start to think

about how they can present their findings to the class as groups on

day two.

day 2

**Assignment 1—Band Poster (continued)**

Students should be close to completing the first project. Give them

a little time to finish up and gather their thoughts. Once groups have

had ample time to complete the project specifications, it's time to

have them present their findings.

Verbal presentation skills are a "must have" in the design industry,

if not all industries. Designers often find themselves pitching a

project or educating their client or boss. In an effort to start building

presentation skills, have each group come up with a presentation

method that works for them and then present to the class. The only

requirement is that there must be a verbal component. All media is

available for presentations.

This presentation is less about perfection as it is about experiencing

public speaking, which scares most people. As groups are preparing,

encourage good presentation skills through practice. Have students

use note cards or other preparation/practice methods.

**Closure**

The presented problem (revenue is down) and perceived solution

(Band Poster) is often not the real issue (why sales are down). The

client may not actually understand what the real problem is and

may need help understanding the real reasons behind the problem.

Appropriate solutions can only emerge by truly understanding the

problem. To truly understand the problem students must delve

deeper into everything that surrounds it. This is done through

research, the next step in the design process.