



## Simon Downs

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Director of TRACEY: Drawing and Visualisation Research Group



Why does my research matter? That's an interesting question. There are lots of theories about culture, but not many that usefully explain the ways that graphics and illustration, games, and apps, function and evolve as systems of communication. This distinction, between theories of culture and theories of systems of culture, is important because culture is (as Prof. Mark Pagel tells us) the mechanism by which we program each other to do remarkable things: things like survive Covid-19 or halt global warming.

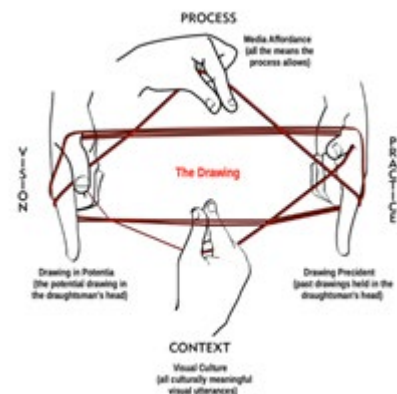
Without communication we blindly stumble, alone in the dark, wondering why we are lost, without the means to communicate how lost we are or to learn from the wisdom of others.

I research visual communication in ways that are useful for the practice of communication design: ways that allow me to train a generation of communications designers: illustrators, advertising creatives, brand designers, videographers, UX designers and graphic designers: designers that will change the world.

<p><b>Post 16 Education:</b> BTEC Art and Design at East Ham College</p>	<p><b>Higher Education:</b> BA (Hons) Illustration at Harrow College of HE</p>
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### Why did you choose to research graphic design and illustration?

I studied design because, quite frankly, it was the only thing I really liked doing. The prospect of spending my life doing a 'job' was utterly terrifying to the 16 year-old me. My schoolmates did things like entering the building trades and the police (or the other side of the law). At 15 my school careers team took us to the shop floor at Fords in Dagenham. It was made clear to us that we were supposed to work in a factory – art school was an escape hatch to a better world.





## WHY IT MATTERS... CREATIVE ARTS



Loughborough  
University

### Simon's experience as a student

I attended a school in East London – a school that was thankfully pulled down a couple of decades ago. It was a deeply unpleasant comprehensive school, with a local reputation for criminality and violence.

At the age of sixteen everything changed for the better with five years of art school. First a BTEC in Art and Design at the East Ham College of Technology. Then while studying at East Ham one of my lecturers, an illustrator called Jane Stobart, took me seriously when I said I wanted to be an illustrator. That was enough for me. The staff encouraged me to apply to the elite Illustration undergraduate course at Harrow, I took the hint and applied. It was amazing.

I wasn't a great student at Harrow, but my staff were patient and persistent. They kept showing me great and beautiful things until I took the work and myself seriously. My dissertation supervisor Patricia Bickers forced me to learn how to write properly, and to organise my thoughts to make an academic argument. She mentored me in academic skills that I pass on to my students to this day.

At East Ham I studied all sorts of lovely stuff: old fashioned type setting, life drawing, painting and photography – commercially useful design industry skills. At Harrow I was trained as a classical painter and illustrator. It was fascinating, if not strongly aligned to the commercial practice of illustration. I learned about etching printing plates, human physiology and renaissance painting techniques. Very little of this was directly relevant to my work as a commercial illustrator or as a design consultant for HSBC and other financial institutions: but it trained me to be the sort of person who could learn the skills that were relevant.

### Simon's Career

Nowadays I have a day job and a passion project – a bit like Batman, but with more black clothing. My day job is teaching graphic communication (think 'graphic design', but with a wider range of options for getting the job done) and illustration (images that make sense of other media); from the first year of a degree up to Ph.D.

My passion project is researching the system of visual communication – the mechanisms at work when a picture tells a story. Technically I look at visual culture as a complex adaptive system which manifests as emergent visual cultural phenomena, phenomena that are downwardly causal on the original system. It makes me very happy.

Loughborough University offer degrees in

Textiles, Fine Art, Graphic Design and an Art and Design Foundation Course