

# Strategic Analysis Through Design: Using Photos To Analyse the Organisation's Strategic Environment

## Abstract

Design thinking has been embraced by organisations for casting a different perspective on their opportunities and challenges. While design thinking offers promise in considering problems in a different light, its performance in organisations is often an immersive experience which takes place over several days. In Business Schools further challenges with design thinking application arise from students who don't feel as though they are artistic. This exercise introduces participants to a bite-sized visual design experience in photography for assisting students analyse an organisation's strategic environment in a new way. Participants will apply their own photography to analyse a case study organisation's industry environment, and be introduced to some of the opportunities and challenges of introducing visual design techniques to the management education classroom.

## Introduction

Strategic management frameworks such as Porter's Five Forces (Porter, 1979), PESTEL analysis (Aguilar, 1967), and the Resource Based View of the Firm (Barney, 1991) have been criticised as relics of the past, irrelevant for strategic thinking, overly inflexible and simplistic, and having poor outcomes in innovative problem-solving (Augier & March, 2011; Bell et al., 2018; Grundy, 2008; Mintzberg, 2004).

Partially in response to challenges with these models, many organisations now incorporate aspects of design thinking into their strategic process. Design thinking is defined by chief proponent, David Kelley, as "a method for how to come up with ideas" (Camacho, 2016, p.88). Tracing a lineage back to artisan-style production of craftsmen in the Renaissance, design thinking blurs the boundaries between art and invention to provide greater context specific and innovation in terms of answering the challenges facing an organisation (Barry & Meisiek, 2015). Today, organisations such as Proctor and Gamble, Lego, Phillips, Mattell, and some universities have established their own business design studios, where participants experiment with visual arts, role-playing, and musical methods for considering business challenges.

While more rational strategic management frameworks still have their place, it would seem there is a benefit to supplementing these models with the teaching of design techniques for analysing the strategic environment of organisations. This experiential exercise session introduces participants to a visual design activity applied in a strategy course for providing postgraduate students with a bite-sized design task for analysing the external environment of a case study organisation. The activity would also be suitable for undergraduate students at the tail-end of their degree, as well as Executive MBA students.

## Theoretical Foundation / Teaching Implications

For strategic management students it is important to consider the strengths and weaknesses of both rational analytic frameworks such as PESTEL and Porter's Five Forces, against those of design thinking tools. Understanding such distinctions will assist students in terms of their workplace practice, particularly for determining when and how to use different types of analysis.

Visual tools are one technique by which students can gain an insight into the design process. Photographs (Bramming et al., 2012), painting (Hatch & Yanow, 2008), and drawing (Kearney & Hile, 2004) all represent part of an aesthetic turn in organisation studies, where different ways of seeing and emotions are elicited through participant-produced design. Visual designs are useful to

organisations in that they might enable participants to see more, by encouraging them to look harder, wider, higher, and deeper (Barry & Meisiek, 2010).

As an example of visual design which can provide different perspectives on a particular problem or challenge, the movies *Blow Up* (Antonioni, 1971), and *One Hour Photo* (Romanek, 2022), introduce protagonists who analyse photos to interpret what they respectively believe to be evidence of a murder and an extra-marital affair. In both movies, the reality of these photos turns out to be quite different from what is inferred through the photos. Similarly, photos can be used to provide students with different understandings on an organisation's strategic environment than they may encounter through typical rational analysis such as Porter's Five Forces.

However, there are two main challenges to introducing design tools to the management education classroom. First, the design studios where organisations often undertake design thinking are also often immersive experiences which take place over several days or weeks. For example, the Procter and Gamble design studio requires participants to take residence for 12 weeks and leave their emails and mobile phones behind. Replicating similar design studio experiences for students is therefore a challenging task for management educators.

Second, design tools can often create anxiety in students. Students are likely to make statements such as "I am really no good at art," and may require greater reassurance on their efforts (Peterson et al., 2016). Furthermore, students seem unaware that organisations are using design techniques in their strategic management, and might therefore sometimes perceive such initiatives as contrary to a formal management education. As Barry and Meisiek (2015) contend, there can be a legitimisation problem with design studios in business schools.

The educator is therefore faced with the challenge of implementing a bite-sized design tool which fits the needs of the academic calendar, as well as overcome student concerns regarding their proficiency in applying artistic tools such as theatre improv and drawing. This session therefore introduces to educators a technique intended to address challenges of time and student apprehension by using visual design tools such as photographs for teaching students different ways of seeing an organisation's strategic environment.

### **Learning Objectives**

The intention of this session is to assist participants meet the following learning objectives:

- Introduction to a bite-sized visual design tool for ready classroom adaptation;
- Apply a photographic visual design technique;
- Understand tactics and pedagogical design for minimising student concerns around (1) the creativity required for applying design tools; and (2) the relevance of design tools to the modern workplace;
- Learn techniques for assisting students leverage insights on an organisation's strategic environment from their pedagogical design;
- Understand how to guide student discussion on differences between rational analytical tools (e.g. Porter's Five Forces) and design tools (e.g. visual design).

### **Exercise Overview**

The exercise introduces participants to visual design through an application involving smart phone cameras. Participants will be introduced to a case study organisation. As part of this introduction, they will be provided with a Porter's Five Forces analysis of the industry environment of this organisation.

Participants will then be presented with a photograph which the session host has taken of some material objects. The host will then explain how to view this photograph by way of considering different insights on the firm's industry environment than would likely be gleaned from a Porter's Five Forces analysis. The host will outline:

- What the photo might suggest about the case study firm's industry environment
- How the photo assists the host to think differently about the case study firm's industry environment

Participants will then be encouraged to explore the UQ campus and take a photo which might inspire different insights on the case study organisation. On returning to the session, participants will upload their photos to a visual sharing software such as padlet. The session will then involve participants outlining answers to the questions on what the photo suggests to them about the case study firm's industry environment, and how it assists them to think differently about the case study firm's industry environment.

Curating this discussion, the host will then develop key insights arising from the Porter's Five Forces analysis and the Photographic Visual Design tool. The host will conclude the session by discussing how this visual technique of analysis has been incorporated into a Postgraduate strategy tools course, including the challenges and opportunities associated with introducing students to such an approach. Discussion on issues such as the techniques used for minimising student concerns about the creative aspect of the design tool will be outlined. As well, the host will put forward strategies for assisting students leverage their insights from the pedagogical design.

### **Session Description**

The session will proceed as follows:

0-5 minutes: Introduction

5-15 minutes: Introduction of the Porter's Five Forces analysis of the case study organisation, plus introduction of a photograph taken by the host and leveraged as a Visual Design tool for offering a different insight on the industry environment of the case organisation.

15-30 minutes: Participants walk the UQ campus to take a picture which they believe helps them think differently about the case study organisation's industry environment. They return to the session room and upload their photos to a teaching software for display.

30-45 minutes: Through a question and answer session, a discussion will be undertaken which seeks to outline the different insights participants have gained on the case study organisation's strategic environment through their photographic visual design

45-60 minutes: The host will use the preceding discussion to identify key differences between rational analytical tools and design tools. The host will also outline the challenges and opportunities of integrating this visual design technique into the classroom, and the tools used for addressing student concerns involved with such techniques.

### **References**

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