In the last few years, the art form known as “ambigrams” has been brought to the world’s attention through Dan Brown’s popular novel Angels and Demons and the film based on it. However, ambigrams are not new; a few were created over 100 years ago, and a couple of friends and I have done them for several decades. But now they are enjoying a certain vogue.

An ambigram is a piece of calligraphy that by deliberate design has two readings, one usually being obtained from the other by flipping, rotating, or reflecting the piece of paper on which the ambigram is written. A well-done ambigram is a source of delight, both through the surprise value that it manifests and through its sheer beauty.

Anyone can make an ambigram, just as anyone can draw a person’s face. There are no strict criteria separating success from failure. However, creating a high-quality ambigram is just as complex and elusive an artistic achievement as is drawing a sensitive portrait.

What separates good ambigrams from poor ones? The most important criterion is rapid, nearly effortless legibility of both readings by native speakers of the language in which the ambigram is created. The second criterion is the possession of artistic elegance, surprise value, and simplicity. It takes time and practice to develop an eye and a mind for these subtle and intangible qualities. Ambigrammetry, in short, is a genuine and deep art form with all the complexity and devotion that art always entails.

Designing a good ambigram requires a number of creative sparks. At the core of such a creative act lie several distinct though overlapping abilities, including the following:

- the ability to dream up highly unusual but readable letterforms;
- the ability to look at structures on several different levels;
- the ability to sense even the slightest risk of illegibility;
- the ability to design beautiful, graceful shapes;
- the ability to self-critique and to change one’s mind;
- the ability to tell when a risk taken has succeeded or failed;
- the ability to back away from an idea despite time invested.

All these abilities, or close analogues of them, are indispensable for any kind of artistic creativity.

Through classroom discussions, readings, and the design of ambigrams, students will explore the relation between form and content, while mastering the techniques of designing an artistic ambigram. This will lead us to considerations of the fundamental mechanisms of human creativity. All participants in the seminar will create a personal portfolio of ambigrams.

Readings
David Moser (1997): “Sinosigns: A Hundred or so of My Best”. Unpublished manuscript. *
*) Available at CRCC / contact: htkeller@indiana.edu, 812.855.6965.