

White paper v. 1

The first Art Directors Club of New Jersey Education Roundtable, held at Seton Hall University on November 10, 2007, took stock of the conditions which characterize undergraduate graphic design education today. The discussion among educators in attendance was centered upon falling standards within their classrooms, an outcome of the new conditions within which design is perceived and practiced today. Many expressed the urgent need to recover codes of conduct abandoned in the wake of personal computers which have placed the tools of production within reach of the public; to the professional and the unordained. The subsequent focus on technology as a discrete area of study at the undergraduate level has eclipsed what one instructor aptly described as 'artistic practice'.

The discipline's cultural pervasiveness and technical underpinnings – entrenched as they have been in color and type specification, printing processes, and now hardware and, among others, imaging, page layout, animation, and sound engineering software – contribute to its popularity among students of varying skills, motivations, and dispositions. The result is a surplus of graphic design majors in both professional and pre-professional programs. It has also generated the benighted perception that graphic design is mere pragmatics (i.e. done the way it has always been done through proven techniques), that it does not demand *real* skills, *real* knowledge, and *real* discipline. There was demonstrable trepidation among faculty for the future of the field and the extent to which they themselves could motivate their students to become educated graphic designers.

The challenge of furnishing an authentic graphic design education has been magnified by the influx of millennial students who often juggle full-time jobs with full-time course loads and whose frames of reference and educational expectations seemingly preclude a commitment to the design process. Theirs is the language of sound bites, rough cuts, MySpace, and text messaging. Indiscriminate admission has contributed to technics as the focus of attention – students want to know *how* graphic design is made. A considerable number of them take up graphic design lacking basic drawing skills and are unable to make sound aesthetic judgments. 'We do have people who can't draw, who insist they can't draw, who could never learn to draw ... [who] don't [want to] be embarrassed by their drawing [and] go right to the computer'. Another instructor succinctly described the way in which our efforts to integrate technology has cost us: 'our students come ... wanting to get more technical knowledge so we ... increase the technical knowledge and the cycle's spinning out of control ... sometimes they don't even care how it looks and how it sounds'. Students exhibit an utter disregard for artistic quality, in its place, the perennial search for effects, instantaneous illusions, and the satisfaction that comes from knowing software

did what they told it to do.

In this new climate, research methods, thinking, problem analysis, and empirical studies relevant to critical practice have been surpassed by a new and ostensibly more prosaic set of priorities: master the techniques and the software; graduate as soon as possible.

Much of the discussion was centered upon the degree to which field expectations are addressed in the classroom. If employers presume that graduates will have estimable portfolios, that they will be fluent in history and theory and will be capable of conducting research; that graduates will be capable of expressing themselves in speech and in writing, will understand the business of graphic design, and will be grounded by a sense of ethics, can educators ensure that they have imparted the information and skills necessary for students to attain leadership in the profession? It is assumed that the above will lead to a graphic design career. But can educators truly *know* if they are reaching their students? Can they *know* if their students are learning the principles of graphic design?

The tenor of discourse arose from an instructor's earnest admission that the level of 'technical expertise' required of students upon graduation makes it impossible to consolidate art and design fundamentals, theory, and history, let alone establish a conceptual approach to solving visual problems. Employers aspire to build scholarly teams of professional graphic designers who will uphold the ethics, standards, and discrete processes of the field, yet the truncated time frames within which graphic design education must take place make it especially difficult to cultivate and recruit such individuals. The prevalent culture of specialism at academic institutions also serves to diminish the pool of well-rounded and highly competent candidates. Despite efforts to maintain the broad-based, interdisciplinary attributes for which a liberal arts education is known, the implicit aim is to graduate experts in an area of study who will earn a living in her or his field. Training for professional practice does not correspond with the ideals of a liberal arts education. Specialization challenges the notion that such an education has value *in itself*.

Following comments regarding the improbability of consolidation, the same instructor explained that a change of curriculum 'to ... get an appropriate amount of technology into it' meant drastic alterations in his program. 'We cut out drawing, we cut out painting, we cut out photography.... the things that give a foundation for being a good designer.' The jettisoning of time-honored courses that provide a firm base from which students may develop an advanced set of skills and procedures is evidence that undergraduate programs are unable to grow with, much less anticipate, the advances and vicissitudes of the field. Indeed, 'if we want to avoid becoming strictly trade oriented [because] all we're doing [now] is teaching ... the skills that are necessary to function ... then, it seems to me [that] we all [need a] five-year program.'¹

Despite the frustration, the bleak accounts of the climate within the classroom, and the inimical structure of programs at most institutions; the Forum's moderator struck a chord. With regards to the aforementioned conditions: it is time to develop 'new ways to teach,' it is time to invent 'new structures to teach within'.

Graphic design today is described as a strategic tool; 'strategy' entails planning and the ability to predict the present and future needs of clients – thinking and anticipation. Leading graphic design, advertising, corporate, and multimedia agencies are aware of the value design brings to their clients' products and communications. Educated practitioners acknowledge that there are benefits to *genuinely knowing* their clients. Are students today prepared to face the requirements of a multinational corporation with offices in Europe and Asia, for instance? Will they, upon graduation, possess the wherewithal to fathom the implications of context, language, economics, and religion if she or he was hired to devise area-sensitive signage for that corporation's offices which may be located in blighted and affluent regions of those continents? Since there is a good chance that such a project will require experts in associated fields (i.e. sociologists, urban planners, architects, and industrial designers), will our students be prepared for a long-term collaboration?

Graphic design must transcend its status as a perishable stockpile of effects if it is to uphold the virtues upon which it was founded – that it is both a form of public service and a force for social change. Students must be made aware of their responsibility to the discipline which is inextricably tied to the circumstances and needs of clients who are themselves part of a continually evolving society.

Gunnar Swanson's seminal 'Graphic Design Education as a Liberal Art: Design and Knowledge in the University and the "Real World"' reminds us that graphic design, 'for its lack of specific subject matter' is interdisciplinary by nature. It can bridge other disciplines and make use of their diverse and historically proven methods of inquiry as a means to parse communications problems. If graphic design is thinking, if it is about generating meaningful forms, then we must outline the methods² that will discipline students and lead them to resonant and relevant artifacts. A workable and generalizable methodology is more valuable at the outset than fabricating a 'look' or a style, as is often the concern among undergraduates. To delineate a method is to place project criteria at the forefront. When requirements are clear, students are much more likely to assess their work and the work of their colleagues critically and objectively, instead of critiquing based on their personal tastes, as one faculty member stated. It is also likely that classroom critiques will sustain themselves. Since expansion/amplification³ leads to other knowledge and/or phenomena outside the immediate realm of graphic design, students will naturally engage in cross-disciplinary collaborations that go beyond the more commonplace marketing-graphic design alliances.

If current teaching methods no longer match student expectations, perhaps we

should employ a more humanistic and classical approach; focus on clarifying the dignities of a disciplined education, the development of mind and convince students that, while finding a job is important and expected, it is not the sole purpose of their education. It cannot be myopic. We must teach students how to evaluate problems; provide an environment that will inspire and wed scholarly reflection (systematic thinking) to traditional graphic design practice (how things can be made to look interesting). We must cultivate patience and the desire to embrace the challenges and uncertainties that are part of the journey. At the very least, students should think of graphic design as a way to learn about the world.

There is no way to quantify the accumulation of knowledge, no mechanism by which we may ascertain if students were changed by our teaching. Our challenge is to find ways of making the study of graphic design personal. Students must bear the weight. Design methods in action are one way to place the onus upon their shoulders. Methods clarify viable approaches to solving problems; methods are a checklist upon which their moves will be judged. The solution to falling standards in the classroom may not necessarily be to create 'new structures to teach within' but to tune the sphere of learning so that it is at once familiar yet much more poignant.

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1 In an online thread entitled 'What this Country Needs is a Good Five-Year Design Program' (*Voice: AIGA Journal of Design*), author and design writer Steven Heller also argued for extending undergraduate studies in graphic design. There are valid reasons to pursue such an idea: 1. The first year in four-year programs is devoted to foundations. The current structure allots graphic design majors a mere three years of study in their major. 2. The number of students applying to graduate programs nationwide indicates that recent graduates are not ready for the field which has become much more interdisciplinary. 3. It will take a year or two to master software. 4. An understanding of typographic history as well as the diligent selection and application of typefaces is a slow process that demands constant study and practice. 5. Students need time to process and integrate their liberal arts and graphic design coursework. This happens slowly, often tentatively. 6. Students must understand the business of graphic design which requires them to take marketing and economics courses. 7. Instructors will have more time to focus on course development and will also have more time to attend to their students; students in turn will have more time to focus on their assignments.

Heller's post elicited a considerable response, though it is unclear whether students, faculty, and administration would be willing to support such a profound change.

2 1. DEFINE + FRAME: Know the problem. Can graphic design make a difference? Can it mitigate the problem? 2. EXPAND + AMPLIFY³: Research begins. What else might the problem be about? What aspects of it are set in stone? Are there aspects of the problem which are variable? Do we know our audience? Do we know the linguistic and visual grammars they favor? 3. PROPOSE + MODIFY: Speculation and exploration based on research. We present empirical studies (i.e. prototypes and sketches) that account for content (the message) and context (placement). 4. SYNTHESIZE + DEPLOY: Produce and disseminate the artifact.