

## **WHEN A PROFESSION CHANGES, HOW CAN CURRICULA RESPOND?**

The practice of graphic design has changed. Our profession has graduated from the 'commercial artists' of the early 20th century to the 'designers' of the 21st century. As with any rite of passage, we have accepted more responsibility and demanded more from ourselves as visual communicators. Our practice now encompasses complex problem-solving initiatives, strategic partnerships with communities and businesses, and accountability for success measured in quantitative numbers. We are designers with a big D, who have embraced this expanded role and want to see it reflected in the education of our students.

Graphic design undergraduate education, like another applied discipline architecture, has always had the challenge of including formal principles, theoretical concepts and technical skills into one curriculum. Institutions choose to adjust their balance of each, based on philosophy, but most institutions find that regardless, the curriculum requires more credit hours than other areas of study in order to achieve stated goals. Now as our profession continues to evolve, and there is more educational territory to cover, the difficulty lies in accommodating these new directives in a framework that is already bloated. So do the expectations of our industry now exceed the ability and scope of a four-year graphic design education?

As an educator who wants our curriculum to be strong and our graduates competitive, for me the argument is not if accommodating these ideas is important, it clearly is, but how to incorporate them while maintaining existing content. It would be much simpler if we could eliminate old concepts and theories and replace them with new, but little has changed, just more has been added. But, to step back, what is really being asked of our curricula by the profession? It seems there are three core competencies expected of our graphic design undergraduates. The first is an ability to think analytically and diversely to solve problems of visual communication (broad based education); second is an understanding of the formal elements and principles of design to visually present the problem once solved (design, typography and presentation); and third is mastery of all technology as well as industry standards for print and digital production (software, hardware, printing, paper, etc.) Our profession wants students that hit the ground running with solid competency in all three areas, which is a daunting expectation for educators and students.

Historically design education has succeeded in preparing students in the formal aspects of design, and has even resolved many challenging, and forever changing, technology issues; but analytical broad based education is the perceived deficiency. Recently there has been sharp criticism from professionals that design education isn't doing enough to prepare young designers as thinkers. This became a major point of discussion at the AIGA Power of Design conference in Vancouver, when Jessica Helfand and Bill Drenttel of Winterhouse Studio commented harshly on their view of current graphic design education. Their assessment of students as form makers who are divorced from the content in their design, as well as, lack the ability to apply rigorous subject research to problem solving solutions, provoked a flurry of debate. Their call for smarter, more widely read, critical thinkers and writers sparked much discussion among educators and professionals and has been followed up with dialogue on AIGA Forum, AIGA Yahoo education egroup and on design blogs such as Design Observer.

Answering this call requires a much broader liberal arts centered education available at some colleges and universities but not at many of our top art and design schools. In a limited online review of graphic design programs

in which the curriculum was posted, half showed that roughly only 20-30% of the curriculum was comprised of liberal arts courses. One simple reason for this is that more general education courses mean less design courses. Few educators anywhere would disagree with more study in the natural and social sciences, along with business and the arts, as long as there's no infringement on time spent on design. The notion that graphic design students could apply principles learned in a geology course, or theory discussed in a sociology course to solving a design problem should induce instant educator nirvana, however, often required general education courses aren't valued by students or faculty because they are perceived as time away from the core curriculum. This unfortunate mindset is one of the first places where there is work to do. It is true that any shift to more liberal arts study requires giving up course units elsewhere, but general studies and design studies need to be seen as a complete education, not two parallel tracks vying for attention. Sharon Poggenpohl, in an article written for Inform, suggests that an undergraduate education is 'a series of tapas or a dim sum feast'<sup>1</sup> that should encourage the student to sample and explore. There are enormous gains to be had by embracing liberal studies in a design curriculum and the design practice is clamoring for students educated in that core competency. So, are there trade-offs in the other two core competencies if a broad based design education is embraced?

My university has a strong tradition of liberal arts education and a keen interest in multi-disciplinary study. Our students are part of The College (School of Arts and Sciences) and graduate with a BA in Fine Arts with a graphic design concentration. Requirements include 20 courses in general studies and 16 courses in the design concentration; resulting in more than half of a student's study in broad-based knowledge. This mix creates a wider appreciation and broader scope for problem solving, but doesn't provide enough design-related courses to adequately cover the other core competencies. We graduate strong thinkers, but less strong practitioners. Our liberal arts model seems to be what the profession is asking for but there are challenges when the balance is tipped this heavily in favor of general studies; the most obvious being that students who spend less than half of their education studying graphic design don't have enough time to master all of the concepts and technical skills.

Then there are specific challenges to the design curriculum in general, such as: there is no ability to track the design courses, other than with a prerequisites system, because the courses must be sandwiched in with general studies courses; there is often difficulty in sequencing courses because of scheduling conflicts with the rest of the college (studios are more hours than lecture courses); all of the courses are open to any student within the university which makes the intro level courses more of a general survey than they would be in other programs; fewer courses are offered and the goals within individual courses have to be broader to include more content; the focus is more task-oriented, in order to accomplish the must-teach list, and as a result topics are covered in a cursory manner and few subjects can be drilled down; and finally, there is not as much time for experimentation and conceptualization within the curriculum.

A less obvious but more interesting issue is that students accustomed to taking general studies courses in a lecture/exam format that is entirely grade driven, find it hard to change gears when taking a design studio course in an open environment that values experimentation and discovery over 'correct answers'. It is hard to impress on these students that grades are not paramount to our profession and concepts and creativity are valued more highly than simply meeting the assignment criteria. Their fear of failure impedes the design process because their focus is narrowly set on completing the final product instead of letting the process help define the solution. Also it can be a challenge to get students to participate in group critiques meant to improve everyone's work, when they see each student as a potential GPA competitor.

Another challenge for our students is portfolio preparation and presentation. Many full design programs can devote a single course to preparing portfolios with the luxury of several semesters of generated work to cull through. In

our liberal arts model the overall work selection is thin because the course load is smaller and the most important piece, the senior thesis or capstone project, has to be bundled with portfolio preparation in one course. This is a significant drawback in a profession that uses the portfolio as the entry point for any job opportunity because a less polished presentation can severely impede competitiveness. On this subject, designers are the most contradictory. Although most professionals say they are looking for strong problem-solving thinkers, the reality is the portfolio is what gets the interview. Comments by designers reveal that form, aesthetics and craftsmanship still have a way to seduce, and although they can see through a content-less portfolio, a tight presentation may still offer an entry that a lesser portfolio wouldn't. It's very difficult for a student to get the attention of a potential employer when a strong broad-based education and a high GPA are still viewed second to the portfolio.

So, if we support a broad based education core competency, what can we do to improve the other two core competencies, formal skills and technology? Add more design courses would be the simple answer but that isn't possible in our university framework. Other approaches might include rethinking traditional design education conventions, encouraging educator and professional interaction, and requesting more responsibility and participation in education from the design community.

A significant curricular change for liberal arts institutions is to rethink traditional design assignments to take advantage of the broader knowledge base of the students. Team-teaching across university departments or structuring more research-based assignments allows students to parlay information from one course to another. Requiring students to research—and write—the content of projects encourages engagement on more than just the aesthetic level and particularly requesting that they use material from other courses helps them to make more crossovers between knowledge and problem solving. Design solutions resulting from these assignments should then yield stronger portfolio pieces that better showcase the student as a strong thinker and designer. We also offer a design practicum course in which cross-disciplinary students do viable design work for real clients (non-profit and community-based) under the guidance of a faculty member. Each project allows the students to bring their own skill sets to bear on solving a collective design problem. Students participate in a real world experience and generate work for their portfolio, while the instructor is able to introduce professional practice skills.

Suggestions for more interaction between faculty, students and professionals include studio visits, field trips, lectures and visiting critics. External interaction is a strong component to bridge the gap in curriculum when time is limited. Events can be scheduled outside of traditional course time, and students rarely object because they value the information provided by professionals. While most programs strive to include these types of activities, their value is often underestimated. Schools can also get design professionals involved by forming an advisory committee. This is proving to be a rich source of information for educators who want to keep their curriculum current and an integral way to maintain a dialogue about the changing needs of the practice. Professionals can ensure that curriculum is forward thinking while educators can manage the expectations of the profession by educating them on the challenges of creating a comprehensive curriculum. The committee is also a great source for speakers, critics and resources.

Work directly with professionals to supplement education through internships. If curricula made internships mandatory, then all students would be guaranteed some insight into the real world, and professionals would have an opportunity to become partners in the education process. For many design firms, this would require restructuring their existing internship policy of relegating students to a production area to retouch Photoshop files and mount presentations, to instead directly pairing them with designers where the onus is on the designer to truly mentor. The profession would have to accept the responsibility for this potent educational experience and view the mentor as an active teaching partner and the student as an integral part of the design team. Internships are not a new idea, but the quality of the experience for all participants is in need of a significant upgrade.

One of the most discussed long-term solutions is a complete restructuring of design education to institute a five-year program. This extension has been suggested by many educators and professionals who recognize the value of extra time and the challenges in covering all core competencies in four years. Steven Heller writes in support of this in a post on the AIGA Forum that opens with 'What is the greatest problem facing graphic design education today? Not enough quality time.'<sup>2</sup> An extra year would allow students to graduate with a full complement of liberal arts courses along with a complete design education that includes history, theory and practice. In many respects this seems like the most exciting solution with the greatest potential; but from an academic perspective the difficulty of getting support and resources for this type of restructuring is daunting; and from a student perspective, it is another year of costly tuition and expenses. This may become more prevalent in time, as it has in architecture programs, but realistically can only be implemented at a small number of schools. Currently at Penn we are exploring the possibility of a five-year BFA program. The prospect of an extra year of in-depth design study is exciting, holding the promise of graduating students that have had more to eat than just a few mix-matched plates of dim sum that don't really equal a meal, let alone a feast.

So where do we go from here if everyone agrees that design education is overtaxed? Design educators have to accept that our profession is raising expectations as a result of greater responsibility within the discipline, and designers have to participate in a constructive dialogue about what are the most critical core concepts to teach, understanding that not everything is possible. Educators have to promote the importance of liberal arts courses, not see them as time away from design, and designers have to evaluate graduates on more than a polished portfolio and strong technical skills. There are as many opportunities to respond as there are graphic design programs, and one size doesn't fit all. But what is needed is a continuous, collective effort by educators, designers and students alike, to ensure that design education and professional practice evolve simultaneously.

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<sup>1</sup> Inform, 2003, Volume 14 No. 3

<sup>2</sup> AIGA Design Forum, April 7, 2004