My city of residence is a sprawling metropolis of six million in a desert valley; a place where frequent ozone alerts inform citizens about whether to pump gas during daylight hours, and where midwestern lawns consume copious amounts of drought-precious water. Recently I heard someone refer to it in a way that caught my attention. "Phoenix," she said, "is in a constant state of denial." My experience as a student and instructor have me wondering whether the same could be said for graphic design education. For years, intellectuals and scholars in other domains of knowledge have been working to create critical pedagogy: by engaging in dialogue about education that is progressive; by attempting to build inclusive classroom communities that nurture individual growth; by teaching for critical consciousness that transcends simplistic ideologies commonly embraced in our culture. Design is perceived to be a field for creative, visionary thinkers — people with a capacity for meaningful innovation. Yet the tendency in graphic design, to teach for individual advancement and success in the field, diverts our attention from creating holistic teaching strategies.

Emphasis on marketability and individual gain are among several factors that influence the familiar air of competition that pervades many post secondary studios and classrooms. As a student, I learned to compete with my peers in preparation for the *real* world, which, I was told, would be even more competitive than school. This was nothing new to me since most formal institutions to which I had been exposed reflected mainstream values of competition over cooperation, and domination over egalitarianism. Competition is one of the devices that keep educational climates threatening enough to be results-oriented — just like the real world. It breeds perfectionism, a debilitating belief system that is often mistaken for virtuous dedication. Perfectionists run on self-criticism, but they also thrive in hierarchical situations where established superiors ration praise and expect obedience. (Bayles, 1993) In many studios and classrooms, perfectionism, competition and obedience to authority have a symbiotic presence. These motivating devices permeate educational practice in graphic design to such a degree that they are seldom acknowledged and questioned. My observations and experiences suggest they may be more detrimental than we realize. I argue that they undermine individual confidence and creativity, deter attempts to build cooperative learning communities, encourage power imbalances, and seriously threaten the work of creating progressive pedagogies in graphic design.

Why does this matter? Many of my students want to be considered good at what they do, and they fail to understand that acquiring aptitude is only a *component* of education. Six years ago, Gunnar Swanson (1998) argued, "graphic design education is not, for the most part, education. It is vocational training, and rather narrow specialized training at that." I am disturbed by the accuracy of this assesment, and the extent to which it still applies. The increasing emphasis on specialization threatens to reduce the teaching and learning process to simple transmission. Educational theorists caution against learning that is merely an acquisiton of skills. (Chomsky, 2000) Yet, in the field of design, acquisition of skills is critical. Attention to detail is invaluable, and we cannot afford to dispense with courses that address specific aspects of craft, technique, technology and the like. But we can begin to revise curricula, to introduce avenues that help students mature psychologically, intellectually, spiritually and ethically. Our aim should be a dynamic tension between teaching students to evaluate design decisions and teaching students to evaluate the interpersonal and intercultural contexts surrounding those decisions. In his text, *The Moral and Spiritual Crisis in Education* (1989), David Purpel advocates that education be a "moral and spiritual endeavor that holds our social and personal lives up against the highest ideals we can conceive." He argues that "knowledge, institutions and paradigms are not eternal, especially in this time of cultural instability, and we are responsible for engaging the world with critical intelligence and moral commitment, which a trivial and technique-driven education cannot prepare us to do."

I have discussed, with former students and colleagues, the need for holistic learning experiences in graphic design — essential to what bell hook's calls "transformative" pedagogy. (hooks, 1994) These discussions have indicated to me that certain elements are essential to revising oppressive studio practices, to making a space for authentic connection and community. Creativity is one of those elements. A former student once told me that a seminar course on creativity helped her to deal with the challenges she faced in studio courses. It was evident that one of those challenges was her own perfectionism, a tendency valued and rewarded in many design programs. She was inviting paralysis by requiring perfection of herself, deluding herself into believing in the myth of an absolute solution. She wrote:

In my studio classes…I was largely driven by perfectionism, competition and sometimes a fear of not being up to par
with my peers. These same driving forces, paradoxically, kept me from striving for truly innovative and creative solutions
out of fear of venturing too far from what I perceived to be the right way to design. In many studios when we talked
about process it felt like a manufactured explanation…for the sake of presentation. In the (creativity) classes there was
an environment of safety and non-judgement combined with a culture of genuine interest in process.

In the introduction to *Creativity: Flow and the Psychology of Discovery and Invention*, Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (1996) writes about how easy it is to dismiss the importance of cultivating creativity, but cautions that, "to do so blinds us to the most important message we can learn from creative people: how to find purpose and enjoyment in the chaos of existence." It was not until graduate school that I encountered a teacher who studied creativity, and she was not a member of the graphic design faculty. In my undergraduate education, creativity was often demonized as something too personal, that might threaten the production of so-called thoughtful or sensitive work. I learned early in my tenure as a student that *sensitive* meant *similar to what instructors prefer*. As a result, some undergraduate experiences in design were, for me, a kind of exorcism of the idiosyncratic, attained through exercises in self-doubt. I know that the residue from those experiences weaken my confidence as a teacher, and hinder my ability to trust in a process greater than myself. I know also that it is imperative to address those weaknesses. bell hooks writes about the teacher's responsibility in creating inclusive classroom settings: "Let's face it; most of us were taught in classrooms where styles of teachings reflected the notion of a single norm of thought and experience, which we were encouraged to believe was universal." (hooks, 2003). A number of years ago Sharon Helmer Poggenpohl wrote, "It is time to ask how we became teachers. Most of us became teachers accidentally… We were the consumers of education, and later we became the instruments of education. We probably teach as we were taught." (Poggenpohl, 1990). She emphasized that educators must be reflective and self-critical to take responsibility for leading the profession rather than following it. She stressed that it is critical for educators to challenge boundaries, to be more speculative than conclusive. Philosopher Maxine Greene has argued that each of us is "a narrative in the making" emphasizing that imagination is a means of creating possibility, not only in ourselves but in society. "When a teacher emphasizes the importance of the social imagination, students can begin to summon up visions of human agency — their own agency that transcends the correctness of the passing grade or the mere mastery of skills." (Greene, 2001).

Personal agency constantly affects the collective. When individuals suffer from oppressive conditions that foster self-doubt, they bring self-consciousness and fear to subsequent associations. I believe it is the educator's task to cultivate teaching practices that sustain and esteem life in a fundamental sense, so that students learn to contribute confidently to the the life of their communities. A recollection from another recent graduate illuminates why this is so important:

(There were times) I felt an unbearable sense of inadequacy. With each studio there was an obvious hierarchy. There
were those two or three students who were designing correctly, and then there were the rest of us…I watched as the
model 'A' students were encouraged and told to keep doing what they were doing…Then, when the professor would
reach the rest of the students, they were told to take inspiration from the students who "got it." Even if the professor
didn't refer you to another student you knew that was what they were looking for. I felt that I would never succeed un-
less I mimicked others.

It's been over a year now since I graduated…and I still struggle with defining "good design" for myself. But I have
to continuously remind myself that it's OK to be different from other designers and that there is no one right way to
design. I have found confidence in experimenting and accepting failure to acheive what I deem (to be) success.

The approach that influenced this student's experience is dehumanizing and potentially counterproductive. It encourages the *model* students to develop a habit for external recognition; they may find themselves confined by their own pedestals. The average majority will learn to be passive, and to perceive themselves as limited, especially if they tend to conceive of work that is different from the model. Many will seriously doubt their ability to think, create, speak and act. (Steinem, 1992) This learned helplessness cripples students when they encounter assignments that require initiative, critical thinking and active participation. Active learning demands that students be courageous, self-assured and comfortable with

failure. Such inner strengths are rarely exhibited in threatening classroom environments, yet they become contagious when conditions encourage and reward independent thinking and difference. Another student recollection indicates the difference that an open, safe environment can make:

> *Whether by intent or happy accident, the studio group that I graduated with paid little attention to our letter grades and the confusion and isolation that can emerge from such linear and competitive rating. This…was a place where my guard was down, where I could share the frustrations and failings that I saw in myself, and learn about the quality of my work through the eyes of others.*

This student perceived that she was learning in a communal atmosphere with her peers, "the people who were striving to learn just as I was." Such an atmosphere is not easily sustained in conjunction with hierarchical strategies and delusions about the existence of absolute solutions. It can, however, be cultivated when individuals appreciate the unpredictable process of learning, when they respect difference and embrace possibility. Teachers cannot create studio culture singlehandedly, but we can work with students toward establishing a climate where openness, intellectual rigor, creativity and concern for others coexist. While deepening our capacity to live fully in the world, we can create conditions in that foster appreciation for learning in all its dimensions.

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