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ENVISIONING
A FUTURE
DESIGN EDUCATION

an Introduction

ABSTRACT

The persistence of past traditions and the uncertainty of change can easily immobilize teachers who see the misfit of design education, but are reluctant to adapt and evolve new approaches to the teaching-learning paradigm. Using a recent statement by a former Harvard president, a few direct and unremarkable adaptations are suggested. This special issue is organized in three sections: Clarity in educational goals and student performance; Attention to dynamic change and interconnectedness; Differentiation and research in graduate programs. The invited authors are briefly introduced. They do not provide consensus, but offer different perspectives on change.

"Design process is the take-away in education; knowing how to continue learning, accessing and assessing useful information, and importantly, synthesizing information and creativity into something that delivers use and pleasure for people."

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IN THIS TIME of volatile economic, social, technological and global change, reflection on teaching and learning is particularly appropriate from either a teacher or student perspective. Invited contributors to this special issue were prompted to examine the deficits in design education, to discuss transitions from past expectations to better performance, and even to speculate on a more distant future—perhaps a utopian design agenda for ten or twenty years hence.

Collaboration, paradigm change, metaphors, integrations and relationships between education and practice, even catharsis—these are some of the themes contained within the diverse papers collected in this issue. Change is seldom welcome or expected—unless the current context is boring, inappropriate—unbearable.

The typical and known is comforting in its predictability, while change is uncertain, sometimes threatening—and for some even unthinkable. Change demands attention, energy, planning and adaptation, behaviors that designers use in service to the future, whether near or far, as they create and stage change. But old traditions die slowly and are tenacious in their hold on people's understanding and performance.
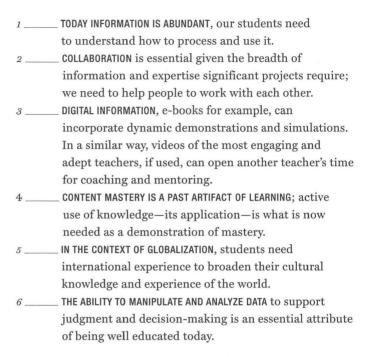
Because design is so firmly and complexly enmeshed in the matrix of contemporary human life, it cannot avoid change. This is not the place to remember and recite the movements that reordered and changed design education in the 20th century (Bauhaus, Swiss design, Post-modernism, etc.), it is a moment

to consider 21st century developments and how design can better fit within a changing global culture and alter its goals in order to more fully contribute. The isolation of design's sub-disciplines (*Poggenpohl, 2009, 11*) make it difficult for teachers and practitioners to learn from each other, much less collaborate on significant projects that go beyond the expertise recognized in one of them. Sub-disciplines share many of the same foci and processes; design would gain from a more unified understanding of itself, regardless of its material or social specialism.

Few designers recognize the skills they bring to collaborative work. Their flexibility of mind to question boundaries, frame a situation for investigation, offer critical perspectives, create alternative prototypes and understandings and recognize and mediate conflicting values—this engagement makes a substantial contribution. Designers with these skills should move aside from traditional small projects and find ways to become engaged in the significant design problems of our time—sustainable development, design for the elderly, effective education and others too numerous to mention. Such work calls for collaborative, passionate and intelligent participation. Design is not little; it can be pivotal in bringing people and ideas together.

I liken the authors in this issue to the coyotes in the opening poem, who adapt to changing environmental circumstances, and hopefully survive to spread their intellectual seed. They may need to be tricksters to institute change, as administrative structures favor people deeply entrenched in their existing knowledge and success. If successful, the coyotes of learning and teaching will become quiet culture heroes known through their progeny, who will not be imitators but adaptors and inventors of the future in design education and its practice.

Many educators are aware of the need for change, but the variety and interconnectedness of its aspects are confounding. Where to start—what is most essential—these are fundamental questions, and if addressed, how do we know they are improvements? Lawrence H. Summers (*2012*), former president of Harvard University, states:

> *Suppose the educational system is drastically altered to reflect the structure of society and what we now understand about how people learn. How will what universities teach be different? (2012, 27).*

He offers six speculations regarding needed change, paraphrased below.

1 _____ TODAY INFORMATION IS ABUNDANT, our students need to understand how to process and use it.

2 _____ COLLABORATION is essential given the breadth of information and expertise significant projects require; we need to help people to work with each other.

3 _____ DIGITAL INFORMATION, e-books for example, can incorporate dynamic demonstrations and simulations. In a similar way, videos of the most engaging and adept teachers, if used, can open another teacher's time for coaching and mentoring.

4 _____ CONTENT MASTERY IS A PAST ARTIFACT OF LEARNING; active use of knowledge—its application—is what is now needed as a demonstration of mastery.

5 _____ IN THE CONTEXT OF GLOBALIZATION, students need international experience to broaden their cultural knowledge and experience of the world.

6 _____ THE ABILITY TO MANIPULATE AND ANALYZE DATA to support judgment and decision-making is an essential attribute of being well educated today.

This special issue of *Visible Language* uncovers the paradox of design education in the context of design as a change agent; a discipline that consciously proposes what does not yet exist. In contrast to its future orientation as practiced, design education is stuck in a now irrelevant past that is comfortable, pervasive, defended, valorized, established—and that fails to prepare students for their role as co-inventors of the future. With regard to the six changes listed above, in the context of project-based learning, typical in most design programs, it is possible to apply the first two mentioned (1, 2), as projects can require information access and application as a guide to form-making and prototyping performance; further, projects can be addressed by a cross-disciplinary team. Such changes are not remarkable—just sensible. This ties to process mastery in designing with active use of knowledge (4, 6). Design process is the take-away in education; knowing how to continue learning, accessing and assessing useful information, and importantly, synthesizing information and creativity into

something that delivers use and pleasure for people. Information alone, isolated research, or spontaneous creativity—these are inadequate design responses—what is called for is integration. Staying informed about change in its many dimensions and remaining curious and adaptable regarding new ideas are also keys to continued learning. Such changes as these to project-based learning provide transferrable skills, useful in many ways within and beyond design—in life. These changes support interactive exploration and exchange between teachers and students as they both experience a deepened understanding of design's possibilities.

Some of the above may challenge design faculty to teach in new ways that would develop their skills beyond their past education or professional experience. Support for faculty development is an administrative issue, often covered by grants and sabbaticals. Mechanisms are in place, competition for them may be substantial, but the need to reinvigorate design education—to look at the teaching-learning paradigm is too often overlooked in the process of teaching design. Where are the design teachers who constructively reflect on their teaching performance in relation to student learning? Where are those who set up experiments and report to a broader audience the results? Even sharing reflections through informal case studies are missing. Teachers need to reflect on the art of teaching and learning as there is no one formula, particularly in a creative, future-oriented discipline.

Returning to Summer's listing, e-books (3) and international experience (5) are also important. The digital revolution is changing access to material and competition for audience. Past notions of having a captive student audience in studio or resident at one university for the duration of a program may no longer be workable or desirable from many perspectives, cost, resource use, teacher knowledge limitation, redefinition of teaching activities and its formal supports (books, laboratories, e-sources, etc.), student expectations and students with fluid work-learning lives to name a few. Not all design classes can be taught remotely, but certainly some can. Having skyped with design research students at Hong Kong Polytechnic University for over a year, our time together online yielded effective learning results as reported in student comments. Perhaps more effective because of the preparation via email attachments and the focused time we spent together despite time zone difference. Webinars and online conferences like

GLIDE (*2012*), Global Interaction in Design Conference, for example, offer virtual presentations online to support moving past cultural and geographic boundaries, opening doorways to knowledge access and sharing within an interdisciplinary audience, and that further does not rely on travel. The technology also supports international team projects in which students partner on a project with students from another culture. Yes, there are kinks to be worked out, especially regarding different faculty expectation and direction, to say nothing of cultural difference, yet the experience is enriching. Again, we need research and reporting on teaching/learning projects; we need to share experience to advance our understanding and to develop a network of people moving in similar directions. Technology is not being used wisely in education; it has yet to be creatively explored and its potential benefits for all may be abundant. The authors invited to contribute to this issue present diverse ideas regarding needed changes for the future of design education. They do not spend time attacking the status quo, they credit the reader with knowledge of the contemporary situation; instead they offer constructive suggestions for change, evolutionary steps that can propel design education in small and large new directions, and that can provide a deeper understanding and commitment to teaching and learning than the shallows in which we seem to be caught.

Two generations of educators are present in this issue in a nearly balanced way. Like Summers' reflection on education at large, some contributors provide analyses and strategies, while others write about issues of complexity, integration and process. The issue has three sections as follows.

PART 1 _____ CLARITY IN EDUCATIONAL GOALS & STUDENT PERFORMANCE.

KAREL VAN DER WAARDE and MAURITS VROOMBOUT match the curricular needs for a communication design program to their interviews with Dutch designers regarding their design practice. They decode the changes in practice and look to improve curricula within a fairly traditional understanding of the discipline. The diagrams that accompany their article are not prescriptive, but suggestive of content and structures that might bring clarity to design curricula.

JORGE FRASCARA and GUILLERMINA NOËL take on the need to teach and practice user-centered design. They argue for an evidence-based approach to design that includes users and does not end until a results-oriented process to see if what is designed actually works is accomplished. The social function of design is very important to these authors and accountability is their goal.

DAVID SLESS challenges the all-encompassing notion of Design promoted in the 20th century and poses instead a more modest notion based on evidence. Using work from the Communication Research Institute in Australia, he demonstrates what this means to design as a sustainable and evolutionary process embedded in both natural and social systems.

AUDREY BENNETT concludes this section focusing on student performance evaluation with regard to typography. Defining good design as good social change, she also focuses on the social function of design and wants to steer student assessment away from being a solely aesthetic enterprise. Metrics for evaluation are provided at the article's conclusion.

PART 2 _____ ATTENTION TO DYNAMIC CHANGE & INTERCONNECTEDNESS.

THOMAS OCKERSE begins this section with an argument supporting deep learning through a holistic approach to students and teaching. He is concerned with collaboration and working together, as our knowledge and expertise is inevitably limited. Exploration that unites the deep character of the designer with practical knowledge and creativity, while respecting the contributions of partners, is what he is after. Cognizant of the problem of fragmentary knowledge and experience, he suggests we use both sides of our brain and seek interconnectedness.

CHRIS MYERS frames 'impromptus' putting design and human activity into several metaphorical contexts that speak poetically to the dynamic situation in which design both happens and currently exists. A storyteller, Myers engages the reader in

seeking out personal interpretations and connections that also reveal the unpredictability of events and our limitations while we strive for needed change.

PART 3 _____ DIFFERENTIATION & RESEARCH IN GRADUATE PROGRAMS.

MEREDITH DAVIS takes a strategic approach to the educational problem and points to opportunities in graduate programs to change design through significant degree preparation and meaningful curricular and degree differentiation. Research figures prominently in her concerns as she looks to the administrative and leadership support necessary to effect change.

STAN RUECKER, using 'cultural archive' as an analogy to what a teacher provides, examines perennial and particular challenges in graduate programs including generation gaps, assessment difficulties, future-orientation and interdisciplinary approaches among others. He concludes by offering another model for doctoral research.

KEN FRIEDMAN insists on moving aside from everyday design and its education to consider from both long and short historical perspectives how design fits contextually. Examining cultural, technological and economic systems along with their relationship with design performance helps to disambiguate the many perspectives on change. Finding the appropriate context for design education (and it is not one) underscores the importance of a broad education with research and collaborative skills that go beyond design basics.

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DIETMAR WINKLER provides the last entry to this issue, a poem that serves as a counterpoint to the constructive, hopeful ideas shared within. It graphically reminds us of the entrenched stagnation teachers seek to escape. Having spent a lifetime in design and its education, the poem is cathartic, damning the persistent past and readying us for future preparation in the changing present.

REFERENCES

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2 Summers, Lawrence H. 2012. The 21st Century Education. _The New York Times_, Education Life,
January, 22, pp 26, 27, 29.

3 http://glideconference.org (Accessed February 3, 2012)