

3

DIFFERENTIATION & RESEARCH IN GRADUATE DESIGN



Meredith DAVIS, Professor and Director of Graduate Programs in graphic design at North Carolina State University, has also served as Director of the PhD in Design Program. She is a Fellow and 2005 medalist of the AIGA, recipient of the NC State Alexander Quarles Holladay Medal, and listed in *Who's Who Among American Teachers*. A member of the accreditation commission of the National Association of Schools of Art and Design, Meredith is a frequent speaker and author on design and design education. She serves on the editorial board for *Design Issues* and is under contract with Thames and Hudson for a series of college textbooks on design.

Meredith DAVIS

LEVERAGING GRADUATE EDUCATION FOR A MORE RELEVANT FUTURE

ABSTRACT

Arguing that the 21st century context for design is significantly different from the previous century, a set of structural suggestions are posed that can leverage change. Administrative arrangements are questioned along with the lack of clear differentiation or performance expectation among design degrees. While widespread, confusing and contradictory ideas about research complicate the situation, the leverage point is identified in graduate education.

“If we expect to meet the challenges of the contemporary context for design, we must study that context for what truly separates leadership and innovation from business as usual. We must anticipate new places where design can have influence.”

A LEVERAGE POINT is a place within a system where a small amount of change in force produces a great amount of favorable change in the output of the system. The most effective leverage point will be a shift in the paradigm on which the system is based, which determines its goals, rules, structure and general culture. So if we think of design education as a system and can agree that there is currently a mismatch between what the system produces and what the twenty-first century context demands, then our task is to look for a leverage point that will shift the mindset of the system and produce better results.

THERE IS PLENTY OF EVIDENCE THAT TODAY'S CONTEXT FOR DESIGN PRACTICE IS SIGNIFICANTLY DIFFERENT FROM THAT OF THE PREVIOUS CENTURY. Problems are increasingly complex and the goal is not to simplify things, as we did under modernism, but to manage them. Complex problems require collaborative work by interdisciplinary teams. Design is no longer at the cosmetic end of a decision-making food chain but a necessary partner with a variety of disciplinary experts. Among those experts are users, who play an expanded role in the development of content and form; increasingly, we design *with* people rather than *for* them. And because people are now involved as co-creators, the designer's work shifts from crafting discrete physical artifacts to developing tools and systems through which others create their own experiences. Because this work responds to a rapidly accelerating technological evolution, the stopping point for design moves from being “almost perfect” to “good enough for now.” And as a result, the relationships among people, objects and

settings constantly change, extending the demand for research that informs the next iteration of solutions.

These changes have altered how a young designer enters practice. In the twentieth century, design graduates began work in the technical service of more experienced designers. If they performed well, they advanced to form-making. And if they stayed in the field long enough, some earned the right to advise clients on overall communication or product development strategy. Today, there is too much to know about the management of technology to think of it as the steppingstone to some other aspect of design practice. Further, the democratization of the means of production and distribution through software and the Internet diminish the role of the designer as the gatekeeper to getting things made. And as design lost some of its traditional responsibilities in the last decades, it expanded its involvement in high-level business strategy, especially in the areas of innovation management, branding and service design. No longer do students enter a single definition of practice through a hierarchical sequence of responsibility.

These changes in the context for design practice are nothing short of transformational, but not well supported by a twentieth-century, craft-based model of design education that presumes a designer is occupied primarily with the issues of form and the mass production of identical objects. Yet that is precisely the paradigm on which most contemporary design education is based. Students begin their studies with abstraction—projects isolated from the rich contexts in which design problems reside and that provide frameworks for action and judging the success of design solutions. They advance through undergraduate curricula tightly defined by products (books, motion graphics, packaging, etc.); tools (Photoshop, InDesign, etc.); or segments of practice (corporate design, website design, advertising, etc.) Any or all of these products, tools or practices may change, even before students graduate, leaving little content that will endure across their careers in the field.

Waiting in the wings to capture the territory overlooked by design education are other disciplines, such as psychology, computer science, anthropology and management. Each is ready to provide scholarship and training in the absence of design research and curricular leadership on issues that shape the world of contemporary problems.

So if we want to change the system that governs what design graduates *know* and are *able to do*, where is the leverage point? Where do we institute a paradigm shift—especially in times of economic and regulatory crises—that will have positive effects for generations of designers to come?

I suggest that the leverage points for making design education more responsive to a changed context for professional practice and disciplinary scholarship are master's and doctoral programs, for the following reasons:

- 1 _____ THE FUTURE DESIGN PROFESSORiate WILL COME FROM GRADUATES OF MASTER'S AND DOCTORAL PROGRAMS, SO IN CHANGING THESE STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF THE PRACTICE AND THE DISCIPLINE, WE SUBSEQUENTLY CHANGE THE CONTENT OF UNDERGRADUATE EDUCATION AS WELL. The current generation of senior professors is retiring, leaving behind a deficit in the educational workforce that grew to meet the onslaught of burgeoning student enrollments in design in the 1980s. Given the current state of the economy, it is likely that colleges and universities will meet continuing enrollment growth in design through new hires from master's programs. These young faculty will be responsible for shaping curricula with little guidance from more experienced (or more entrenched) senior faculty. We might reasonably ask, however, "What are we doing as a discipline to prepare graduate students for this curriculum development responsibility?" Few graduate programs address curriculum and instruction and most institutions are neglectful in building repositories of syllabi and curricular explanations to inform the work of new full-time or adjunct teachers. So most graduate students enter their first academic job with no recourse but to repeat what they have been taught, even when the new institutional context suggests another approach. Were we to address this issue of preparing the professoriate as the partial content of graduate curricula, or as the explicit focus of some graduate programs, we would leverage the system for future gain.

2 _____ GRADUATE EDUCATION TYPICALLY RESIDES IN INSTITUTIONS WITH THE INTELLECTUAL RESOURCES AND HIGH EXPECTATIONS NECESSARY TO MAKE CHANGES THAT ARE WELL-MATCHED TO THE CURRENT CONTEXT FOR DESIGN. Research is an activity that distinguishes professions from trades. As design expands its scope of services, it requires new information and methods. More and more, designers are either asked to predict the outcomes of design action or are accountable to other fields, such as marketing and human factors, which do it for them. On the surface, generating new knowledge appears to be an assignment for doctoral programs, which in design are few in the United States. But there is much debate internationally about the nature of such programs, with many in Europe advocating “practice-based PhDs” in which students reflect on their own behavior as designers, rather than generate empirical findings that are relevant to others. If we can agree within the field about what we mean by “research” and deliver research-ready master’s students to PhD programs, we can build the research capabilities of the field and the scholarship of the discipline to better address the intellectual challenges of contemporary design problems. The institutions that are most likely to make such contributions are those with well-established research cultures in other disciplines, which can provide guidance and influence the standards by which scholarship is judged. Investment by the field in these programs, therefore, will yield benefits to practice and the discipline. Such investment includes collaboration with thought leaders in the field about what is most deserving of research attention.

3 _____ GRADUATE DEGREES IN DESIGN ARE NOT REQUIRED FOR MAINSTREAM PRACTICE, THEREFORE, INSTITUTIONS HAVE LESS PRESSURE THAN IN BACHELOR’S PROGRAMS TO CONFORM CURRICULA TO THE MODEST EXPECTATIONS OF STUDENTS, PARENTS AND EMPLOYERS. There is currently great confusion about the value of master’s study. With regularity, popular design magazines, such as *Communication Arts*,

publish interviews with famous designers who claim they would be no further along in their careers if they held a graduate degree. Invariably, these articles are written by a designer who never undertook master's study, organized by editors who didn't look far outside the traditional definition of design practice to find people to interview. Unlike undergraduate programs where there is an expectation of general preparation for the job market, master's programs are free to experiment and specialize curricular offerings as long as they maintain sufficient enrollments to satisfy their institutions. Yet historically, much of this experimentation has resulted in doing things *outside* of practice: in developing the student's personal voice; in undisciplined critical reflections about design; or on the pro bono application of traditional methods to under-served populations. While some of this work is important, it rarely reaches the level of exportable concepts that influence practice or methods that can be replicated by the culture at large. And typically, graduate students are not taught how to take this work to the next level through publication and entrepreneurship. So while the appropriate environment is in place for focusing graduate education on the evolving context for design, we are missing its important role as an incubator of new ideas and knowledge—both curricular and practical—that can take on the challenges of a changing profession. Further, we are missing the dialogue among leaders about how programs might direct their efforts toward more ambitious goals for society and the field.

What will it take to shift the mindset of college design programs regarding graduate education and what are the challenges to a transformation of advanced degrees in the discipline?

FINE ARTS AS A MODEL FOR GRADUATE EDUCATION IN DESIGN

The current paradigm for graduate education owes much to the traditional location of design programs in departments and

schools of art. Content, patterns of instruction, values and identity with others are generally defined by this location. We are comfortable with the things we share with the arts (authorship, intuition, subjectivity), yet many of the most pressing issues facing our field have little to do with these attributes. This is not to say that artistic values aren't important and can't find instantiation in design practice, only that they are insufficient alone in defining the nature of contemporary design problems and opportunities.

At the graduate level, painting and sculpture represent the typical MFA model of instruction. Students pursue personal development through self-defined investigations, meeting with others occasionally for critiques and seminars on topical issues. In many schools, design has adopted this model. In some places, design students complete their graduate degrees entirely through independent study and in seminars with peers only from the fine arts. Unfortunately, this situation often has less to do with ideology than with the economics of where tenured faculty reside and how many students apply for admission.

In independent art schools, access to relevant coursework outside of art and design is limited and usually organized around the humanities. Faculty, therefore, rarely direct students to literature in the social sciences and struggle with identifying seminal work and interpreting research findings for their relevance to students' investigations.

Graduate thesis projects often reflect the fine arts context, and while most professional design offices value creative thought, it is difficult to explain how graduate study brings significantly different creative benefits to practice from those of undergraduate education. There are ongoing debates in schools about how much curricular content art and design graduate students should share and whether standards of accreditation discourage study in the areas most in need of development. If we are to view graduate education as a leverage point for responding to change, these issues must be sorted out.

PROGRAM PROLIFERATION

There is anecdotal evidence that the number of graduate programs in design is growing. In many institutions,

graduate students are valued more highly than undergraduate students because of the status associated with having advanced students. In other schools, the interest in graduate study results from the funding model of the institution: more money per student for graduate enrollment; reduced faculty/student ratios in determining class size; and assistantship support for teaching lower-level classes go to departments that offer graduate degrees.

These economic incentives often convince programs to offer graduate degrees in the absence of intellectual resources. Faculty must support the breadth and depth of program content and actively model the research behavior they expect advanced students to learn. There is a difference between what *interests* faculty and what they are *qualified to deliver* as high-level content. So if we look to graduate programs as a leverage point for changing the system of design education, we first need to set a higher bar for program performance.

DEGREES OF SEPARATION

While intellectual resources determine what a graduate program can and cannot do, the majority of American colleges and universities show little differentiation between the published outcomes of undergraduate and graduate design offerings. The presumption in many schools is that graduate students will *do more or be better* at the same things that comprise undergraduate education. This supposition is often reflected in the scheduling strategies of some schools; graduate courses are piggybacked on upper-level undergraduate offerings in which juniors and seniors define the level of performance and discussion.

Further, in order to show acceptable graduate enrollments, many schools use the terminal degree as “change of career” education for students whose first studies are in other fields. Generally, these students don’t expect to practice as “hybrids,” bridging their first and second disciplines in some research sense. And the graduate design curriculum rarely makes explicit use of their extended knowledge. Instead, faculty attempt to pack six years of practice-based content into two years of instruction and expect graduates to compete successfully for employment with their better prepared undergraduate

peers. Consequently, the profession has little understanding of what a graduate student brings to the workplace besides maturity.

If we expect to meet the challenges of the contemporary context for design, we must study that context for what truly separates *leadership and innovation* from business as usual. We must anticipate new places where design can have influence. And we must address, through research and collaboration with other disciplines, the knowledge shortfalls of the field that result from our evolution from a trade to a profession.

OFF THE CLOCK

Because the historical template for graduate education in design has been independent study in the arts, many programs support curricula through overload teaching. In most schools in the United States, graduate thesis advising is an unpaid supplemental assignment, keeping faculty from their own research and leaving students to beg for valuable faculty time. In some institutions, programs cluster design students with fine arts majors to achieve acceptable enrollments or pay outsiders to interact remotely with their graduate students. In either case, the design program has little control over the content or quality of instruction; others define the reputation of the program.

Another increasingly common practice is to unleash unprepared master's students on more experienced researchers through email inquiries. The email request typically goes something like this...*"I am a graduate student doing my thesis on X and would like your ideas on the topic and any readings you can suggest."* Invariably, the topic is *massive* in scale, making it impossible for the respondent to focus comments or narrow recommended readings. Emailing students frequently complain that they have no mentoring in their programs and seek advice from anywhere they can find it. While technology makes it easy to connect people with similar interests, this advisory practice raises disturbing questions about whether graduate programs are adequately staffed and whether required coursework appropriately supports the kind of study associated with a terminal degree.

If graduate education, therefore, is to fulfill its promise of raising the capabilities of the field, it must be a priority for the schools that have chosen to engage in graduate education.

THE TROUBLESOME TERM: RESEARCH

If our discipline were medicine, we would look to the practice for guidance in setting our research agenda. For example, how many patients have been discharged from hospitals with Type II Diabetes as part of their diagnoses tells us something about the urgency of the obesity epidemic. There is some agreement in the field and in society that this issue is important and funding opportunities reflect that consensus. The standards for judging the quality of research, whether in the social or basic sciences, are in place. And the outcomes of such research are reported to the public and guide the recommendations of practicing physicians.

But design has no common understanding within the field of what is meant by research, no unified theory guiding practice, few research methods that haven't been borrowed whole-cloth from other disciplines, and little recognition by practice and the public of the value of design research findings.

It is difficult, therefore, to determine the paradigms that should guide the development of academic research programs in design and the desired skill set of "research-ready" master's students. Further, there is little agreement of what topics are worth researching, even though so little has been done in the discipline. So there needs to be dialogue among institutions that are serious about design research and greater collaboration with the field in setting a educational path for the future.

These obstacles are daunting but not insurmountable. And there are notable exceptions among the current mix of graduate offerings that make meaningful contributions to the field, despite the challenges apparent under the current system of design education. But there is a sense that design education has reached a threshold, that change is no longer an option but an imperative. I believe schools have a narrow window of opportunity to redirect efforts in ways that ensure the relevance of our discipline to life in the twenty-first century. I also believe that graduate education is a leverage point, that positive intervention in the system at this location will yield disproportionately productive results.