

Gary Rozanc: grozanc@colum.edu  
Alyson Beaton: abeaton@colum.edu  
Columbia College Chicago  
623 South Wabash  
Chicago IL, USA  
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### **Re-Claiming Leadership: The designer's overdue response\_ability.**

Today, design is a word which resides in the vocabulary of school-aged children. With the accessibility of computer programs design has become something ordinary people engage in everyday. An even more sobering thought: a designer is one more person with a degree entering a dwindling workforce with a portfolio of paper showing what can be done with a white field, pristine typography, and shapes colliding to form logos on letterheads and business cards. Design has evolved into something that is often formulaic and predictable—the stuff of templates. How will our future designers define his/her role in this seemingly bleak marketplace and techno-savvy world if visuals via software continues to be considered the pinnacle of design?

"Graphic," "architectural," "industrial," "communicative," "visual," constitute the design discipline vocabulary that governs how educators have taught for the past few decades. Yet designers, and people in general, by nature are visual, verbal, formal and great at critiquing work that does not necessarily fall into these neat categories or meet the traditional standards of these disciplines. It is clear perhaps why design education became so focused on these traits, but the question now, given the changes in design technologies and practices, why does design education continue to focus on these divisions? Are there other traits, far more useful to an individual designer and to society that could be included in the training of designers?

Instead of continuing to follow traditional discipline demarcations, education needs to respond to the designer's greatest ability: seeing the whole of a given situation and creating the larger picture for others to see by connecting these seemingly unrelated aspects, not creating visual artifacts. This is something designers are good at and it is why designers are effective communicators: they are able instantly to form visual metaphors for situations that are difficult to comprehend. This attribute, excellent for communicating complex messages, is particularly powerful when used to locate connections between needs and resources in local, regional, national and global communities. Unfortunately over the course of the 20th century designers quickly abandoned this leadership role realized by 1920's and 30's Modernists, a decade during which design was used to elevate society.

In the midst of one of the worst oil spills on record we still focus our design efforts on car-centric modes of transportation as well as over-packaged cheap goods produced completely from petroleum. This unsustainable way of living is on the verge of collapse, similar to the situation the early modernists faced gearing up for the industrial, we as design educators have to be ready to respond with a new model of teaching that prepares our students for these real world tragedies.

Only recently a small, but demonstrable, number of designers have reclaimed this social leadership response\_ability. Project M, founded by John Bielenberg, has transformed dozens of young designers from mere communicators to leaders with such projects as *Buy A Meter*, where designers envisioned ways to bring clean water to impoverished parts of Alabama and empowered residents to continue to turn blighted parts of East Baltimore into sources of community pride with the project *This is Not Grass*. Erin Huizenga, founder of EPIC, has helped designers rediscover their leadership potential by challenging them to find resources to provide adults with developmental disabilities an environment to experience personal growth or bring communities

together to help homeless men and women to make life changes.

Project M, EPIC and other organizations have positioned designers to reclaim their response\_ability as leaders and have also trained others, but that burden should fall not on a handful of individuals and organizations. Rather, design educators need to change the focus of their undergraduate programs from ones that train students to create artifacts for consumer communication and consumption to ones that empower them to become the leaders of tomorrow capable of envisioning and realizing community changing acts like Project M and EPIC.

To make this shift education needs to stop giving students prompts to create artifacts for random solutions: a brochure, a logo, a website, in hopes that one of these visual artifacts will be the answer to a specific need that any designer with a computer and software can create. Design educators need to shift from solution to problem based methods of educating as explored in the AIGA *Designer of 2015* document. In this model outcomes are media independent and arrived at through researching assigned problems, not assigned solutions.

When we teach the solutions we ignore the necessities of effective leadership. For example, creating a website and mailer for a daycare center needing increased enrollment is an expected outcome. However, the actual need isn't a website or a mailer, but increased enrollment. The assignment then, is *increased enrollment*. What if the problem of the daycare wasn't awareness, but the uninviting environment inside the waiting area? The proper visual solution in this instance would be creating an engaging environment in the waiting area friendly to both parents and children. A website or mailer would have failed as a solution. By assigning open ended problems such as increasing enrollment students will discover their role as leaders and find creative solutions.

While this may seem like a radical shift in pedagogy, training leadership skills can be done while still giving students the necessary understanding of visual literacy and visual production. Design education has to reclaim its response\_ability to train leaders in the community and fundamentally rethink their programs from the foundation level to traditional senior portfolio to meet the needs of future designers who solve problems beyond the computer, based on the following recommendations.

Freshman Year:

Great leaders understand problems that communities face at the micro level, but more than that they know how to link resources at the macro level to solve those problems. That level of understanding is a trainable skill that should be introduced to design students during the freshman year and can be achieved by shifting the focus of foundation courses away from the acquisition of quickly outmoded technical skills. Micro research methods such as formative research and macro tactics such as quantitative and qualitative research need to be taught so those research methods can then be used to inform traditional skill based foundation projects.

To gain understanding of this, students must learn how to connect these resources. To do this students first need to learn how to identify a resource through formative visual research. By using system mapping of their own personal experiences, freshman leaders begin to see how resources and actions throughout a typical day affect themselves and larger communities. It's through the recording of the formative research that traditional forms for visual communications should be trained. Specifically, future leaders will be asked to record their visual anthropological research using illustration, photography and design skills to create icons, typographic studies and representational images that are organized on maps and presented as information graphics.

Possible projects: Semantic/Symbol studies and creations. Photographic and illustrative journaling. Typographic studies and creations. System mapping that uses illustrations, photographs and representational images to display and inform of micro/macro connections.

Sophomore Year:

With the understanding of micro and macro research methods, future design leaders in their sophomore year can further develop an understanding of interconnected communities to know how to link resources to needs. To do this the focus of design programs needs to shift from training students in the skills necessary to create artifacts for consumer communication to training future design leaders in systems analysis of community groups. Through the understanding of how one community's resources might benefit those of another, design leaders can then apply this understanding of micro/macro research and systems to design projects that solve the needs of a community with the resources from another.

To do this, the sophomore leader will rely on their freshman training to identify actual needs in the community through research, whether that need is increased foot traffic through a town center or awareness of an initiative to promote local, sustainable vendors. Once the need has been identified, the student leader will then use their understanding of systems to locate possible resources. For example a student might see artists galleries as a solution to bringing foot traffic to a town center. The final step in this process will be uniting the need to the resource through an appropriate narrative. A potential narrative for the previously mentioned example could be to create a website informing artists that they could use empty storefronts as gallery space. Further, the website could attract visitors to the galleries creating the end result of increased foot traffic in a town square.

Possible projects: Narrative story telling independent of media. The ideal method of informing the resource provider will be executed. This could include books, websites, videos, ad campaigns, etc., but not limited to these solutions.

Junior Year:

If connecting resources to needs is a common trait of all great leaders, the hallmark of a great leader is the ability to make those connections on a sustainable basis. The education of a future design leader, during the junior year experience must address issues of sustainability. Methods of recognizing how community resources and their uses impact the local community and their linked communities need to be explored. Once students learn to apply their research and become sensitive to the positive and negative impacts of resource use, they can become true design leaders applying their knowledge to design projects that will have lasting value to the community with sustainability being the primary focus.

To do this, student leaders will study the use of materials in stages over two semesters. In the first semester the junior leader, in order to make sustainable choices, needs to understand the meaning of sustainability in relationship to materials. During this semester, students will rely on their previous research training and look for needs in the community that they can solve using 100% reused materials. This could include creating packaging made from existing materials that has longevity as a useful item to the consumer. The second semester for the junior leader will focus on the practicality of sustainability and sustainable materials. Not every problem can be solved using 100% reused materials. Sometimes new items will need to be created so during this second semester, students will research the impact the new materials create throughout communities and create solutions to problems that won't have a domino affect of causing problems and resource shortages elsewhere.

Possible projects: Through research, solutions to problems will be created that are created from 100% reused items in the 1st semester. This could include but isn't limited to learning systems, packaging, and

reusable items with a long product life cycle. During the second semester, solutions need to be practical and sustainable. This could include creating packaging for cleaning products that instructs the user how to make their own cleaning products, eliminating the need for packaging.

#### Senior Year:

Future design leaders in most four year programs have few opportunities to apply their understanding of micro/macro research methods, interconnected communities and sustainability in real world practice. The sustained application of this sort of knowledge should occur during the senior year under the guidance of a mentor in a real world experience that spans the entire academic year. Projects entail future design leaders seeking out social, political, economic problems with the specific goal of enhancing the quality of life for individuals within communities. In this year long project, future design leaders will get to exercise their leadership skills far beyond the traditional revisiting of previous artifacts for consumer communication and consumption for the creation of a senior portfolio.

To further encourage/advance design leadership skills, the senior leader will work with professionals, locally, regionally, nationally and globally to solve problems facing society. Under this mentor/mentee partnership both the student leader and professionals learn from each other. The student's obvious benefit is experience, networking and resources. The less obvious, is professionals will learn the value of the student leader's ability to solve community problems and then pass along those leadership qualities.

The scope of the problems solved through this mentor/mentee relationship are not definable. Each partnership will be encouraged to use research methods obtained from the previous years to seek out problems, from homelessness to health care, and find solutions to these problems, then execute that solution in a thoughtful and sustainable manner.

Potential senior projects: Environmentally sound, non impact-full, signage making it easier for tourists or non natives to navigate a city or create a campaign to help immigrants assimilate by using their local libraries as a resource.

The outlined curriculum was designed to create leaders with the necessary skills to compete in a rapidly evolving global community. Many of the skills that have been discussed are also recognized by industries as desirable qualities in AIGA's *Designer of 2015* assessment. Through training and guidance in the outlined four-year design leadership program, students will be better prepared to serve society in meaningful ways, previously envisioned by early modernists, and inspired by design leaders like Project M and EPIC.

Unless we are ready to give up our profession to those who can obtain a license of a design software suite, we are going to have to transform our mode of designing. Our future designers leaders, empathetic and educated global citizens, will be prepared to solve problems beyond the creation of artifacts for consumer communication and consumption.