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Making the Future Present through Integrative Learning

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Editorial Suggestions and Contributions:

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Graphic design education is at a turning point.

The AIGA, as part of the Designer of 2015 initiative, asked the education community to explore new ways to address this changing field. Graduates today are faced with urgent and emerging challenges. They are being asked by both the public and private sector to solve social, governmental, environmental and cultural problems. To address these needs, it will be necessary for students to become broader visual thinkers and more holistic problem solvers. Education must now turn to a truly integrative approach that goes beyond specialization and forges thinkers capable of arriving at the necessary creative solutions.

Currently Graphic Design education is primarily a practice-based discipline. Success of design programs is measured by how many students find placement in the field. For all practical purposes it is an elite aesthetic vocational training, a finishing school for visual efficiency and professionalism.

According to the Jeffersonian Ideal, the purpose of liberal arts education is to create informed citizens. It has since been folded into most art and design education as a parallel course of study. The effective aim of this hybrid is to infuse liberal arts values alongside practical training in technique, craft, and art.

Historically, the evolution of contemporary educational systems has many roots in the industrial revolution. Schools, universities, colleges and apprenticeships arose as ways to train for trades and properly socialize a work force. It is not hard to see where elements of these roots may still persist in the leaves and branches. The delivery of education can however, be the study of a discipline without context. A consumer paradigm may be infused into the delivery system itself. The professor, seen as a pitcher full of content, decants her expertise into the partially empty vessels of her students. This passive reception may be an adequate and even effective model in many situations, but it is not the only one.

Most students begin their undergraduate careers eager to learn vocational design in the service of consumerism and corporate capitalism. This is logical since where it is seen that jobs exist. Students often emulate these modes, having been exposed almost exclusively to them through their own formative years of media consumption. Steven Heller, critic, author, and chair of the MFA Designer as Author Program at the School of Visual Arts in New York writes in *Citizen Designer*,

“It is disheartening to see the vast number of undergraduate projects dedicated to selling goods and services in the marketplace devoid of any mission beyond business success. Undoubtedly all students need experience in this type of message and purpose. But cannot projects cover a broad mix of content, including issues beyond business? Cultural, social and political subjects make excellent communications challenges for student designers.”

If the formative culture that shapes designers before entering Higher Education does not imply these challenges, then it is the responsibility of Colleges and Universities to do so. Today's students are preparing to enter a future in which emerging transitions will likely overshadow any education rooted in the status quo of the last century. As scientist and financial observer Chris Martensen has put it "the next twenty years are going to be nothing like the last." (<http://www.chrismartenson.com>)

The International Forum on Globalization explains it in this way:

"The planet's ecological, social, and economic systems are on the verge of catastrophic change, for which few societies are prepared. Efforts by governments to respond to the impending emergency are thus far grossly inadequate. Efforts by corporations and industries to reform their behaviors remain largely enclosed by systemic limits that require continued growth and profit above all other standards of performance."

Continuing to train and educate students to design purely in the service of consumer culture may at best be inadequate to prepare them for meaningful careers, and at worst, may be irresponsible neglect if they are indeed expected to face a challenging future full of approaching limitations. Even worse, continuing to perpetuate systems that ignore consequences implicates the teacher as well as the student in the moral problems of the accompanying fallout that may carry very real human costs.

Certainly, the driving force behind design in a capitalist system is profit. Consumerism will no doubt continue to be an important mode of production and will certainly serve psycho-social as well as economic purposes in society. However, emphasis on socially-responsible activating design will be essential as within our lifetime, economies of consumption become less relevant. The consumer must be replaced with the citizen participant, and new provocative models of integrated liberal design arts are needed to displace outmoded and obsolete modes of design production and education. If our dominant cultural force is aligned with an unsustainable future, then design should be a counter-cultural activity, sanctioned by institutions of higher education and catapulted to the forefront of a world in transition beginning today.

How do we educate students to become responsible designers?

Global strategy consultant Roger Martin proposes what he calls an integrative approach. He says, "Rather than limiting the possible causal relationships to simple, linear, one-way dynamics, they (integrative thinkers) entertain the possibility that the causal forces may be multi-directional (i.e. circular) and complex...integrative thinkers approach problem architecture differently. Rather than trying to deal with elements in piece-parts or sequentially, they strive at all times to keep the whole of the problem in mind while working on the individual parts. Finally, when faced with two opposing options that seem to force a trade-off, integrative thinkers are included to strive for a creative resolution of the tension rather than simply accepting the choice in front of them."

Our institution has initiated an integrated model that teaches students in three domains; the disciplinary, which provides traditional visual training; the common liberal arts education that builds the proficiency to think critically and creatively; and the life experience and action domain in which students work together to build inclusive and welcoming communities that rest on a set of social, financial and leadership skills. The core liberal arts education is taught in a fully integrated, interdisciplinary approach that begins with the basics of Western thought and civilization and extends outward, creating a foundation for critical learning. It starts with a period of self-examination, and progresses in expanding concentric circles, first considering local communities and then radiating into the world at large. These three domains are contextualized and augmented by an academic experience abroad.

Our core liberal arts education, referred to as the “Core” is almost a second major where the emphasis is on context. The Core approach to liberal arts education is inquiry-based learning where courses are designed around problems or issues and the students figure out ways to solve the problems. The learning is specific, relevant, personal and immediate. It's not based on learning and memorizing content. There are no tests or lengthy lectures.

Example

CORE 330: Crossing Borders

Students who were unable to go abroad for a full semester traveled to Morocco with a CORE professor during spring break to experience living in Muslim homes. They were required to complete three projects that addressed these inquiries:

- What do you need to know to travel to Morocco like ethnographers?
- What can the professor do to make travel meaningful and relevant to my future career?

Each student identified a problem related to her major and proposed a project that she would investigate while traveling. A graphic designer wanted to organize a public exhibition of women's art in Rabat; four digital filmmaking students collected interviews and observations and collaborated to edit a documentary of raised insights; two education students will be presenting their findings at a conference this October about the home-stay experience and its potential to “cross borders” in our understanding of one another.

Finally, students reflect on how traveling to a third-world country, informed their plans for their profession, their world-view, and their lives.

There are three key attributes to the Core education.

Integration

The liberal arts courses are unique because they are not discipline specific. Instead, they are organized around themes in which students discover questions and seek answers using the tools that the different disciplines provide. This is liberal arts in context.

Example

In the first semester, students may question the role of evil in the world. Does evil exist? What can psychological studies tell us about Shakespeare's Iago so we can perhaps understand something about his motivation to destroy Othello? Rather than an entire course on psychology or literature the ideas and tools of each discipline are used as part of an integrated inquiry to discover answers.

By the third year, integration, as a way of thinking, becomes second nature. Students no longer think in terms of the separate disciplines. This is significant because the world students encounter outside their education is in need of people who have skills to integrate various approaches to solving disparate problems. Successful design solutions are dependant on the designer's ability to know about the subject, to find information, and to be sensitive to cultural differences. These are the skills that integrating the disciplines will provide.

Relevance

The liberal arts courses are related to one another and to graphic design. This allows students to better understand how the discipline fits in the bigger picture. The courses are taught in cohorts of 20 (for example, Secular and Sacred is paired with Capitalism and Democracy.) Faculty members meet regularly to discuss common interests and find ways in which ideas in each course overlap.

Example

One teacher published a newspaper article stating his position that public money should be spent on parochial schools. His partner disagreed completely with the argument. Students taking the linked sections of Capitalism and Democracy and Secular and Sacred, would see their cohort partners debate. Because of the integration of Core, students would learn about debate, religion in context, and how faculty deal with differences, pose questions and seek answers. Students see how the material in the texts relates to the real world in action.

Example

In Scientific Revolution students might use rhetorical skills to present an argument in the modality of an 18th Century philosopher—without the use of modern presentation technology. In Capitalism and Democracy one might write new laws or adjust an existing one in relation to one's major. In one case, Criminal Justice students created a video about the right to remain silent contained in the Miranda law warning, answering a new question they posed about the implications for law enforcement today.

Curiosity

Core allows students to exercise and to foster their natural curiosity.

Example

One section of Human Rights and Responsibilities begins with the questions: What are your rights in this classroom? What is your responsibility to classroom polices? To each other? To your teacher? Where do rights come from? Should everyone have rights? Do all people have rights? Is there such a thing as Human Rights? In this class, students design and determine what they will study. They take the lead through their own interests within the general framework of Human Rights and Responsibilities. They choose the themes and the area they want to explore. Each semester the course re-invents itself.

This approach is challenging and can be more work for faculty. When the direction of the course is determined by the student's professional interests and the ideas they care to explore, and when research projects are self-designed, it becomes the instructor's job to make it possible for the student to reach those goals.

Core also fosters curiosity by encouraging group-based work. Working in groups opens possibilities of expression not necessarily available in traditional classroom, lecture, or studio environments.

Example

CORE 120 Concepts of Communication

- Graphic designers researched and told stories about people living in trees
- Professional Writers expressed their point visually through painting and creating art
- Public Relations students worked with Digital Filmmakers and Graphic Designers. to make a film raising awareness around issues of homelessness.

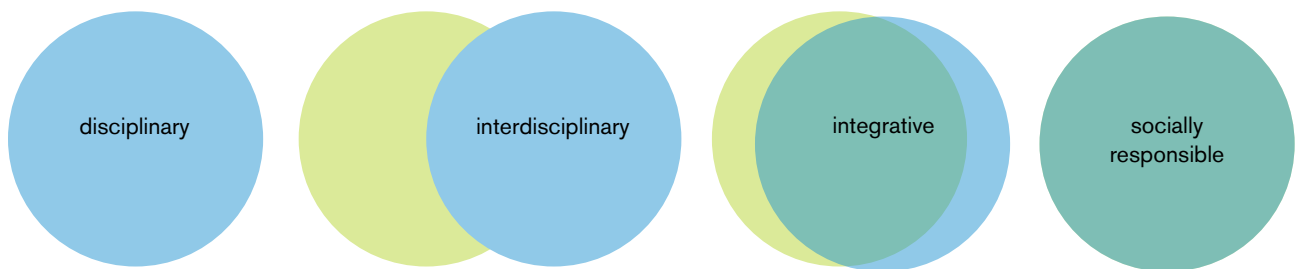
This integrated approach was created and implemented by our educational institution three years ago. Next year, the first group of seniors will begin the final phase. During the senior year students design a capstone project that reflects the culmination of their integrated learning. Student projects address issues of ethics, activism and social change. One student has proposed working on government forms standards, another is investigating work with refugees, and a third intends to begin a bike share program in our city. Student Alex Dahl writes,

“The capstone project interests me because it is inherently interdisciplinary, and can be whatever I can make of it – personal or far-reaching. My goal is to create something that could make a difference, and to get there through information architecture and visual design, for many audiences, in multiple mediums. I may go big, and create a comprehensive identity system for every federal office in the United States government. I might go local, and design an integrated web app that improves my college's online learning components. I just wish I had time to do everything I can think of.”

Students don't choose to work within an integrated curriculum because they want to study Rhetoric, or Aesthetics, or Human Rights. They choose based on their desire to become a graphic designer. However, when they come for their program, they can't leave without Core. What this experience provides is beyond a certification in graphic design. The world outside their education is looking for interdisciplinary thinkers, people who are curious and able to transcend boundaries to solve problems and work collaboratively, people who are worldly and have the perspective afforded from travel and study abroad.

Ideally, this approach is a transitional step towards an even more dramatic shift. Imagine student-run community design initiatives addressing environmental issues, economic inequities, or social justice problems. Rather than training students to plug into the existing professional tracks of consumerism and corporate capitalism, graphic design programs will facilitate student engagement with the immanent cultural changes unfolding within their lifetimes. The AIGA can then be seen as the connection between schools that unites designers through common challenges. Our institution has pioneered a progressive shift. We are slowly changing the student perception of design from consumer-based practice to life-changing visual thinking. We still hear a few complaints that "core liberal education is taking me away from my major;" however, the impact of our movement is evident in the goals of each proposed capstone project. Students have been awakened and re-visioned. As the future becomes present, our responsibility now more than ever is to foster an open eyed willingness to see transitions as they unfold and to provide students with the intellectual tools and creative understanding necessary to shape sustainable and socially responsible solutions.

Creating social responsible students (past/present to future)



¹Heller, S., & Vienne, V. (2003). *Citizen Designer: Perspectives on Design Responsibility*.

²Mander, J. (2007, September). *Manifesto on Global Economic Transitions*. Retrieved from <http://www.ifg.org/programs/Energy/energy.htm>

³Martin, R.L. (2007). "The Opposable Mind: How Successful Leaders Win Through Integrative Thinking." Boston: Harvard Business School Press. p. 41-44.