

Design/ed

Rethinking the Scaffold: Making the Case for K-12 Design Education

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It has been said time and time again that the quality of students entering college-level design programs is not up to par in recent years. Much of this is blamed on K-12 (and specifically high school) arts educators, who are targeted for not providing adequate instruction in design basics. It has also been said that teaching design is best left for college-level faculty and that such instruction disrupts the “scaffolding” system that has been in place for decades. If this is a scenario that seems familiar to you, then you need to face facts that you can’t have it both ways – you want students entering your classes to have greater knowledge and awareness of what the design field is all about, but you don’t want high school instructors infringing upon your educational territory. However, there is room for both lines of thought and if we are to make progress as design educators, then it is time to evaluate the existing system of design education itself. Design can be taught in K-12 classrooms, if students are provided with the right kind of support system.

If the right steps are taken to break from the past and open the doors to more students, the next decade could very well be the “Decade of Design Education” for students not just in the field of design, but also in other areas of study. By taking the existing scaffolding system and rethinking it, opening it up, making it not just about pure art and design but also about design thinking and the creative process, we open up immeasurable possibilities for the children who will inherit the problems of today and who will be responsible for fixing them.

In rethinking the current scaffolding system, consider three relevant facts:

1. **The world is in a global financial crisis, with the United States leading the way.** One key factor in this is that as a nation, we simply no longer manufacture anything. Most retail products that used to be made and sold here are now assembled overseas and shipped into the U.S., creating a trade imbalance to the tune of \$380 billion in 2009 alone, according to the U.S. Census Bureau (1). This has resulted in an increasing unemployment rate in the domestic manufacturing sector.

Tying this staggering number to an increasing reliance on outsourced foreign manpower has also created a loss in brain trust within the U.S. Many children are educated using an

outdated educational model that is based on learning skills that are no longer supported by existing employment opportunities. We don't train enough people in skills that look to the future, such as those supported by the Partnership for 21st Century Skills (2). This is evidenced in a March 6, 2010 New York Times article (3) that reported that the U.S. economy needs 100,000 new jobs *per month* just to break even with workers entering the marketplace, in addition to finding jobs for the 15 million people who are currently unemployed. Many of those millions of workers have no training in skills that will be needed in the Creative Economy.

To bring this back to the conversation of Design Education, include our national obsession to increase scores on standardized tests. Here you start to realize the problem, because standardized tests are themselves based off of outdated standards. They cannot predict if a student has learned any of the skills that will be necessary for them to succeed in the 21st century, such as Design Thinking. This being the case, their task as a yardstick by which to evaluate our children has outlived their usefulness.

Because this focus has come with the cost of abandoning instruction in classes that develop critical design thinking skills (such as the arts and vocational classes), K-12 students are already facing limitations critical to their educational growth. To rectify this situation and ensure that college-bound students are prepared for their next educational experience, more K-12 schools must be open to integrating some design education into their lessons. In addition, colleges must do what they can to help public schools with this endeavor and prepare students entering college-level programs.

- 2. We must face the reality that in order to maintain the precarious position of the United States as a global superpower, we must learn to work with our strengths.** It can be argued that the greatest strength of the U.S. lies in our open and accepting form of government. While not utopian, it nevertheless provides its citizens with an enormous amount of creative flexibility. For example, the training provided to students of architecture, fashion and industrial design is second to none and people from around the world travel to the U.S. to study design in all of its forms. The U.S. Design Education community must take advantage of this by learning how to hold onto our creative resources and nurture them at all levels of development, starting with K-12 schools.

Across the country, programs are already in place to help K-12 teachers improve their ability to integrate Design Education into their classrooms. At schools such as Stanford University's d.school in California (4); Kean University's Busch School of Design in New Jersey (5); and Kutztown University in Pennsylvania (6), programs are in place to help K-12 teachers learn about design thinking and methodologies. Many of these schools also go out into the K-12 districts to have direct access to students.

Separately, programs like those conducted by the Cooper-Hewitt National Design Museum in New York City (7) conduct workshops across the country. These programs for K-12 educators spread the academic benefits provided by design education.

At the high school level, schools such as the Charter High School for Architecture and Design in Philadelphia (8) and the New Design High School in New York City (9) may be at the forefront of a movement that recognizes a weakness in traditional K-12 schools that do not provide any meaningful instruction in Design Education. Their very existence and success proves that this content has a place in a general education setting.

- 3. The idea that only art and design schools at the college level can provide the education needed to create an awareness and understanding of design is shortsighted and fatalistic.** For too long, providing an education in design has been treated as a sacred cow open only to applicants with the best portfolios. If we continue to not only support a scaffolding system that fosters this line of reasoning and places designers on a pedestal, we risk the chance of alienating generations of young, talented people whose career opportunities could only be augmented by having some knowledge of common design practices.

A reference to this was stated during the AIGA discussion panel "Those Who Can, Teach" on October 26, 2009 (10), when legendary designers Paula Scher and Carin Goldberg lamented on how many of their incoming design students don't even know what a graphic designer does, let alone why they are taking a design class. By concurring on this point, they may have touched upon a relevant conclusion: if art-school bound college seniors don't even know why they are in a design class, then how would someone majoring in areas that hire designers, such as business or marketing, know what a designer does? Why do they have to wait until they enter the workplace to learn this?

What is needed is a new structure – an improved scaffold – that not only caters to potential art and design students, but also seeks to enlighten and inform students from a broader number of subject disciplines and varied interests. These are students who may not seek to gain entry to a college-level art or design program but nevertheless could be valuable contributors to the Creative Economy.

By starting young – as early as kindergarten – and discussing how certain colors make us feel, or why a Sesame Street character looks the way it does; or by giving middle-school students information on possible career opportunities that involve art, architecture or design; or by preparing high school students for colleges and trade schools that train students for careers that assist professional artists and designers, we can bolster support for the future and prepare students for their entry into the Creative Economy. By integrating design education classes into non-traditional settings, we also foster a greater respect for the roles that designers play in today's business environments. We can help these students be better clients and customers of design once they have entered the workforce.

We are shooting ourselves in the foot as an industry if we, rather snobbishly, restrict design education to students who are only enrolled in art and design schools as we withhold it from all others. Several successful MBA programs have recognized this fact and integrate design classes into their curricula, to improve the skills that students will need in the next few decades. Some of these noteworthy programs include:

- The California College of the Arts “MBA in Design Strategy” (11)
- The Illinois Institute of Technology’s dual “Master of Design / Master of Business Administration” program (12)
- New York University’s Stern School of Business class titled “Innovation and Design” taught by Luke Williams of frog design (13)
- Rotman School of Management at the University of Toronto, who has an advocate in Roger Martin for teaching design at business schools (14)
- The Darden School of Business at the University of Virginia (15)

The Harvard Business Review (16) famously stated a few years back that Dan Pink’s quote “The MFA is the new MBA” (17) was a breakthrough idea. Since that time, MFA programs are overflowing with applicants, as individuals and companies realize that to establish an edge over their competition, utilizing some design thinking and practices will give them a distinct advantage in the marketplace, both now and in the future. In September of 2009, Business Week reported

in-depth on the subject (18). So, it seems that as the “Decade of Design Education” dawns and its influence on business and economy grows in stature, the time has come to consider how to best improve Design Education access for all students, not just those destined for post-secondary art and design schools.

Other telling signs that the “Decade of Design Education” is here:

- Currently offered at Pratt, RISD and soon to be offered at Kent State University, programs are in place that augment the traditional Art Education training and offer Art & Design Education. These programs may foretell a future need for Design Educators in K-12 schools.
- On December 1, 2009, a group named the “National Design Policy Initiative” (19) led by Dr. Dori Tunstall, held a summit meeting in Washington, D.C. Members of several national design groups, including the AIGA, were in attendance. The top priority for 2010 was chosen to be the development of K-12 design education initiatives. This decision is a key example of how important this subject is being considered on a national level.
- In April 2010, the International Design Education Alliance for Schools (20) met in Washington D.C. for the first time, to discuss matters relevant to this very subject. Organized by Drs. Martin Rayala from Kutztown University and Robin Vande Zande of Kent State University, the agenda included:
 1. **PREK-12 Design Education Policy** - What standards, assessments, curriculum, licenses, regulations, statutes, etc. will need to be in place to ensure that every student in every school gets design education every year?
 2. **PREK-12 Teacher Preparation** - What training, certification, university courses, degrees, curriculum, resources, etc. will need to be in place to provide qualified teachers of design education in schools?
 3. **PREK-12 Student Services** - What resources, recognition, scholarships, incentives, motivation, classes, lessons, etc. will need to be provided for students to help them understand and value the importance of design education in their future success?

To expand upon agenda item #2, IDEAS supports a proposal to offer licensure endorsement for K-12 Design Educators, just as the Praxis currently offers exams for General Art Education, Art Therapy and Art History. Coursework would be assigned to precede an evaluating exam, after which the

instructor would be certified as a K-12 Design Educator, thus increasing their influence and importance as a valued member of the educational community.

What can YOU do?

Get off the campus.

Go for career days at K-12 schools in your geographic area. If the career days don't exist – make them! Volunteer to do a dog and pony show for kids, who actually appreciate dogs and ponies. Suggest that other designers or design teachers such as architects, product designers, fashion designers, etc. join the show!

Send invitations.

Invite high school students to YOUR school. Let them shadow your design students, sit in on a class, participate in a project.

Make friends.

Get in contact with the art, design, and graphics teachers in your local high schools. Help them help their students create better portfolios. Build relationships with the teachers and the students. Show business students in DECA or FBLA classes how design interweaves with business and marketing.

Design Education can lead to careers in design, yes; but it can also augment many other career goals and help our students solve tomorrow's problems – but only if they are given access to the knowledge, the tools and the resources to find their own paths. K-12 Design Education can help provide direction down that path and it is up to the Design Education community as a whole to help foster this support.

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