

It is not the Winning; it is the Taking Part

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ABSTRACT

“Education is too important to be left solely to educators.”
- *Francis Keppel, (1916–90) American Educator.*

Education and particularly design education can't win. Or so it seems. Sat between a rock and hard place, the best courses in design education seek to create forward-thinking, motivated and talented designers with a thirst for knowledge, enquiring minds and ecologically and socially responsible attitudes.

On the outside, looking in, the design industry rarely acknowledges or demands such positive attributes from graduates entering the work place preferring to seek the short term fixes of strong computing skills, current design practice awareness and the ability to work hard for long hours for little pay without question.

Matters may be no better from within: many educational institutions often placing more value on issues such as admission and retention rates, external accreditation and health and safety monitoring than providing a conducive learning environment. Too many courses in design have been trapped in a stranglehold of conformity, trapped by assessment regulations and inflexible modular structures, trapped by systems that work against and hinder rather than encourage and support the flow of creativity.

This paper explores some of the ways and means of addressing the external and internal demands as well as retaining the spirit of why we choose to teach design.

Keywords: Graphic Design, Collaboration, Design Education, Design Industry, Risk-Taking.

1. Introduction

“You will be able to work under pressure to strict deadlines.”

“You should possess a ‘can-do’ attitude.”

“You should possess an attention to detail.”

“Superb XPress/Illustrator/Photoshop skills - a must.”

“Fast and Accurate.”

“You must be able to thrive in a fast-paced environment.”

“Willing to be thrown in at the deep end!”

- *Extracts from Appointments advertisements in Creative Review magazine (Jan 2005).*

“This monitoring report has been written following information submitted by staff responsible for the delivery of units of study (course modules), from student evaluation and feedback and consultation, staff team meetings, external examiners’ reports, cohort analysis, entry and progression statistics and health and safety reports regarding the learning environment. Feeding into the writing of this paper are reports on the 56 units of study, the total number of units from across the three years of the three undergraduate courses as well as the discussion regarding these individual unit monitoring reports that have occurred at course level. Consideration has been given to the paper from The Strategic Planning Unit – Undergraduate Retention 2002/03 and the annual theme agreed by the Academic Board for 2003/04 – The Implementation of the Learning and Teaching Strategy, Widening Participation and The Research and Teaching Nexus.”

- *Extract from the Annual Monitoring Report 2003-2004 for the Academic Programme in Communication and Media Arts, School of Arts and Communication, Faculty of Arts and Architecture, The University of Brighton (Sept 2004).*

Sat between a rock and hard place, the best courses in design education seek to create forward-thinking, motivated and talented designers with a thirst for knowledge, enquiring minds and ecologically and socially responsible attitudes.

On the outside, looking in, the design industry rarely acknowledges or demands such positive attributes from graduates entering the work place preferring to seek the short term fixes of strong computing skills, current design practice awareness and the ability to work hard for long hours for little pay without question. Unfortunately, too often the industry looks solely for those fresh-out-of-school juniors with knowledge of up-to-the-minute contemporary practice demonstrated by portfolios of work that follow fashions and trends rather than diagnosing, challenging and solving communication issues.

Matters may be no better from within: many educational institutions often placing more value on issues such as admission and retention rates, external accreditation and health and safety monitoring than providing a conducive learning environment. Too many courses in design have been trapped in a stranglehold of conformity, trapped by assessment regulations and inflexible modular structures, trapped by systems that work against and hinder rather than encourage and support the flow of creativity. Breaking boundaries, challenging rules and attempting new, untried and untested methods can move knowledge and understanding of the discipline forward; taking risks is integral to successful design education. And that is risk-taking by staff as well as students.

2. Taking Risks (or not)

“Soyez réalistes, demandez l'impossible.” - Be realistic, ask for the impossible.

“L'ennui est contre-révolutionnaire.” - Boredom is counterrevolutionary.

- *Slogans and graffiti from the student riots in Paris (1968).*

“Unrest on the streets of Paris

The worst rioting ever to hit mainland France took place in Paris, leaving scenes of devastation, not seen since the Second World War. There was turmoil on May 6th 1968 when some 10,000 left-wing students fought with CRS riot police, armed with teargas, fire hoses and batons, in the streets of the Latin Quarter. Cars and buses were overturned and burned. There were 600 injuries and 422 arrests. On May 10th, further pitched battles took place between police and students, who dug up paving stones for barricades. The rioting was followed by a five week occupation of the Sorbonne University and a general strike.”

- *The 20th Century – The Pictorial History*.

Scenes as described above are rarely seen today. Confusion still surrounds the actual events that kick-started the May '68 student riots in Paris but one thing is clear; the students involved were prepared to take real and dangerous risks, to make demands of their educational system and their government. Nowadays, students at the start of the 21st Century, of course this may only be true for the UK, are a different breed. Increasingly regarded as customers or clients, their demands are for material possessions, rather than ideological or theoretical nourishment. Politics, for many students, is an alien concept, and perhaps their apathy for getting involved should be viewed as a revolt against the idealistic attitudes of their parents. Nowadays happy to wind away hours staring at the screen, rather than take to the streets – we have had Generation X, we now have Generation Xbox.

A website, www.phd-survey.org, with a section dedicated to advice written by students for students about aspects of PhD education confirms suspicions. “It is a long, discouraging but sometimes rewarding path with no guaranteed job prospects at the end of it. Consider it carefully,” writes one student about studying a doctorate in art history. Another offers the following advice: “Think twice about the decision and be aware 1) of the abysmal job situation in certain disciplines and 2) of the realities of an academic life, e.g., low pay for long hours, egocentric colleagues, and struggles for tenure.” Hardly the stuff of dreams and little wonder then that the risk-taking attitudes of a previous generation of students cannot be attributed to a gene prevalent in all students. With attitudes appearing quite so bleak, it is no surprise that some academics are wondering the worth of their teaching.

3. The Joy of (being in) Education

“He who can, does. He who cannot, teaches.”

- *George Bernard Shaw (1856-1950) British dramatist, critic, writer*

Education has had to fend off those that would knock the profession for more years than one would care to imagine. In 1918 Henry Brooks Adams, the US historian and writer, exclaimed in his book - *The Education of Henry Adam*: “the chief wonder of education is that it does not ruin everybody concerned in it, teachers and taught”. In the UK it was poet, dramatist and critic Oscar Wilde in his essay, *The Critic as Artist*, that stated and slated: “Education is an admirable thing, but it is well to remember from time to time that nothing that is worth knowing can be taught”. Bertrand Russell, English philosopher, mathematician and writer, went as far to say “Men are born ignorant, not stupid; they are made stupid by education”. Clear evidence, if required, of the disparaging views many, outside of the area, have written about the discipline.

“Consider... the university professor. What is his function? Simply to pass on to fresh generations of numskulls a body of so-called knowledge that is fragmentary, unimportant, and, in large part, untrue. His whole professional activity is circumscribed by the prejudices, vanities and avarices of his university trustees, i.e., a committee of soap-boilers, nail manufacturers, bank-directors and politicians. The moment he offends these vermin he is undone. He cannot so much as think aloud without running a risk of having them fan his pantaloons.”

- *H. L. Mencken (1880-1956) American editor, critic and writer*

Mencken's views now sound dated, although it is the language rather than the message that dates his opinions. His view of an academic pushing forth half-truths and lies without wishing to offend the university's trustees is controversial but, in truth, the present day reality could be viewed as not entirely dissimilar. Although today, trustees may not be the enemy of the design academic, there are certainly other factors that contribute to the pressure to conform and play by the rules. Where once the art school was considered the epitome of creative chaos, John Lennon, Keith Richards of the Rolling Stones, Malcolm McClaren – manager of the Sex Pistols, all having attended, today's art school is a different place. Now run more like businesses, greater emphasis is placed on issues of health and safety, annual monitoring, admission and retention rates, and widening participation than fostering creative freedom, pushing back the boundaries whilst pushing forward the notion of originality. Gone are the really dangerous days where spontaneity and risk-taking were the norm, the combination of student as customer, with purely career-driven aspirations, and academic as law-enforcer have seen to that.

“In England ... education produces no effect whatsoever. If it did, it would prove a serious danger to the upper classes, and would probably lead to acts of violence in Grosvenor Square.”

- *Oscar Wilde (1856-1900) British poet and dramatist.*

4. How to Teach Design

“2-D - 4-D

Once graphic design meant flat, static, two-dimensional.

Now it encompasses multiple, hybrid media. It is not just visual, but involves a variety of senses, more like life itself, which plays out in a four-dimensional world.”

“Object – Experience

Once what you were making was an object.

Now it is more often an experience.”

- *Chris Pullman, Vice President for Design WGBH Boston, Some Things Change... The Education of the Graphic Designer.*

“There are designers employed as teachers who even feel like teaching design is in principle an impossibility, because the field of design moves too quickly and develops in so many directions at once.”

- *Hugues C. Boekraad, Academic at Post-St Joost, Copy Proof – A New Method for Design Education.*

With both the external and internal pressures mounting, how do we as design educators ensure the provision of a truly creative learning environment that challenges preconceived notions and theories of design whilst equipping students for the rigours of the 21st century workplace? How do we offer a curriculum that nurtures, supports yet confronts change? As design educators we have a responsibility to equip the next generation of designers with the knowledge and skills to effect design solutions that communicate truthfully, responsibly, that enrich lives and life-styles. We must seek to endow our students with the ability to empower, rather than be empowered by, technology, to harness new ideas and ways of thinking and to understand and comprehend the past whilst looking to the future.

The teaching of design is not exact science, far from it - in fact many argue that the teaching of design is a near impossibility because there is confusion about what the practice of design really is. With digital technology came new working methods and approaches that have initiated new patterns of communication exchange. A minority of educators and practitioners have started to move away from the previously established rules in design education, focussing less on specific outcomes and objects as well as styles and working methods and starting to concentrate on the design method itself, looking at the combination of models for communication and aesthetic criteria. In her essay, *How High Do We Set the Bar for Design Education?* Meredith Davis, professor and director of graphic design at North Carolina State University, acknowledges that this is still a small minority, "teaching strategies in most design schools discourage systems-level thinking by asking students to design products (a book, brochure, multimedia presentation, etc.), usually outside the context of the systems to which they belong and even, in some instances, outside the context of use". Davis recognises that in many cases "project briefs are written by faculty, not students, and the criteria for success (legibility, good composition, original idea, etc.) are usually known before the student begins work."

In essence, focussing less on outcomes and style and instead concentrating on working with a client to determine the most appropriate mode of delivery and the essence of the communication task in order to establish the context of the problem - should be formulated before the brief is written. Working together as designer and client in collaboration may be a simple enough sounding approach, but one that requires a huge shift in established patterns from those in education and in practice. Not exactly rocket science but then design is not an exact science.

5. Collaboration

"The reward of a successful collaboration is a thing that cannot be produced by either of the parties working alone."

- *Harlan Ellison, US Film Writer.*

"You have to be part psychologist and part politician to work creatively and collaboratively..."

- *Nina Sadowsky, US Film Producer.*

Recognising the importance of relationships with both those outside and inside the design institution is the first step in the right direction towards establishing the perfect

creative environment. External and internal links can be successfully fostered, building relationships and partnerships where collaboration and communication are the building blocks of innovation and change. Our students are expected to recognise and evaluate peer learning, that mysterious mist that often occurs in the studio environment when we are elsewhere, but are we as design educators and practitioners practicing what we preach? Are we learning from each other, communicating our intentions, evaluating our failures as well as our successes and creating an open dialogue regarding our own performances in the educational and vocational needs of the next generation of designers?

A course curriculum that acknowledges and embraces professional practice and that invites design practitioners and design clients into the programme with a view to fostering productive links, enhancing and progressing the relationship between education and industry by re-evaluating the nature of the collaboration offers an educational experience to each of the participants. Whilst Davis admits that many design courses fail to create relevant projects, she notes that they also fail to ensure that they are critiqued appropriately too. “The outcome is usually critiqued by faculty and students or other designers (rarely by clients or audiences)” she explains in *The Education of the Graphic Designer*.

Gert Staal, in *Copy Proof – A New Method for Design and Education*, envisages similar problematic issues with working solely for an audience made up of a peer group, “Designing for fellow designers may well lead to a celebrated career in the bosom of the minute in-crowd of the graphics world, but it is not an approach chosen by Post-St. Joost”. Therefore understanding how to develop and critique project briefs through careful liaison and discussion, looking at ways of incorporating both professional and educational realities whilst underpinning the brief with the opportunity to take risks and experiment can be challenging yet should ultimately be a rewarding process for all involved.

6. The Politics of External Projects

“Is it morally acceptable to maintain a system in which (as one designer puts it), ‘Advertising and, more importantly perhaps the desire to mass-manipulate people for financial gain has become perfectly acceptable, and in many ways desirable’?”
- *Nigel Whiteley, Design for Society*.

Within the Academic Programme in Communication and Media Arts at the University of Brighton in the UK we are constantly developing ‘live’ projects with external partners for the undergraduate courses in Graphic Design and Illustration. Due to the high standing that the courses have locally and nationally, we find that we are regularly approached by outside agencies to participate in real projects for real clients, although unhappily often without real budgets. Requests arrive by post, email, telephone, and in person on a weekly, and occasionally daily, basis. They come from all sectors of the community and vary enormously in terms of their expectations, level of development, creative opportunities and timescale. There is no official channel for the requests to follow and much of the decision-making process regarding which projects the courses wish to get involved in, is mainly due to instinct and gut-feeling. Many of the successful requests have yet to be formally formulated

into a written project brief and so require less taking apart and putting back together than others that arrive signed, sealed and immovable.

The challenge for the course team and the potential client is in constructing a project that will benefit all three participants – the client, the student and the course. And this process is arrived at by face-to-face discussion between staff, students, normally student representatives, and key members of the client team about the perceived communication issues, perceived modes of delivery and any perceived audiences. Research is undertaken that starts to gather in-depth information about the organization, company or group.

It is only through conversation and communication that project briefs start to emerge that allow enough freedom and flexibility, as well as promoting that all-important ingredient of creative risk-taking, thus ensuring that the design process can get underway without fear of creative or commercial failure. Of course, commercial concerns are important, many clients demanding that a project that has their involvement and support even though initiated from a new perspective, still meets their commercial needs.

Not all projects require commercial success though, and plenty of the 'live' briefs commence from an entirely different starting point. Working with charities and trusts is a vital aspect of the process of ensuring that students receive first hand experience of working on projects outside of the commercial arena. The aim is to create an opportunity to investigate, understand and communicate issues that are more important to the wider community than the selling of consumer goods. Clearly articulated in the preface to *Design for the Real World*, Victor Papanek stated in 1971 – “There are professions more harmful than industrial design, but only a very few of them. And possibly only one profession is phonier. Advertising design, in persuading people to buy things they don't need, with money they don't have, in order to impress others who don't care, is probably the phoniest field in existence today.”

Papanek's views may still be considered extreme and Naomi Klein's call to arms in *No Logo* covers the intricacies of advertising and branding in more meticulous detail, but it is Nigel Whiteley in *Design for Society* that communicates a manifesto-style plea to the design community. Whiteley states - ‘The design profession needs to be both introspective and outward-looking. It must look at its practices and values, and their implications: and it must look at the condition of society and the world. Designers can no longer take refuge from responsibility for their actions and continually repackage the same old type of consumer goods at a time when issues about consuming and its relationship to the world's resources and energy need urgently to be acted upon.’ Introducing students to projects that insist upon communication that is truthful, responsible and that will enrich lives is the first small step: for some students it can be their first initiation into politics and the ethics and responsibilities of working as a designer.

7. Case Studies

“Think with your heart”

- *Gert Dunbar, Studio Dunbar. Behind the Seen, Design without Boundaries – Visual Communication in Transition, Rick Poyner.*

Born Free Foundation

Born Free, based close to Brighton in the UK, is an international wildlife and conservation charity, working throughout the world to protect wildlife and endangered species. Projects in India include a major initiative to help save wild tigers from extinction, plus a natural habitat sanctuary providing lifetime care for rescued tigers.

Working with Born Free, a 'live' brief was conceived and developed that looking at raising awareness of the organisation and its work.

Initial discussions with the head of marketing and publications, Celia Nicholls, around the themes and issues at the core of the charity's work provided a useful starting point. The foundation relies heavily on donations and funding is always a constant concern, it was clear that Born Free's intentions were to create a series of paper-based products, such as a range of cards, that would aim to increase revenue and awareness.

Working together to push the project's potential whilst investigating further areas for possible funding led to involvement and part sponsorship by Mapp paper merchants. The funding and enthusiasm brought to the project by this third party allowed the project coordinators to be far more ambitious in scale. Students, part of the crucial target audience for Born Free, raised the idea of creating a range of T-shirts as well as a set of greetings cards and postcards. Mapp sponsored the project and in return were allocated a run of each T-shirt design to be given as gifts to their sales teams.

T-shirt designs were created that used the Born Free campaigns for elephants, lions and monkeys in up-beat, contemporary and humorous ways. The intention was to raise awareness through designs that would be a talking point: that would relate to the charity as well as the wearer and would be a unique, but fashionable statement. Students submitted over fifty design proposals that were critiqued by members of the course staff team, by staff from Born Free and Mapp and by students themselves. The final range of shirts and cards that went on sale promoted through the annual merchandise catalogue and website and revenue from sales has well exceeded any expectations.

Born Free's chief executive Will Travers was delighted by the students' designs: "The new t-shirts are a fabulous addition to our merchandise catalogue, bringing up-to-the-minute style to our range. What a great way to raise funds to protect wildlife. Thank you Brighton University!"

The Royal Sussex County Hospital

The Royal Sussex County Hospital, based in Brighton, first opened in 1828 and in 2004 one of the UK's biggest and most specialised renal units was established at the hospital.

Renal patients have diagnosed problems with their kidneys and although not considered 'in-patients' are often long-term, visiting the unit three times per week for kidney dialysis. Patients may have to continue visits for the rest of their lives unless they have home dialysis or until they have a successful transplant.

The first stage in initiating a project with the hospital was to meet with members of Brighton City Council's Arts Development Board, the Royal Sussex County Hospital Arts Advisory Board and members of the Renal Unit Patients and Family Group to discuss the parameters of any possible collaboration. It was clear that whilst the new unit would offer medical facilities surpassing anything previously offered in the city and although the environment itself would be far easier for staff to work in, the visual stimulation for patients was less than satisfactory. Renal patients can experience feelings of nausea whilst on dialysis and may have to sit in a static position for many hours so their immediate surroundings are vital to their general outlook and well-being.

Through discussion, a project brief was conceived that would result in a series of artworks being created that would be situated in various locations within the unit. A number of site visits were organised, although at this point much of the construction and refitting work was still very much in progress. Students were given the opportunity to meet with patients and staff to discuss their needs and adequate time was allowed for project research into the effects of kidney and renal failure. It was decided that key words raised by patients were to be the main content of the brief – 'up-lifting', 'warm', 'friendly' and 'approachable' being the headlines in their discussion with students.

A brief was written that although creatively open, reflected upon issues of health and safety as well as the practical requirements for the works when sited in the renal unit. Students worked both solo and in groups to produce a vast range of design proposals for a first stage presentation at the hospital. From seventy initial proposals a shortlist of ten were selected for further work. At the final presentation four students were commissioned and a period of three months given for their creation, construction and installation.

The work produced was creative and varied: one student Andrew Merritt, created two hanging sculptural pieces entitled 'HELLO' and 'HI'. Letterforms constructed from thousands of small pieces of interlocking plastic washing machine, dishwasher and refrigerator components sprayed with day-glo orange and pink car paint spelled the words HELLO and HI. These were hung inside Perspex boxes and mounted in each of the two reception and waiting areas. Merritt explained "I wanted the works to appear to change depending on the location that people viewed them from (close, faraway, round the corner, through the doors etc). The pieces would never look quite the same. This is an important point for the patients, staff and visitors as they use the renal unit on a very regular basis. 'HELLO' and 'HI' are like fish tanks - same components but different situations every time you look, except the pieces are smarter than goldfish!"

For "Gingerbread People" Josie Brooks baked numerous different gingerbread people of both sexes, each naked and with varying sized anatomical proportions. She photographed the results and digitally printed onto canvas three large multi-faceted images. "The gingerbread people piece is based on the notion of bringing a bit of light-hearted relief in to the hospital environment to make people smile. The work contains 100 individual characters, of all shapes and sizes, to represent the diversity of people coming in and out of the hospital. The volume, along with the scale of the piece, provides a significant amount of visual stimuli encouraging the

viewer, even if seen on numerous occasions, to spot something new in the image. It also provides a great talking point as people can try to spot a relevant gingerbread person that they identify with or maybe, more importantly, that they are glad they are not!" explained Brookes.

Bloomberg

The London headquarters of Bloomberg, the global financial news and communications company, 'dedicated to new technology, dynamism and creative thinking' collaborated with Scarlet Productions in London and members of the staff team to create a brief offering a unique design challenge. Fifteen one-minute student films were commissioned that were to be played continuously for one month in the street entrance and reception of the architecturally inspiring Bloomberg building in Finsbury Square in the City of London.

The project brief incorporated the following text from Bloomberg's own statement about their sponsorship of the arts – 'In recent years there has been a move away from traditional notions of the working environment and Bloomberg's art and design installations represent a significant shift from the conventional corporate art collections that often place status before innovation. The extraordinary becomes part of the everyday, and creativity is brought right to the heart of the company. Bloomberg's close relationship with the arts and education builds loyalty and motivation among staff, encouraging new connections and new approaches within teams throughout the company as a whole.'

Staff and students visited Bloomberg's offices in London to gauge the space and meet with staff from Bloomberg and Scarlet Productions. The visit was an important one as it enabled students to ask questions about how the space was used, examine the working habits of the staff and generally delve into the inner workings of a creative-looking financial news institution. The team at Bloomberg were asked to respond to many of the immediate ideas and themes that students wished to express through their work.

Ten one-minute films were chosen from a shortlist of twenty made, the main deciding factor being the depth of creativity explored and the ability to work sequentially within the confines of the timescale allowed. Other considerations included how the audience would engage with the films and how the pieces displayed a recognisable narrative from beginning to end.

Subject matter varied, techniques varied too – from analogue animation to digital Flash movies and the results reflected the diversity of work created on the course as well as the open brief and approach that Bloomberg, Scarlet and the Communication and Media Arts teams collaborated to provide.

8. Conclusion

The road from the student riots on the streets of Paris in 1968 to the pavements outside Bloomberg in 2004 may appear to have a tenuous link but there is some method in the madness. Education and particularly design education may have its critics and pressures from external and internal sources may continue to mount but

remaining sane, positive and inspired are ingrained into the psyche for many educators.

To combat internal institutional pressures – keep recruitment figures high, maintain retention rates, approach various boards and committees in a proactive manner, use studio space, facilities and equipment wisely and don't let students disobey health and safety guidelines – all straight-forward really.

To alleviate the stresses caused by external pressures from industry, invite them into your institution, speak to them about their needs and requirements, talk about the requirements of the course and the students and move forward from an equal stance. The riot-torn days of Paris in 1968 are well and truly over - it may now be up to the educators, rather than students, to be the catalyst for change, although it is wise to remember it is not the winning, it's the taking part.

“The Future is not inevitable. We can influence it, if we know what we want it to be. We can and should be in charge of our own destinies in a time of change”
- *Charles Handy, British oil executive turned academic and populist social philosopher.*

“The great aim of education is not knowledge, but action.”
- *Herbert Spencer (1820-1903), British philosopher and sociologist.*

“Graphic Design will save the world right after Rock and Roll does.”
- *David Carson US graphic designer.*

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10. Profile

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Zeegen's research involves the role of the illustrated image and its relationship with art and design. He is currently researching and writing two books for publication in 2005 – *Graphic Image-Making* for Rotovision and *The Fundamentals of Illustration* for AVA. He writes regularly for the design press for publications that include *Creative Review*, *Computer Arts*, *Digital Creative Arts* and *The Association of Illustrators The Journal*. Zeegen has lectured at seminars and conferences at institutions nationally in the UK and internationally in Tel Aviv, Istanbul, Nagoya, New York and Sydney.

Zeegen continues to practice as an illustrator, fifteen years since graduation from the Royal College of Art in London. Involved in the set-up of influential illustration studio, Big Orange Zeegen went onto establish Heart, one of the UK's foremost illustration agencies. Zeegen's design and illustration clients include national newspapers and magazines and international design and advertising agencies.