



# 56

by Steven Heller

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## Me feral designer

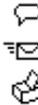
Agenda

I'm a recovering self-taught designer. After more than 30 years I have finally come to the realisation that my self-education was like a dormant childhood illness that has returned in adult life to haunt me. For years I smugly admitted that I had never attended a graphic design class (except those I taught), was expelled from The School of Visual Arts (where in the late 1960s I was enrolled in the illustration department and barely attended) and learnt everything ostensibly on my jobs (I was 'hired' right out of high school as a layout designer / art director for an underground newspaper and moved on from there). Me be proud primitive, with limited skills and limitless ambition.

Ambition masked many deficiencies, thus validating my belief that formal design training would have been a colossal waste of time. Yet being a feral designer had its drawbacks, even then. As in the case of a foreign-speaking immigrant who was never properly taught the tongue of his new land and is consequently stuck in linguistic infancy, my design language lacked sturdy foundations. I was never taught the grammar of type or precepts of design. Rather, I acquired stylistic conceits – what might be called design pidgin. My instincts served me well, but ultimately instinct failed to sustain design intelligence. Even practice, practice, practice was insufficient over the long haul, because I had been practising all wrong. Passion is useful, but justifying decisions to others solely on the basis of 'It feels good' extends only so far before one is labelled a dithering nabob of emotional excess.

Formal education does not, however, replace instinct and passion with rote and reflexive methods. What it does is provide tools for harnessing those enigmatic traits. Formal education imparts standards of competency, and being competent is difficult enough even with the benefit of good teachers or savvy computer templates.

A feral designer can survive for a while on pure guile, but without substantive knowledge (or a very strong creative and / or business collaborator) he or she is likely to be lost in the wilderness feeding on clichés and formulae like so many berries and grubs. Worse, he is probably destined to reinvent the wheel over and over and over, which squanders more energy than it creates. It is, therefore, nonsense to believe that one is more likely to push boundaries in a vacuum than in a classroom. The old maxim about knowing rules in order to break them is actually pretty sound. In fact, a good undergraduate education packs the student's brain with so many damn rules (and infuriating opinions) that rule-breaking is inevitable.



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'I think the last time "self-taught" worked was [with] Herbert Bayer who claimed, for typography at least, that knowing nothing gave the Bauhaus guys freedom to invent,' asserts design historian and educator Martha Scotford. 'It worked for them, briefly, but today that would be naive.'

#### Creative direction

Yet speaking of rules, there are always exceptions to them: Tibor Kalman initially studied English at NYU in the late 1960s before catching the wave of political unrest that closed the campus down and turned many students into leftwing agitators. He back-ended into graphic design by creating window displays and ad hoc signs in the campus bookstore for which he was manager – which later grew into the huge Barnes and Noble chain. Kalman's design life is well documented. His natural rebelliousness, together with his naivety, fuelled an instinctive contempt for professional standards that turned designers into capitalist tools. Yet Kalman called himself a designer. Of course, he stood on a soapbox, made a reputation as a bad boy and eventually became respected in the design field and fêted in the press. However, he would be the first to admit that if he had a formal design education he probably wouldn't have been so 'bad'. Being a self-proclaimed hybrid designer gave him strategic license.

Strictly speaking Kalman was never a bona fide graphic designer but rather a creative director (somewhere above a mere designer but below President of the United States), which is one of those semi-ambiguous, fabricated titles that allow the self-taught to work alongside the well tutored. Kalman controlled large projects that he conceived but he did not necessarily make himself. When it came to craft, he had little of it. He couldn't draw a straight line, lacked computer proficiency, and didn't care what typefaces were aesthetically harmonious (although he did know what he liked). If Kalman were alive today I'd wager he would not call himself a graphic designer. He creatively directed others, yet freely acknowledged that his lack of formal design competencies impinged upon his overall abilities. Yet he was unwilling to be tutored because he was much too busy moving and shaking, and his M&Co studio was always staffed by great designers doing his bidding.

There is tipping point for self-taught designers when they must confront their limitations and take stock. While I am not suggesting that all of us should turn ourselves into our local professional design authorities for retraining and competency review, I believe that being self-taught is no longer a badge of honour. In fact it is a handicap. Formal education teaches one to learn, and only a few privileged self-starters can achieve this (be it from books or osmosis) without guidance. 'In general I think [self-teaching] is a bad idea and not to be encouraged,' argues Scotford. 'Teaching / learning takes time – there is less of that every day so the learning curve is steeper now, and experienced guides are needed.' One does not have to be a dedicated teacher to hold such a rigid view. Since graphic design has become totally integrated with everything from motion to brand strategy, and both technical and creative skills are so finely meshed, I cannot understand how it is possible to process so much knowledge and experience on one's own. (In fact, I even favour a five-year undergraduate education, but that's another story.)

#### Learning on the job

However, since designers are not required to hang diplomas in their studios, it is not always easy to distinguish the formally trained from the self-taught (who in most other professions

would be called 'amateur'). The final product – the design work itself – is the ultimate credential. Moreover, it goes without saying there are good and bad designers on both sides of the educational divide. Self-education is relative. It could be argued that some who claim this distinction have actually had grounding through various alternative means. Before writing this essay I solicited personal testimonies from designers on the AIGA email education list and learned that some of them considered apprenticeship in the workplace was a viable substitute for classroom learning. Mary Scott, Chair of the School of Graphic Design at the Academy of Art University in San Francisco, received an ersatz education in the art department of Capitol Records under the tutelage of the leading album cover designers of the age. 'I was not formally trained,' she says, 'I learned through "intensification" much of what I needed to know.' In other words, she had direct access to some great talents, worked in a bullpen, and was paid for it. Yet there are some fundamental holes in the 'apprenticeship' approach of education that need filling.

Educator and designer Gunnar Swanson, who graduated from college with an art history degree and a minor in photography, is reluctant to describe himself as an autodidact. 'The implications of claiming to be "self taught" are false,' he says. 'I looked at what I saw around me and took a couple of [typography] classes. The textbook was Jim Craig's *Designing With Type*. It took me less than two weeks to figure out that the teacher was a chapter ahead of us and I decided that I could read the book as well as she could, so I dropped the class,' he continues. 'Being an outsider has probably forced me to think harder about the way things really work.'

Of course, there are immaculately conceived autodidacts successfully practising today, and one is Jon Rohrer who founded Fluxlabs ([fluxlabs.com](http://fluxlabs.com)) in Philadelphia. 'I am self-taught,' he says, but notes that his 'father was an artist and an art educator, and I think because of my upbringing I feel a certain built-in comfort with some of the formal issues of graphic design.' What he says he lacks, however, 'is much perspective on the business practices of graphic design, and I sometimes wonder if I'd feel a little less like I'm making everything up as I go along if I'd gone the usual route of student to designer / employee. Ultimately, though, finding my own way through chance and intuition is the only way things seem to work for me – in life or design.'

In fact, who can argue with success? Everyone does learn differently – some people even learn from manuals, although I don't know how – but the academy offers more than mere book learning. Greg Huntoon, founder and creative director of 417 North in Pasadena, California, laments that he 'missed the opportunity to be mentored by so many successful and influential teachers of design.' Nonetheless he insists that 'on the whole, I feel that what I missed in a formal design education I can make up by reading and continuing to remain teachable.'

Which is sound, but I still am convinced that despite all the design books, conferences, institutes, and distance-learning websites that offer virtual educational opportunities, the self-taught model is less viable today than ever before. Nothing can really take the place of immersion in an educational environment which is then combined with experience in the workplace. Swanson contends 'the graphic design world is impressively insular,' but it could be argued that the isolation endemic to self-teaching breeds a bogusly noble savage.

During my self-taught period I never sought out peer critiques. Like Howard Roark (the narcissistic hero of Ayn Rand's *The Fountainhead*), whom I moronically idolised as a teen, I saw no virtue coming from outside validation. I wanted praise but was not willing to be criticised lest it impinge on the purity of my vision. I glanced at what others, particularly more seasoned designers, exhibited in design annuals but adamantly avoided being influenced. Nonetheless, I acquired a mentor, the illustrator Brad Holland, whom I met through an ad I placed in the *Village Voice* when I was seeking contributors to an indie magazine I had started called *Borrowed Time*. This was as close to design school as I got, and it was Holland who taught me the rudiments of paste-up, type-specification, and, most importantly, conceptual thinking. Incidentally, it took all of two weeks, after which I was so full of myself I felt I didn't need his guidance any longer. This was the height of arrogance and ignorance, but I truly believed that autodidactic-ness was not merely a choice but a mission. And this was before the computer.

#### Self-taught anythings

Speaking of computers, has it become too easy to feign design competence? 'Since "font" has become a common word in popular culture,' says Leslie Becker, a Professor of Graphic Design at California College of the Arts, 'it has become sort of a metaphor for design knowledge – making all of those people with access to technology consider themselves designers.' Conversely, Frank Baseman, an Associate Professor in Graphic Design at Philadelphia University, counters: 'Just like many other times in history, some people have been self-taught in a particular discipline, so I don't think that just because of the invention of the computer that these days someone could more easily become a self-taught designer. But, some people could become self-taught anythings.' The reality, of course, lies somewhere in between. Certainly owing to the computer more people have been drawn to graphic design. In the mfa Design programme at the School of Visual Arts, which I co-chair, at least 35 per cent of all applicants admit entering graphic design through desktop publishing. Obviously, they realise their limitations from manual learning and are now seeking higher education. But a smaller percentage claiming to the self-taught mantle do not go further – an error in judgment that will haunt them sooner or later. All the computer skills in the world do not make a great designer. Formal education helps bridge the inevitable knowledge gap.

It has been over 30 years since I cut my first galley of type for my first magazine without an iota of training, and I believe I wasted some of those years teaching myself what would have been passed on quickly and efficiently in the classroom. I am not being disingenuous when I say that this lack of schooling has had an arresting effect. While it has been incredibly rewarding learning through work and working with others, I cannot help believe that my choice was wrong. I am convinced that given the complexities of this multi-media, integrated design age there is no question that self-education is impractical. While we don't need more slick professionals, primitives are no boon either. So the first step in my self-imposed recovery programme is admitting my error. But what's the second step? Well, maybe I'll take a class or two in typography.

Steven Heller, who wanted to be a cartoonist, has been an art director for over 35 years, ever since he lucked into a layout job at an underground newspaper at the age of seventeen. He was art director for *Screw*, *The New York Review of Sex and Politics*

and Evergreen Review, as well as the Irish Arts Center in New York. For the past 30 years he has been an art director at The New York Times and for over twenty of those years he has been a senior art director, specifically responsible for The New York Times Book Review. He is the author of over 90 books on design and culture. Heller is also the co-chair of the MFA Design program at the School of Visual Arts (SVA) in New York, though he never graduated with a design degree.

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