

Revolution: Philadelphia 2005

Panel:

Barbara Sudick, California State University, Chico (Moderator)

Aaris Sherin, St. Johns, University

Joe Coates, University of Iowa

Jane Pirone, Parsons School of Design

Title: **Design Fundamentals: What should we be teaching?**

Introduction:

Barbara Sudick, California State University, Chico (Moderator)

A little more than thirty years ago, in the summer of 1974, I took my backpack and my 35mm camera to Europe to study design fundamentals at the first summer program in Brissago, Switzerland. We worked outside, taking in the sunshine, clean air and “white space” of the Swiss Alps. All of our work was done by hand with simple tools. Using scissors and invisible tape we literally cut and pasted type (Weingart’s favorite Akzidenz Grotesk, of course). Meticulously crafted exercises using exactos, ruling pens, Plaka, gouache and brushes not only developed hand-eye co-ordination, but taught us the fundamentals of typographic hierarchy, color (temperature, intensity and hue), and the articulation of 2-dimensional space.

Who would have thought that ten years later, a 60-second commercial aired during halftime of the 1984 superbowl would mark the beginning of the most significant revolution in contemporary design history– the introduction of the Macintosh?

With the freedom to experiment and the help of a user-friendly GUI interface designers virtually cut, pasted and “photoshopped” their way through the rest of the decade–experimenting with all the “bells and whistles” of the digital age. Technology-based training in computer software (mostly Illustrator, Photoshop and QuarkXPress) suddenly became a necessity for every designer.

During this time, I began to realize that it wasn’t just our tools that were changing. The role of the designer was also morphing into something new. During my six years as a member of the company of the Yale Repertory Theatre, I started to see many connections between the virtual environment designers inhabit and the experiential space of the theatre. I asked myself if we couldn’t also be authors, producers and directors. For a long time, graphic design was written about by those outside of the profession who critiqued the products we made. Like other designers, I began writing from my own perspective on the process, history and methods of design. By putting control in the hands of its users, the personal computer soon proved itself to be a powerful democratic tool. Released from the constraint of a client’s authoritative message, we were all free to be conceptual thinkers, influencing content as well as form. These new roles added critical thinking and writing to our basic skill set.

Ten years later, a second revolution occurred. The introduction of the world wide web in the 90s connected us with users across the globe. Entering this conversational space, where information traveled fluidly between individuals on a diverse and vast interactive network, it became clear that strong interpersonal or social skills were necessary. As opportunities for collaboration and interaction increased, the benefit of the theory, methods and skills of interactivity, such as human factors and wayfinding, became evident. Exploring time-based media expanded design fundamentals to include issues from related fields including film. User-experience, audience and performance theory became part of the graphic design curriculum.

At the beginning of the 21st century, this increasing number of competencies challenges us as design educators. How can we structure a 4-year undergraduate degree program, which will provide students with the design fundamentals they need to both enter the workplace and prepare for future learning? What should we be teaching? What is the role of technology in design pedagogy? Should undergraduates choose to follow a narrow track and specialize or does a generalist degree make sense?

As two of my current students get ready to head off to the first Summer program in Basel, Switzerland, I wonder how their experiences will differ from mine three decades and several revolutions earlier.

Q. What is the role of technology in design pedagogy?

Jane Pirone, Parsons School of Design

The current relationship of design and technology is a complex one. Our work is unable to be divorced from modern-day technology and more and more, what we design is extremely driven by technology– from websites and motion graphics, to way-finding systems and device/product interfaces. Even the most traditional of graphic design practice requires a high level of competence with computer-based technologies. Design programs can't teach technology as only technique nor can they teach design and aesthetics without including a strong technological perspective.

Many colleges have incorporated “workshops” into course curriculums where students can opt to gain skills in software and technology without requiring the more traditionally structured “design” courses to lose valuable time in covering the basic software skills. In addition, introducing technology courses that approach the topic as a comprehensive study can provide students with the contextual framework for understanding technology from a broader view by incorporating historical, societal, cultural, economic/business, political and theoretical perspectives. The metaphor of technology as tool and technologist as craftsman acknowledges the impact mastery of a technology has on the ability to control outcome of form and function and arrive at one's intended result. It is in this venue that our relationship as designers to technology can be analyzed and specific attention can be paid to the interplay between form, function, and technics.

Q. Does a generalist design education still make sense?

Joe Coates, University of Iowa

Aaris Sherin, St. Johns, University

Are we graduating too many specialists not engaged in the world? Concerns are growing about the possibility that specialization might inhibit the ability to view the “bigger picture” or whole problem. A well-rounded generalist design education prepares students to design more meaningful solutions. Indeed, the increasing complexity and diversity of the problems we are facing may require an expanding rather than shrinking focus—looking outside of ourselves and outside the discipline. In this regard, the fundamental skills which support collaboration are highly valued.

It is evident by the response to the session and the discussion that followed that the topic of design fundamentals is an important concern of design educators today. It is our hope that the conversation about how we might address many of the issues raised here will continue.

If you are interested in participating in the on-going discussion of Design fundamentals: What should we be teaching? you can log on to:

www.adobe.com/education/designschools/forum.html