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Artist-Designers: Freeing the Undergraduate Graphic Design Student

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The popularity of graphic design has exploded in the last two decades. D K Holland estimates that in 1994, there were over 100,000 graphic designers in the U.S. and 1,000 graphic design programs (231). He compares this with other professions, such as law: in the same year, there were 700,000 licensed attorneys graduating from a mere 175 law schools (227). Popular interest in graphic design has increased, and much of the training offered either comes from vocational schools, or follows a vocational model. In these programs, training in tangible skills and techniques through "real-world" assignments takes priority. Little time is given to the academic study of design; the students aim for competency in the current industry, and institutions rush to cater to their interests. Perspective falls victim to profitability. **Undergraduate vocational graphic design education is not adequately preparing the next generation of graphic designers.**

The first underlying fault lies, ironically, in ignorance of the changing nature of the profession. One has only to look at the technological advancement in the last ten years to predict the rate of change ahead. During the last four years (the time necessary for an average graphic design student to receive his diploma) smart phones and tablet computers have arrived on the market. The way that people will communicate and consume media has changed, and software and scripting languages go through the same constant revision. Since technology cannot be considered permanent in the design landscape, why should graphic design education focus first on developing computer literacy and technique? This approach reverses the natural process of learning from broad understanding to narrow. The broad will last much longer than the narrow, which is constantly in flux.

The lament of many trained graphic designers today is the attitude of the public. Average people who would not have given much thought to design have had their awareness reawakened — not by good design, but by the availability of Photoshop and other desktop publishing tools. Thanks to technology, many can achieve superficial design tasks on their own. For this reason, the basic role of graphic designers threatens to shift. Future designers should be prepared to perform more high-level

analysis and problem-solving (Davis, "Raising" 15). An undergraduate program that focuses only on teaching the use of the now-democratic design tools does little to impress upon students the depth, importance, and possibilities of the discipline.

The third problem with the vocational training model is the tendency towards immediate specialization. Swanson recognizes this and concludes that "graphic design education is not, for the most part, education. It is vocational training, and a rather narrow specialized training at that" (26). She sees such training as programs that want to be apprenticeships, but are stuck in a classroom format (26). While specialization is the general trend of society today, history shows us that such checks on our productivity are something of an insult to the human capacity. Graphic design students enrolling in vocational programs right out of high school tend to cut themselves off, mentally and practically, from the wider world of design possibilities. Graphic design, to them, feels like a small and cozy, somewhat inferior trade. They miss the dynamic potential that graphic design inherits from the greater field of design.

History confirms our suspicions that the field of graphic design is not currently operating at its apex. At the same time, more glorious chapters of the past invite today's designers to reach for more. Medieval society produced enough men fluent in form to erect stunning cathedrals in nearly every European town. Credit for these churches does not belong solely to the field of architecture. Cathedrals housed a spiritual experience for which every detail, from rose windows to candle-holders, was painstakingly designed. The artist and the craftsman were indistinguishable; all professionals had submitted to seven years of apprenticeship (Coulton 343). The skills of illuminators, stone masons, painters and more were called upon again and again for centuries.

The Medieval "union of art and labor in service to society" inspired a number of artist-designers in the mid-nineteenth century (Meggs 167). William Morris and others spearheaded what is known as the Arts and Craft movement. In reaction to the overall ugliness produced by the Industrial Revolution,

Morris called for "workmanship, truth to materials, making the utilitarian beautiful, and fitness of design to function." (168, 173). These heroes of design exhibited a prolificacy that touched (and healed) furniture design, book and typeface design, architecture, and textiles. They possessed exceptional visual literacy at their core and rightly considered all of design as their personal domain (168-172).

In the early twentieth century, Walter Gropius and another handful of prodigious artist-designers created the Bauhaus school. There, students and teachers explored principles of design with radical devotion, then championed the liberal application of those principles to architecture, graphics, interiors, and products. Like the leaders of the Arts and Crafts movement, Gropius and the other Bauhaus instructors were men of diverse gifts and interests (Hughes 103). They so inspired their students, that the Bauhaus as an internationally recognized aesthetic has long outlived the school itself.

These examples strongly suggest that any upcoming design renaissance will require more fluidity of the graphic design industry than it now possesses. Students in vocational schools find their talent trapped in wading pools, their institutions unwilling to confront them with the need to swim. How can we give today's young designers the ability to go further, to anticipate society's needs for design, and confidently realize the solutions in any way necessary? Some basic changes to the vocational model are in order.

First, graphic design programs need to seek a better balance between design as practice and design as an academic discipline. A designer's most vital and enduring skills — quality of thought and commitment to problem-solving — come into play before the first sketch is drawn. Why should these skills not also be given priority in undergraduate education? Computer literacy is important, but the graphic design industry changes so rapidly that "the best thing we can do for our students is to make them adaptable" (Swanson 27). Academic study has a much longer shelf life than knowledge of a particular software.

When vocational students are asked to defend their own work and "sell it," they usually do so

without training in the art and science of examination, interpretation, and critique. These students remain effectively orphaned if they cannot build upon the work of past designers' successes and failures. Design theory classes are invaluable toward this end. Davis recommends that even vocational programs seek to "instill in students a disposition for scholarship in both the academic and professional settings" ("Professional" 71). Such practices promote design leadership and innovation by moving students beyond superficial thinking. When students discover dignity and gravity in their field, they will be able to see themselves primarily as society-changers, not button-pushers.

There are a number of schools that embrace the academic side of graphic design. One American example is the Maryland Institute College of Art, which boasts both a Center for Design Practice and a Center for Design Thinking. Under the direction of Ellen Lupton, students and faculty collaborate in research and publication, and have produced numerous books that inform about design in relevant ways ("Research"). These students have the opportunity to see analysis and reflection lead directly to influential design pieces.

Vocational schools would also benefit from organizing their programs around a more holistic view of design, focusing on the vocabulary and principles that unite the various disciplines. Walter Gropius strongly believed in this idea and advocated teaching "all the essential components of design and technique right from the beginning, in order to give the pupil an immediate insight into the whole field of his future activities" (qtd. in Lerner 220). Practically, this may mean that graphic design majors are given freedom to sample other art and design disciplines throughout their education. It may also mean exploring first and specializing later, even if that exploration resembles childlike activities (Lerner 225). Students at the Bauhaus spent time experimenting with elements and ways of fitting them together. They were encouraged to play with various materials in order to discover their different properties (216). Such a foundation promotes deep enjoyment of artistic elements and helps young designers use them deftly and meaningfully.

Jacob Dobson, design instructor at the Art Institute of Indianapolis, reminds his students that real inspiration does not come from the inbred ideas of a specific discipline, but rather from the adventure of reinterpreting concepts and messages from one discipline into another. And when the time for specialized training comes, schools must provide opportunity for students to work with people of different expertise toward a common goal. Meredith Davis advocates teamwork in the design classroom as the most authentic real-world simulation ("Interdisciplinarity" 11). Guiding the whole process should be faculty with a wide range of skill sets and experience, allowed to teach from the depths of understanding that they possess.

The First Year Program at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago models this kind of fluidity with incoming students. All undergraduates spend a year broadening and exploring their perceptions of art and design through studio courses, art history, writing, and electives. They learn to conceptualize without being limited by a specific major (First Year Experience). After they declare concentrations, familiarity with other disciplines keeps variety within easy reach.

Most students in vocational programs are being deprived of these opportunities, whether they crave them or not. Graphic design departments have the responsibility to invest long-term in the quality of education, not merely capitalize on the enthusiasm of a visually-oriented generation. The market for graphic design is competitive. Visually literate and intellectually flexible graduates, however, will have no problem rising to the top.

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