

Specialization versus generalization in design education: where to draw the line?

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I would like to state from the onset that I am not a designer by training – I came from a fine art background and was introduced to the realm of design education when I joined the Graphic Design section of the University of Potchefstroom. To me, the world of design, where industry demand dictate the nature of a curriculum was in sharp contrast with the relative creative comforts of the more ephemeral philosophical world of fine arts where artistic freedom was heralded and protected at all costs.

When new media¹ and interactive design were added to the traditional graphic design curriculum at the University of Potchefstroom this year, I became keenly aware of the current complexities in the industry and the difficulties involved in teaching students a wide range of specialized skills with limited funds, limited expertise and in limited time. I certainly sensed what Lorianne Justice termed the ‘big squeeze’ when she referred to the ever expanding knowledge base that needs to be accommodated in limited time in current design curriculums (Justice 2000: 49). This paper is based on my perceptions of the current state of design related professions and its implications for design education that evolved during the process of implementation of new media at the University of Potchefstroom. What follows, is intended to serve as a discussion paper to prompt debate and exchange of ideas on the topic of generalization versus specialization in design education.

To a large extent, the dilemma for contemporary graphic design educators seems to be the expanding and shifting definitions of the profession or professions for which we prepare young designers. The nature of graphic

1. In this particular instance, the term ‘new media’ referred to the introduction of software applications that allowed sound and animation for interactive design like animated web-sites, interactive CD ‘s and multimedia presentations.

design professions has clearly changed dramatically over the past decade. Entirely new areas of practice emerged – some of them not well served by the traditional art-based education of most designers. Professional boundaries are blurring between client, author, designer, reproduction specialist, and audience. Writing, designing, and publishing are converging; many designers are publishing, many clients are relying on nonprofessional desktop publishing. Rapidly changing technological, economic and social forces demand different design responses than those society expected a decade ago. The question arises whether conventional paradigms of design education are still appropriate for, what is now seen by many, as a new multifaceted discipline? Since the vocabulary of design is expanding it seems to require a curriculum relevant for the development of students’ understanding of screentiming, editing, narration, navigation, pacing, teamwork practice, outsourcing, information layering and managerial skills.

These shifts have vastly expanded the expressive options for visual communication and fundamentally altered the way graphic designers operate within this sphere. We came to understand that computers are more than tools, they are channels of communication with the ability to reach millions and to create new communicative and persuasive possibilities. The

flat, static, two-dimensional design end-product has changed to a product that encompasses multiple, hybrid media that plays out in a four-dimensional world. Once designers made objects; now they are creating experiences. The physical has changed to virtual. The isolated, solo operation of designers has made way, in many instances, for a team-production model. This model is arguably based less on maintaining the integrity of the 'author' and more aimed at the entertainment industry paradigm where authorship is granted to the director, the producers, maybe the screenwriters, but typically not to the people who create the visual dimension of the product.

The computer has also given clients greater control over designers' efforts: for instance, the client can possess and manipulate a digital document which has eliminated the need for 'the original' without consulting the originator. Thus the designer has, in effect, become co-author and co-editor of the message. This expansion of the role of graphic designers is leading to an identity crisis for the profession which, in a subtle way, is masked by the techno-optimism of today.

As far as design education is concerned, these shifts are responsible for a paradoxical dilemma that highlights two diverse perceptions of the profession: On the one hand graphic design is perceived as an extremely specialized field that requires highly trained designers who are literate in cognitive theory and perceptual processes - strategic thinkers who can manage the analysis and solution of large-scale or complex communication problems. On the other hand, sophisticated desktop publishing and multimedia software have made it possible for virtually everyone to become 'a designer', resulting in great numbers of self-taught 'digital artisans' who seem to flourish on the perception that digital technology had actually made it easier to produce design.

This perception contributed to a booming of mediocre designers and a number of educational institutions whose short courses in design software are sold as proper graphic design programmes. These courses are often seen as too constrained by industrialization and capitalism to ever rise to the lofty heights of theory or to the imperative of well-informed idea-generating people who understand conceptual thought processes that drive the visual communication process. Furthermore, computers and design software provide access to the means of design and production, at whatever levels people deem satisfactory. And while in many instances significant losses of quality occur, the reality is that some clients cannot see the difference, don't care, or are not willing to pay for quality, concept-driven visual communication.

With the profession in such a state, Meredith Davis argues that it makes little sense to continue to educate hundreds of students each year solely in the design and production of beautiful form (Davis in Heller 1999: 27). This is not to say that the need for inventive form will disappear or that educational institutions should completely abandon this as an objective of their programmes. But she states (1999: 27) that it does signal that the survival of the profession may depend less on its traditional education in art-based concepts and more on responding strategically to changes in the business, social, and communication environments.

There seems to be a need for a new kind of professional who has a broad knowledge of a variety of fields and knows how to put these together - to parallel-process several things simultaneously. The demand seems to be more and more for designers to be both specialists and generalists. Indeed, for design education, specialism versus generalism is the implicit problem underlying the debate on the consequences of working with new media. Of course,

one needs specialists – operators, programmers, HTML editors, illustrators, image manipulators – just as one needs photographers, typographers and printers. But there seems to be an even greater need for designers who are capable of seeing the whole picture before it is produced: people who know enough of each specialist field to direct the totality of the ever-more-complex design process. These are not necessarily the same people who execute the visual end-product. In multimedia communication, the role of the designer is shifting more and more from visualizing to conceptualizing.

There seems to be an increasing need for specialized generalists who can bind together, in meaningful and enticing ways, the different contextual and technological levels of the product – designers who are steered by their conceptualised vision, not so much as by the actual visualization. But then, traditionally, graphic designers have always worked in an argumentative, conceptual way. Actually, they have arguably always tended more toward generalism than specialism. And one can be a specialized generalist, as long as one's trade is consistent and not too complex. But it is here that things have changed in recent years. The 'trade' has subdivided into very diverse and technologically complex specialisms, resulting into various different, but interactive design related professions. What is probably even more important: the divisions between design and other fields of cultural production have, as I have pointed out, been blurred to a great extent. The implications of these shifts for design education are far-reaching, often resulting in undergraduate courses that delivers neither specialists, nor generalists.

Lorriane Wild, in an essay in the *Émigré* magazine (1998: 21), wrote that design or visual communication has to be redefined as a conceptual practice, while graphic design would have to be more clearly defined as a speciality within it. She suggested that, in addition to teaching basic visual syntax, composition, typography, and the other skills usually associated with graphic design education, a myriad of other issues have to be added to the education of young designers to build and enhance their conceptual skills. These include attention to expressive writing, the study of rhetoric, semantics and narrative as component parts of the basic structure of communication; the grammar of film and film editing; critiques of communicative systems as artificial constructs; the techniques of collaboration, teams, negotiation, and consensus building – to mention only a few on her somewhat idealistic list of skills that students should acquire to prepare them for the current realities of the industry (Wild 1998: 24).

But along with providing core foundations and theory, can educators enrich design studies by crossing departmental divides to include subjects from other disciplines – humanities, history, business, psychology, semiotics, dance, music, physics, and film – and still keep up with technology's relentless pace? Although the merits of such a wide knowledge base seem clear given the complexities of today's communication problems, significant losses of specialization in any form will be inevitable. Where to draw the line between specialism and generalism in design education is becoming one of the greatest challenges facing current curricula.

The debate on how many theoretical subjects are needed for a 'practical' discipline like graphic design, is often at the heart of this question. While some stress the importance of a rigorous theoretical approach to design education, it is often questioned how this theory will be of relevance to designers. Theory - because it is characterized as external to the design process - is sometimes seen as disruptive to a designer's intuition and creative imagination.

Indeed, the need for highly trained conceptual designers should not allow us to underestimate the importance of what Paul Rand calls, the ‘play-principle’ (1997:12).

This principle refers to an activity where the process of overturning, or questioning what is taught, leads to innovation of a unique concept or method. This activity allows a designer to intuitively explore a myriad of possibilities which serve to challenge and invigorate the given structure of a client’s brief. Rand states that play – and therefore creativity - is by nature unreal and is unconnected to the constraints of rational thinking (1997: 34). This process implies that the intuitive designer must transcend reality (and rational thinking) in order to be creative. Ironically, of course, designing for the marketplace confronts designers with a set of harsh realities. Transcending these realities in order to be creative and still keep up with the realities of large-scale communication strategies demanded by industry today, seems an almost impossible task.

To encompass all the aspects that impact on the design process – to weigh all of these against their influence on form and content of the design – the designer has to have knowledge of and insight into an incredibly broad array of social, creative, communicative, and technical processes. Moreover, the complexity of new communication problems, coupled with the diversity of contemporary culture, require a broader knowledge base and a more sophisticated skills base than intuition alone.

It may be that within this complex environment of abstracted digitally generated data, the designer’s personal viewpoint and interpretative forms may be the humanizing element essential to make the vast quantities of abstract data meaningful, useful, comprehensible, and compelling to audiences. Design as a cultural activity, including aesthetic and personal expression, may be the essential source of values, emotions and play that we all need in the digital domain. If we succeed to define the multitude of new roles that designers play in today’s ever-changing, ever-expanding world, we shall be in a better position to develop appropriate curricula to suit these roles.

This does not imply that graduate study should strictly imitate professional practice. Rather, it should challenge students to look deeply into the disciplines and into themselves to connect design culture, its history, its users, its society and its technology. A effective education is one that gives students the resourcefulness to solve the problems they have not anticipated. It should provide experiences that give students the ability to express themselves in a variety of media. And with the inevitability of change in both the tools and the scope of design, it should probably constantly adjust the focus to the fundamental mechanisms that make an experience authentic, accessible, and understandable.

Whether specialization or generalization is the aim, two aspects of design education seem to be fundamental: adaptability and creativity. Without an ability to adapt, a designer in today’s industry will be lost - whether it is to changing software requirements, changing time-schedules or a change in conceptual imperative. And without an ability to be truly creative, to generate and unique invigorating designs, the world of graphic design shall become the slick, uninspiring mediocre morass of plastic sludge it is currently threatening to become.

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