What… So What… Now What

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Preface

Writing about the future of design education is both challenging, as well as extremely difficult. Predictions can show foresight or folly. This is intended as a position paper, not based on a thorough study of the current curricula and programs that exist throughout the United States and the rest of the world, but rather based upon my own personal experiences having joined the academic world 15 years ago transitioning from being a full-time practitioner within commercial enterprises. During this period I have consistently attended regional, national and international design conferences to learn about the state of education, both witness and make presentations, as well as engage in hours of conversations with academic colleagues over the course of this same time frame.

In a career that currently spans over almost four decades all of which have been engaged in some form of professional commercial practice and/or some form of social engagement. In the later stages of my career then entering the academic world as a Clinical Professor of Industrial Design, I created the **Interdisciplinary Product Development Program (IPD)** at the **University of Illinois Chicago** campus and being one of three founding faculty members (ID, Engineering & Business) of the **UIC Innovation Center.** These initiatives have given me a unique perspective on education within the context of a tier-one research institution located in a dense urban environment, comprised of a highly diverse

international student population that has led me to form the point-of-view I now intend to share.

What is the future of industrial design education?

Before looking to the future of industrial design education, I think it's important to pause and take a look at a snapshot of the current state of industrial design education here in the United States today. Looking through my window, the state of the state is, generally speaking, quite extraordinary. In the last two decades the awareness of design within the general public as well as commercial and social enterprises has risen to new levels. The profession has expanded into areas that probably wouldn't have even been imagined 50 years ago when the IDSA was first formed. User experience design, interface design, service design, design thinking, design strategy, design planning are all new areas that have emerged from an ever-evolving design education and professional practice. My colleagues, Stephanie and Bruce Tharp, have aptly categorized modern practice into four easily understandable fields – commercial, experimental, responsible and discursive.

As the awareness of design has raised within society as a whole, the desire to become a designer has also dramatically increased. The response to this has been a proliferation of design programs throughout the country. Some of these programs take a specialist view on how to teach and approach the subject matter, while others have taken a more generalist approach, teaching the equivalent of the modern day renaissance person. There are more programs and more opportunities for young people to study design and its various forms than ever before. The general success of undergraduate design education is perhaps at an all-time high.

Even though there are greater complexities and more skills that need to be acquired, design programs have risen to the challenge and have created young designers ready to go out into the world and make significant contributions within a variety of different contexts. Undergraduate industrial design education is at a level that produces highly skilled, highly motivated, well-trained, thoughtful young designers mostly serving the commercial needs of industry, as well as engaging them in the possibilities of becoming design entrepreneurs. The success of undergraduate education programs throughout the country has been able to supply and fulfill the demands of an expanding economy while also empowering a segment of these young designers to move beyond traditional roles into new areas of entrepreneurship and investigation. I firmly believe that undergraduate industrial design education has succeeded in integrating technology as well as traditional hand skills along with critical thinking to prepare students well for the challenges that lie ahead.

So What

If my thesis that industrial design undergraduate education has succeeded in its goals of preparing and training the next generation of young designers then what's next? So what? What is the future of design education? If we assume that the objectives of an undergraduate design education are being met and often times exceeded and that programs are rising to the challenge to integrate the latest best practices into the educational process, where should the focus be in the coming decades? If undergraduate design education is all about **problem-solving,** critical thinking and critical making and that success has fulfilled the needs and desires of a generation of young designers, then what can educators offer to move beyond this initial training? From what I see and know about the state of undergraduate industrial design education today, educational structures are constantly being reevaluated. In most studio and classroom environments the instructor is no longer viewed as the solitary source of information and technique. Peer-to-peer learning, workshops and on-line tutorials have set up a much more

exciting, open and dynamic educational relationship for students. This openness has also provided an atmosphere in which students naturally realize that there can be many right answers to the problems they intend to solve. Multiple points of view and approaches to problem-solving is encouraged within the studio culture, and that tends to generate a pattern of shared experiences in which diversity and inclusivity of thought are the fundamental qualities of collaborative learning.

From what I have witnessed attending district and national and conferences, the students from universities throughout the country when presenting their work demonstrate not only their highest skill level, understanding of cutting-edge techniques, but are also able to integrate an approach that is both inclusive and thoughtful, integrating human-centered research methods. It is now extremely common for undergraduate educational classes to have external collaborations with industrial and commercial partners and oftentimes even with social agencies and cultural institutions. Undergraduate students have benefited from this exposure to work real world engagements that have created invaluable experiences essential for their development. The same undergraduate students have been exposed to a new wave of entrepreneurial design efforts through crowd-funding that has provided them exposure and enhanced their own initial development of their personal entrepreneurial skills. In my humble opinion the state of undergraduate industrial design education is currently at its highest level in recent decades.

Now What

In order to prepare industrial designers to become the future leaders for economic, social and cultural innovation, locally, regionally, nationally and internationally, the mission of a graduate design education must be to foster a higher level of critical thinking, investigation and trans-disciplinary activities in

order to create a platform for enhancing and contributing to the body of knowledge. Charlie Cannon, Head of the ID Department at RISD, believes, *"The purpose of graduate education is to prepare people to make a serious and substantive contribution to their field and to the world…Think about that contribution, not in a narrow definition of contributing to knowledge in the field, but in the broader sense of the* ***verb to contribute****; preparing individuals to contribute by seeking out and taking on positions of leadership."*

This higher level of design inquiry must maintain the same intense level of rigor as scientific inquiry or humanities inquiry in order to gain the respect it deserves within both the academic and professional communities. At the graduate level, students should be encouraged to cross boundaries and fashion their thesis around a topic of which they are passionate about, whether that includes products, environments, services, or the like, they must be encouraged to place those interests within a larger social context to expand the impact of their work. The field of design, particularly at the graduate level, is undergoing a massive transformation. Designers today are faced with challenges of growing economic, social, and environmental instability that demands a more complex multidisciplinary and collaborative approach. Graduate design students should be encouraged to engage in critical experimentation and collaboration amongst themselves and with other disciplines in order to challenge and push the body of knowledge forward. It makes complete sense, that this critical inquiry be first taken up within the academy. Graduate design students should be encouraged to pursue a spirit of intellectual curiosity that exceeds the more grounded education they received at the undergraduate level. Philip Thompson, Vice President of Design at Newell-Rubbermaid, offered this opinion, *"A graduate design degree takes the fundamentals achieved at Bachelors and provides the individual with the opportunity to explore broader more complex issues… more critically. This experience should set them up to be future leaders in the field…with greater long term potential."*

Masters candidates must also be encouraged to pursue and maintain the rigor of critical thinking accompanied with a heuristic approach to prototyping and not being afraid to fail early and often in their pursuit of a new offering. The same graduate students should be encouraged to work with other disciplines within the academy as well as potentially students and faculty outside of their own institution. Students should be encouraged to collaborate and create their own version of an open-source design network. Graduate design education should help students move to a more open process, rather than merely an individual creative act. Graduate education can then foster a new kind of understanding of the field and practice of industrial design, viewing it more as an all encompassing essential human activity in order to improve the lives of humanity. Graduate students, as they face the complex conditions of today, should be strongly encouraged to form their own point-of-view, nurture that perspective and have their work be a reflection of their own personal set of values and responsibilities.

If undergraduate education revolved around acquiring skills and **problem-solving**, graduate education needs to focus on **problem-discovery**. Through critical observation, examination of daily patterns and behaviors, these students will have fertile ground to explore problem-discovery. Finding, articulating, and reframing problems in order to uniquely approach them and then offer potential solutions from this new and more humanistic point of view.

This all points to the importance of graduate design education. The real opportunity for advancing the field and expanding the body of knowledge exists at the graduate level. These students can help to continually redefine the user experience as it relates to products, systems, services, environments and digital interactions. Perhaps the most significant hurdle that effective graduate design education faces today and into the future is that a graduate degree in design,

outside of the academic community, is not as respected and valued as other degrees of post-graduate education. Both the profession and the professional society need to do much more to create strong advocacy for the importance and value, both intellectually and commercially, of graduate design education.

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