

# **DESIGN EDUCATION: A NECESSARY EVIL?**

Independent Research  
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Have you ever bitched about your design teachers? Gathered in small groups, whining about how he or she does not have a clue about how to teach design? I bet you have. So have I. All the whining and bitching had prompted me to find out more about how design is taught elsewhere. The reason is simply to know whether there is any basis to all the complaining; are my teachers really that bad?

I had been taught by a variety of design teachers, male and female, young and old, with lots of teaching experience and none at all, and from all around the world. The experience, however, have left me often in confusion about design and the design industry. Even simple questions like what my duties are as a design student have been left unanswered. But confusion, as Glenn Wyatt (my lecturer) often says, is a good start.

This essay would attempt to answer several questions. These include (i) what is design; (ii) how is design taught; (iii) what is the difference between formal design education and self-taught design education; and (iv) what is the future of design education. The bottom line is for me to find out whether design schools are necessary to develop skills and talents to be successful designers.

Graphic design is a young vocation in Singapore. Most find it hard to understand why a person would choose to go to a design school. Most do not have a clue what design is and do not know why someone might actually need specialized training to design. Most often it is this lack of understanding that cause people to take designers lightly. It is not seen as a serious or real job.

But those who choose design as a career would know that design is an important occupation in society as design creates many social and cultural meanings. Design encompasses every aspect of our lives and touches us daily in one way or another. It affects everyone simply by the emotions it draw from within us and by invoking us to take certain actions. No one can rightly say that design does not touch his or her lives. For example, if you are enticed to make a purchase of X brand soup in the supermarket,

which you have not purchased before, the reason might be that you are the target audience to X brand's successful advertising campaign. You might not be aware of it but it is very likely that that purchase was because you remember X brand soup's television advertisement which they mentioned how nutritious their soup is.

But design is more than just commercial. It is not just for influencing people to buy the clients' products. Design can also be educational too. For example, posters to warn people about the dangers of hepatitis B and the need for vaccination or to educate people about the dangers of casual sex. The list is endless. The most important thing that students and designers should be aware of is that design is a powerful communication tool.

There are many uses for design and because of this, designers need to know a lot more than what is taught in most design schools. One of the things designers need to learn is human behavior and culture. This is to get a better understanding of the targeted audience and the culture and society they live in. It is naïve for any designer to try to fit one advertising campaign, for example, to all societies worldwide as audiences of different culture will interpret the same poster in different ways.

Several experienced design educators share this view. For example, Milton Glaser is an illustrator, graphic designer, and cofounder of Push Pin Studios and has taught for over thirty years at the School of Visual Arts in New York. He mentions in an interview that in addition to the technical and aesthetic considerations that school already teach, he would imagine a useful course of study that would include linguistics, anthropology, behavior and business. Perhaps most importantly, schools should also teach an understanding of the unique relationships of artists and designers to culture at large.

I used to think that design is shallow and commercialized. I was in it for the money and to a certain extent it is still about the money. Doing something I like and getting paid for it seems like a deal. I thought of

design as something I could do without much serious thought; a form of escape of what I used to do in university. I was a sociology major back then and I found that this has helped me tremendously through my design education. Both sociology and design has developed my thinking and I feel that I have achieved some form of balance. In my opinion (I doubt I am the only one who thinks this way), the mental development of a student is the most important thing they could gain from any form of education, including design.

Nevertheless, with the rapid rate of change that design goes through, we have to constantly update ourselves as to what constitute design. We know that not everyone who uses a computer becomes a computer graphics designer but what makes us special? Maybe it is not necessary to define it. Could it be possible that since we are visual communicators, we should just let our work speak for us? Not that we treat design as fine art. Maybe it is good enough to know that graphic design encompasses various fields and what these fields do. Clients approach us because they know that they can not design for themselves. If they could, we might possibly be out of a job. For those who do not understand and appreciate design, well, let them be. Not everyone needs to be convinced.

For those who have chosen to take up design, they would have to face the difficult task of choosing their design schools. Many of the college catalogues around the world, if you believe them, seem to offer the same thing. These colleges often boast of educating budding designers to be fully prepared entry-level design professionals. These include prestigious colleges like The Royal College of Art (RCA), School of Visual Arts (SVA) and California Institute of the Arts (CalArts).

Some find that schools with this kind of missions are offering an incomplete design education. As mentioned earlier, design education should offer a lot more than principles of art and design in relation to industrial and commercial processes. Established schools, which claim to offer a more holistic education, are Cranbrook Academy of Art and Rhode Island School of Design (RISD).

Cranbrook Academy of Art provides an educational community dedicated to creativity as a way of life. The key phrase here is “a way of life”. Design should not be limited to merely a means to earn a salary. It should develop creativity and skills that will enrich a person’s life, regardless of the career path he or she embarks on. RISD emphasizes the importance of both the professional major and the humanities, literature and social sciences as RISD recognizes that not all students will ultimately practice the profession they are trained for.

To sum it up, most schools see students as merely future professional designers and will be equipped with the knowledge of the latest software and design principles. But schools like RISD offer much more. They try to develop the individual, not just a designer. However this is not the end of the story. It is not fair to bash schools who offer less than RISD.

Maybe when you see a school’s curriculum, like Raffles LaSalle International, you might assume that the courses are meant to develop the student to be design professionals only. But each student creates his or her own experience. Even if the course is on how to use Adobe Photoshop, if the student creates a different experience for him or herself then he or she will learn more than the others.

Most often than not, the briefs given are pretty much open and it is entirely up to the student to come up with his or her own concepts. In my own experience, there are students who deliberately choose an easy concept. To them it is an assignment to be completed, rather than a chance to learn something new. Others may develop a more complex concept, which would have required greater research, time and effort. They would have naturally gained more knowledge than those who did little or no research. Importantly, they would have learnt how to express their concept and to not just design something to make it look nice.

There are students, however, who work backwards. That is, they design something first and once it looks nice, they try to create a concept thereafter. I am sure this happens everywhere, regardless of the school

because there are many who want a degree and choose the easiest route to get one. To them, they are being smart because they manage to finish their work first. It may not be a very clever design but at least they finished it earlier than the rest.

It is thus unfair to put all the blame on the schools or teachers for not providing a more holistic education. Even if one goes to RISD, if he or she sees the learning of literature and social sciences as simply a way to get the degree, then the whole experience would have been wasted on him or her. He or she would merely complete the assignments and not care much about the learning process and other benefits which the teachers may wish to pass on to him or her. The best learning, thus, is when students become aware that they are responsible for their education and that the teacher is not the source of all knowledge.

Design schools' curriculum cannot be too specialized either as it might limit the students' creative abilities. In a properly balanced education, students will learn how to quickly adapt to changing circumstances and use their skills in new areas. This is especially crucial as the design industry changes so rapidly. For example, new software is being created regularly as more and more people begin using programs, which were once exclusive to designers. Designers often have to find new and innovative ways to satisfy the needs of a more, demanding and knowledgeable client base. If a designer has difficulty in learning and accepting new things, he or she might become a useless member to the team and may unfortunately, lose his or her job to someone who is more eager to learn and to grow as a designer. The education of a designer does not end after he or she gets a degree. It is merely the beginning.

What then is an ideal design education? Although it is difficult to achieve an ideal education, as we are not living in utopia, school can most certainly strive towards it. Louis Danzinger has a wonderful suggestion of what an ideal design education is. He is a graphic designer, art director and design consultant and on the faculty of Art Center College of Design in Pasadena, California. He has been an educator since 1956 and is one of

the pioneers of graphic design pedagogy. To him, an ideal classroom environment is where teachers and students hang out. The teacher does not teach but instead create an environment or climate where students are motivated to learn. This ideal education develops confidence, ego, strength, and a thirst to discover one's possibilities.

How wonderful if it was as easy as that! But real life is not so simple. How then do teachers not teach and still look like they are doing their job? How do you motivate students to learn, especially when some of the students can barely speak the same language as the rest of the class? I have spoken to my lecturer, Glenn Wyatt, and he said that the trick to not teaching is to ask the right questions about the student's work. This helps the students to question themselves and by figuring out the answer, they would have learnt something new.

But this might be easy for an experienced teacher but it is not for a new design teacher. Some of the time, the teachers wrecks a student's self-confidence and ego instead of developing it. It has happened to my classmates and I. Some of us feel very frustrated when a teacher constantly treats us as children with no minds of our own. The teacher would tell us that real working life is bad and that we are not prepared for it. Instead of giving us positive advice, it seems as if that teacher's job scope was to discourage us to do be a professional designer and to choose another profession. I think that the teacher does so in order to educate us about working life. The intention is good but the execution leaves an undesirable result.

Raffles LaSalle International often faced shortage of design teachers so it is impossible for the new teacher to be weaned into their new jobs. The more experienced teachers does not have the time to sit in class with the new teacher, like what other trainee government teachers will have to go through. There are no methods, systems or rules to teaching design. There are goals and outlines that department heads have set and most of the time, it is up to the individual teachers to create their own briefs to achieve these goals.

I guess the most important thing is that all the teachers come to an agreement to what these goals are. It should be a flexible philosophy, which the teachers should adhere to. This is to prevent students from getting mixed messages from different teachers. For example, the goal may be to develop students to focus more on their concept and to do more research for each brief. Then the teachers may come up with a list of ideas on how to achieve this. It may be as simple as spending one hour in the library or on the computer every week or to set aside a larger percentage of the grade to the development of concept.

My personal experience in Raffles LaSalle International tells me that some teachers sincerely do care about helping students develop important self-learning skills. Unfortunately, these efforts often go wasted since students are used to being told what to do. Some of the students even blame teachers if the teachers do not explicitly say what should be done. These students will thus question the ability of the teachers. I feel like this argument can go on forever. Pushing blame to each other does no one any good. The only way is to have good communication between teachers and students to better understand the teachers' intentions and the issues students face.

This is what I learnt in university while doing sociology. The teachers are not always right. Anyone should challenge the teachers' point of view, of course with supporting research, and there is no right or wrong answers most of the time. This is crucial in a design school too because design can be very subjective. There should be more critique sessions and teachers as well as students should take it very seriously. So far, few teachers in Raffles LaSalle International have included class participation as part of their grading system. Maybe if they did, students may feel more obliged to speak up in class. Once they are used to it, they would no longer view it as an obligation but rather a necessary part of design, which it is.

Another frustrating problem in Raffles LaSalle International for both teachers and students is the language barrier. I feel that the class could

be progressing a lot faster if these non English-speaking students are not there. It sometimes reach to the point of absurdity when these students are expected to present their work and they can barely complete a whole English sentence on their own. How can they possibly understand the brief? They can barely communicate with the teachers without a translator present. It almost feels like the UN sometimes! How can these students develop themselves as a designer? It is a viscous cycle. The teacher can not teach them because they cannot understand what the teacher says and in turn, these students learn little. They may end up with a diploma by just scraping through the assignments, but how useful is that piece of paper when the design skills are barely developed?

Many design schools worldwide face certain problems and it is not my intention here to mention them all. Even though no school is perfect, I feel that formal design education is a good learning stepping-stone. It is not enough to leave design schools with degrees and impressive portfolios; graduates should have learnt the ability to upgrade themselves on their own. Design education, as with any education, is a life-long, self-initiated process.

But what about those individuals that have not been given a complete design education? Instead they have embarked on their own journey of learning design and self-discovery. Examples of successful self-taught designers include Lester Beall, Paul Rand and Marget Larsen. One of the benefits is that they never learned the rules that dictate what they can and cannot do. It is definitely possible to learn different software programs on your own through readily available books. There are even web sites that can teach you design principles and design history.

But this does not mean that every one can be a successful designer by self-study. I am not denying the possibility that there are those who can. But for the rest of us, a design education helps mould us into designers. A shared experience in class gives us a sense of what design life is. In the real world, a team of designers completes most design jobs. Very few are solo jobs.

Ideally, a classroom atmosphere creates a drive for students to excel in their work. When some students work hard and experiment with techniques and such, others try to jump on the wagon too. The students themselves teach each other new things. No one likes to be left behind. I do not mean that students start imitating each other's work. Instead, they adopt certain attitudes about design and keep learning new ways to approach a brief.

I find this true within my class at Raffles LaSalle International. Everyone has a different approach to a brief and even if someone thought of a better way to do things, it does not mean that I have lost out in any way. Observing and learning from my peers make me grow as a designer. I believe that it will be the same when I start working in a design studio. The interaction with peers cannot be duplicated when you study design by yourself and work on your own. Since there are no critiques from others, it leaves little room for improvement.

Besides our peers, teachers have a very important role in a design school. That goes without saying. A person who learns design from a book or web site will find that it still lacks the personal opinions and feedback, which a real teacher can provide. A teacher who knows us from the time we enter school till we leave often knows our strengths and weaknesses. They guide us to excel at what we like to do and to explore new things as well. Can a book do that?

A student who completes two to five years of design education is not guaranteed success. However, a student who had received a good design education is equipped with the basic skills and knowledge to be successful, with the right amount of effort and positive attitude. A good designer is not someone who is in good in computer software necessarily. Adaptability is crucial because every software would be replaced by something new. It is his or her brains that make a good designer; for example, his ability to learn, unlearn and relearn and his ability to break down complex, ambiguous briefs.

I think it is necessary to take a closer look at software as many have discovered that technology will encompass a large part of the future of design and design education. Virtually anyone can do everyday design work with the new sophisticated desktop publishing and multimedia software, as I have mentioned earlier. Designers can no longer rely on traditional skills alone. However, the key to distinguish between a desktop publisher and a good designer is the conceptual ideas that created that design. Designers must deliver conceptual innovations and new insights, the things that computers cannot do.

Unfortunately, most often than not, computers are being used because they are there. There is not much thought to what media should be used to best suit the brief. Designers should be able to argue their choice of means on basis of the content they want to communicate and formulate it consistently with the technical, social and cultural characteristics of the media they use.

Multimedia is undeniably hot now, but it is still just one avenue to pursue creatively. Design schools are aware of this and do include classes to learn the basic multimedia software like Adobe Illustrator, Macromedia Freehand, Adobe Photoshop, QuarkXpress and the like. But teachers do question students why they choose to use a certain medium to express their ideas. Technology cannot be seen as an easy way out or sometimes, the only way out.

But what makes a design studio hire someone for a designer position? Is it the portfolio or the paper qualification or is there something else? It is true that a vast majority of designers attain their true expertise on the job. However, to become employable they were nonetheless expected to acquire not only certain aesthetic principles, most importantly, a keen knowledge of their craft. A diploma or degree related to design is a good indication that a student meets up to these expectations as it shows that he or she is interested enough to have put aside those years of his life just to study design.

Many employers have complained that young designers lack general education and problem solving skills in other academic areas such as writing, history, computer science and other social sciences. As mentioned earlier on, design encompasses many areas of study and its not just about design. Schools have so much to teach in so little time and this leaves design programs with little choice but to sacrifice one set of skills and knowledge in favor of another. But this is entirely understandable. That is why the education of a designer is life long process.

Other complaints are that young designers are more concerned with issues of aesthetics rather than the audience. Some employers have found them self-absorbed in making personal statements in client-based work and incapable of presenting convincing arguments for their design solutions to clients. However, this is a natural thing as young designers are sometimes over-enthusiastic in making a mark in the industry. This enthusiasm will mature and experience will educate these young designers to focus more on issues of the audience. The only thing the teachers can do is to emphasize the importance of audience but at the same time, to explore all concept possibilities and mediums.

My journey in Raffles LaSalle International is coming to an end. But from my research, I have learnt that my education as a graphic designer has merely begun. I am glad that I did this essay because it has opened up my eyes to a new perspective. It is not easy being a teacher, that I know, more so a design teacher. I had felt bitterness towards my teachers before this and now I am proud to say that I understand why they did what they did. The grass always looks greener on the other side. But I am fortunate to have been where I am.

This essay has equipped me with an important tool. I feel more prepared to meet my future employers who would undoubtedly challenge my abilities and skills. But I know I can respond to their questions. I am merely starting out as a designer and I do not need to know everything. I have an advantage over students from other design schools: I know the

importance of concepts and research, thanks to Raffles LaSalle International. I have also developed confidence and presentation skills throughout my years in university and in Raffles.

Sagmeister said in an interview that you have to live a rich life because everything comes back to design. He found that most designers whose work he really appreciates have large influences on their work that are not design influences. This sounds like a lot more fun way to improve my design than browsing through design magazines and books to see the world's most recent designs. I am not saying that they are not important, but rather there are other things that can influence what I do.

To end, this has been a wonderful learning experience for me. It has even stopped me from bitching about my teachers and instead, I try to empathize with them. I realized that I had received a full design education because I had created my own experience. I sincerely wanted to learn as much as I can and I did.

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