THE EDUCATION OF A GRAPHIC DESIGNER

THIRD EDITION

Edited by Steven Heller

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

PART NINE *Questions and Answers*

PART TEN *Merging Cultures*

Introduction to Third Edition

MUCH LEFT TO LEARN

Steven Heller

There is, I believe, a Hollywood movie analogy for just about everything. Take

Gravity, the 2013 Oscar Award winning film about how even the most highly

educated operator of the most technologically advanced flying machine in the

universe can be boloxed by garbage. The greatest threat to life and limb is all

that supersonic flying junk sent into the atmosphere in the name of technology

and commerce. *Gravity* is a parable about the future of graphic design, which is

at the mercy of technological and commercial "innovations" beyond its current

control. So massive are these changes, that how to educate designers for the

present, no less the future, can be as complicated as when *Gravity*'s Matt

Kowalski (George Clooney), the wise old-middle aged astronaut, attempts to get

Dr. Ryan Stone (Sandra Bullock) back to earth in one piece after she was cut

adrift from her space station by hurling satellite debris.

Like space junk, are digital media are smashing into old verities of graphic

design? Designers are, by and large, have more expert techno-skillsets, but at

what expense? UX and data viz designers are in more demand by industry when

it comes to pushing data into digital space, which raises the question of how best

to impart knowledge and what knowledge should indeed be imparted to students

of these disciplines. Is fine typography and expert image direction and

manipulation still the *primary directive* it once was? Or is *code* the new type? Can

design be judged by time honored aesthetic standards or is what we call graphic

design destined to be viewed through anti-asthetic lenses?

I wrote in the introduction to the Second edition of this book in 2005:

Design pedagogy long ago moved out of the proverbial one-room schoolhouse onto a labyrinthine campus of departments and workshops awarding degrees and honors. In fact, considerable time has gone by since the formal word "pedagogy" was substituted in certain circles for the more pedestrian (though straightforward) "teaching." Which is not a complaint, mind you, but an observation that design education has a lofty status now. It means that in many institutions it is no longer adequate to simply have a marketable portfolio— graduates must acquire bona fides through internships, apprenticeships, work studies, and anything else that bulks their résumés. They must have certificates, diplomas, degrees, awards, and scads more evidence that they are designers with a capital D rather than mere mouse-pushers.

Still, there is a lot more to learn about "capital D" graphic design since

2005. This third edition of *The Education of a Graphic Designer* examines the

field as it was, is and may even become. Since 2005 competitive trans-media

programs have proliferated in schools large and small, especially in the

postgraduate space. Indeed more postgraduate programs are available that

provide integrated programs, many of which emphasize the current marriages of

technology, business and strategy with traditional and new design disciplines.

The job market is hungry for designers who know the new tools and old skills.

For instance writing and research are increasingly more integral to a well

rounded career.

"Unlike degree programs for professions governed by established

standards and standardized tests (i.e., law, medicine, engineering, psychology,

economics)," I wrote in the second edition, "graphic design—which does not, and perhaps may never, necessitate board-tested certification—has very few strict curriculum conventions and hardly any blanket requirements (other than "knowing" the computer and being "fluent" in type). Basic undergraduate design programs offer more or less the same basic courses, but levels of teaching excellence vary between institutions." More and more, I hear that teachers, particularly faculty who are practicing designers, want to be part of institutions where the students have proven levels of skill and talent. Time is too short to be simply tutor those who either cannot or will not achieve what might be described as a new standard of design proficiency. The new requisites for designers (and the definition thereof) demands that standards be established. Some of the contributors to this edition overtly and covertly address what they should be.

This new edition is a compendium of previously included and newly added essays. Retained are ones that have not lost their currency – or have an historical dimension that is relevant to current thinkning. Eliminated are those essays that while important to the history of design education and design literature, are not as relevant in this context. Still, to loose these voices is a shame. In the last edition Katherine McCoy wrote:

A discussion of graphic design education necessarily expands to include professional practice and theoretical research. These three components— education, practice, and theory—are interactive and describe the scope of any profession. But is graphic design a profession? The field did not exist at the beginning of this century, and still there is little agreement on the proper nomenclature. Are we graphic designers, graphic artists, commercial artists, visual communicators, communication designers, or simply layout men and pasteup artists?

McCoy was spot on in her longer analysis of why in 2005 design education was in its adolescence. But that stage is arguably over. Still, what we call ourselves is an issue that needs resolution on the pedagogical stage. Like standards in practice, common nomenclature implies maturity as well. Yet maturity does not mean a loss of serendipity. Graphic design may be veering towards technological and strategical realms, but it is still an art form demanding aesthetics and imagination.

The first edition of *The Education of a Graphic Designer* was loosely based on the 1997 education conference that I co-chaired called How We Learn What We Learn, sponsored by the School of Visual Arts, which examined how the confluence of history, theory/practice, and new media could be taught in various educational models. The previous edition was divided into three sections: "How We Learn What We Learn," which included critical essays on the essence of learning and teaching; "How I Learned What I Learned," which included interviews with designers and educators on how they were educated; and "How I Teach What I Teach," a selection of ideal syllabuses. This last section was so popular it was spun off into an entire book titled *Teaching Graphic Design: Course Offerings and Class Projects from the Leading Undergraduate and Graduate Programs* (Allworth Press, 2003). For the second edition the syllabus section remained, while the interview section was removed to make room for new essays. Some of those are retained in this reconfigured volume.

The third edition include over a dozen new essays as well as a new structure. The syllabus section is gone (a revised *Teaching Graphic Design* is being worked on). Ten new thematic sections have been instituted for greater scanability. Nonetheless, the fundamental idea of this book remain and can be paraphrased from the 2005 introduction:

> *Taken as a whole, this book is both a white paper on the state of today's design pedagogy and a potential guide for both student and teacher searching for viable methods and progressive ideas. Read individually, each essay offer possible models for individuals and institutions. As a guide it reveals how educators navigate an ever growing and complex field. The Education of a Graphic Designer ultimately reveals a commitment to methods that provide encouragement, inspiration, and insight that will be a solid foundation for future generations of designers on which to continually learn.*

A DESIGN CORE FOR THE 21ST CENTURY

Andrea Marks, Professor
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When I began teaching graphic design at Oregon State University in 1992, the required freshmen foundation courses included 2D and 3D design and basic drawing. It was a core of classes very similar to the ones I took upon entering college in the late 1970s. Many graphic design programs today still rely on a set of outdated, design foundation classes that are offered throughout the freshman year as pre-requisites to entering graphic design programs. These are often watered down courses modeled from the Bauhaus Foundations courses. Though a basic understanding of design principles and vocabulary is necessary, the freshman year introductory model needs to be replaced by a broader, more relevant set of core classes. A revamped design core, developed as a set of classes taken across three years by students from multiple design disciplines, can strengthen student understanding of the connections between disciplines, research and practice.

It may be helpful to look at history for the context of our current foundation classes. The great European designers and artists, who came to the United States in the early to mid-20th century, brought new ideas and theories about Modernism. They influenced a generation of Americans, who in turn became teachers and practitioners, and the cycle of influence continued throughout the decades. Many of the Bauhaus faculty were among this group of émigres and continued teaching in the States; Moholy Nagy and Gyorgy Kepes taught at the

New Bauhaus in Chicago, (now the Illinois Institute of Design), and Walter Gropius and Marcel Breuer in the Department of Architecture at Harvard University.

Josef Albers immigrated to the United States in 1933 to teach at Black Mountain College, a new type of experimental and inter-disciplinary college in North Carolina. At Black Mountain, Albers taught a basic design course called Werklehre (workteaching), a course similar to the preliminary course he taught at the Bauhaus. In 1950, he left Black Mountain to become head of the department of design at Yale University and spent his eight years at Yale, developing what would become known as the Yale Graphic Design Program.

In the United States, the 1960s and 70s saw commercial art programs give way to four-year college and university graphic design programs, most located within art departments. Coursework in 2D and 3D design and drawing were mandatory before moving into a more defined discipline, and many of the projects and investigations done in these courses were reflective of the Bauhaus model.

First year foundation curricula at many institutions have changed to include courses in design thinking, collaboration, visual culture and theory, yet many freshmen still take foundation classes within a more traditional, fine arts oriented model. Some may argue that freshmen typically have no idea what particular discipline they want to pursue, so letting them take a combination of fine art, design and art history courses, can help them with their future decisions.

Though this argument may be true, there is also a critical need for contemporary graphic design programs to develop a new type of core, one that includes a set of design foundation courses coupled with a more multi-disciplinary set of classes that better prepare design students for the 21st century. Why not a drawing course *and* a course in entrepreneurship?

Today the scale and impact of design is much greater than during the Bauhaus era due to many factors including technology and complexity of information. As a result, graphic design has become a richly diverse field that continues to evolve.

Today's graphic designers work as creative strategists alongside business leaders, engineers, computer programmers and other disciplines. Graphic design education needs to keep pace with this acceleration of change to ensure students understand the importance of design research and human behavior in relation to a designed experience. Rethinking both what a contemporary graphic design curriculum looks like and where a graphic design program resides, are necessary.

In the Fall of 2012, the graphic design program at Oregon State University migrated from the art department in the College of Liberal Arts, where it had been housed for over three decades, and joined three other disciplines on campus to form a School of Design. This new school, comprised of graphic design, apparel design, interior design, and merchandise management, is housed within the College of Business. The first goal of the school was to create a cross-

disciplinary set of core classes for all students to take over their four years of college. These classes are in addition to the individual program requirements for each of the four majors and will roll out in the fall of 2015. A new set of freshmen design foundation courses (Design Perspectives and Design Explorations), replaced the previous 2D and 3D courses. The eight new "core" classes will allow for students from graphic design, apparel design, interior design and merchandise management to take classes together with students from the College of Business. The collaboration is intended to give students a more holistic understanding of how they will work when they graduate. The courses include:

- Human-Centered Research for Design and Merchandising
- Human-Centered Design Theory and Strategies
- Collaborative Studio
- Sustainable Engineering
- Introduction to Microeconomics
- Fundamentals of Accounting
- Introduction to Entrepreneurship
- Introduction to Marketing

When the Bauhaus began in 1919, its structure and curriculum was progressive. Walter Gropius and his colleagues understood the need for change in how art and design were taught in response to the cultural, social and economic context of the time. Today's design programs need to also respond to significant changes. With the need for more collaborative, multi-disciplinary

curriculum models, a specific core that is comprised of a diverse group of cross-disciplinary classes can build stronger connections and ultimately better prepare design students to solve today's complex problems.