

*Criticism: Graphic design education must go beyond formal principles and technological mastery.*

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Graphic design students have a false expectation that mastering software will help them find work. This myth is perpetuated by the image made easy promotions of industry leaders, Apple, Adobe, HP, Windows, and Dell. The debate over the utility and usage of creative software and technology appears to be ramped up year by year with release of faster, shinier machines and software that promises to take all the work and worry out of creative projects. Commercial software companies target students by luring them into the belief that “new, fast, and easy” solutions are capable thanks to their products. Students grow dependant on digital tools for creative thinking, and solely rely on the computer to solve complex graphic problems. Instead, students must learn how to arrive at a solution through research, experimentation, and critical engagement, and then weave technology into its fabric.

At the classroom level, instructors planning to go head to head with the filters in graphic applications, the audio playlist and any vector animation on the web are in for double duty. The instructors that continue to live in the excitement of the Dotcom bubble of the early 90’s are doing a disservice to their students and the graphic design practice. They approach problems and projects with the intent of teaching students primarily about software. At the earliest stage of a student’s design education, this shows them that dabbling with software instead of investigating the problem will do adequately. When most students think of design, they think about interfacing with the computer and this approach robs the student of thinking critically about issues, influences, audience, and applications. Preliminary data collection might prove that the problem at hand does not require a communicative solution, but an expressive and cryptic one instead. Students look for solutions in the computers believing that they have a bank of answers at their disposal; technology is a powerful tool that can deliver answers, and the user will have the most success by approaching it with a clear understanding of the problem.

The argument has been made that mastery of tools, software, and technology is the privileged skill-set for potential employers. In fact, what most employers do want are designers who can hit the ground running: an understanding of software; a willingness to work in team environments; dedication; curiosity; and strong communication skills. How does a creative professional practice that is subject to constant and rapid change expand its definition, practices, and scope in order to be a site of creative vision and technological innovation? The commercial industry has never placed such interdisciplinary challenges on its areas of creative development. The model practitioner on contemporary graphic design is an aesthete, a technician, a philosopher, a marketer, and an accountant. The creative teams are smaller and the demands are increasing; the formula is clear. Educators must prioritize. We need to create strategic relationships with the related programs and professions. In agency and studio environments, there is a need for talented production specialists, who dedicate their time and effort to final assembly and engineering of jobs using commercial software and technology. This would be similar to the 3D modeler that generates Frank Gehry’s conceptual visualizations. And while these are both valuable roles, design educators must instead generate thinkers, entrepreneurs, and innovators who have the ability and ambition to advance farther.

In order to prepare students to be thinkers as well as form givers, they should be surrounded by process sensitive problems and interdisciplinary projects that put them in touch with culture, current events and social issues all under the domain of critical thinking. Said educational goals would create a self-motivated student with a passion for life-long learning, as is the case with any liberal arts education; empowering students with the computer as technical tool only gets them so far. A new graphic design curriculum that focuses on principle, tools, complexity, and change would better prepare students for such endeavors. Principles would instruct students about the means of creating dynamic, expressive, and communicative form; tools would sharpen hand and craft skills while introducing a wide variety of rendering methods including print and digital media; context would expose students to a range of problems, issues, and influences while fostering critical thinking and inquiry; and complexity would expose them to a range of difficult and dynamic problems needing intense examination. Through this breadth of instruction, students would gain ambitions deeper than mere financial affluence. Knowledge of the computer as a tool for rapid prototyping and production would maximize its place in this cycle of innovation, whereas knowing it alone has its limitations. The student that possesses business acumen, a broad overcoming intellect, strong oral and written communication skills, and the ability to problem solve through critical inquiry will have greater opportunities than those who have only mastered commercial software. In our ever-expanding culture, it is important that each student has the knowledge to find a place as citizens, whose goals reach far beyond clicking and dragging the mouse.