A Design Education Manifesto

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School is hard. Design school is especially hard because so much of it exists within the abstract, the opinion. There are few, if any, absolutes as you go through design school. Much of design education is about learning some key techniques and then trying to apply them to your work in interesting ways. The following are some thoughts I have about how to go through a design program and get the most out of the experience, and beyond as a creative professional.

Always take risks. It is easy to learn and then repeat exactly what you have learned. However, you will not grow that way. I can see value in the regurgitation of knowledge if you are a lawyer, but I have a hard time with it as a design student or a creative professional. You should be pushing yourself and you should be taking risks, especially in school. Big risks. Trying what may not work. Asking questions that may not have answers. Seeing if what you throw against the wall sticks. In my experience, taking risks in school has always paid off big time.

Be aggressive. There are many opportunities available while in design school. For example: collaborative projects, extracurricular activities, and freelance work. These opportunities will not always come to you, you must go get them. Every school has a publications department that designs and produces internal and external collateral. There is no reason that you should not be the person designing these projects. Make contacts and ask for work. If you are talented and a little lucky, you will get it.

Be aggressive in terms of your academics as well. There are two kinds of design professors at school: pushers and pullers. Some professors will push their knowledge on you. Others will make you pull what you need from them. Ask questions of both. Challenge their statements. Ask for precedents. Beyond the curriculum of the class, ask your favorite faculty who they know that needs an intern (because they do know people, I assure you). Ask faculty if they need any assistance with their own work. Find out which exhibits they enjoyed at local museums. It is very important that as a design student you do not sit back and let things happen to you. Be aggressive and create your own luck and opportunities.

Break the rules. I lecture to my students that they should "fuck the rules" as long as they have a good reason. I have consistently found that the students who are conservative, stay inside the lines and try to appeal to the teacher, are

the students who do the most predictable work. Not bad work, just predictable. Defying the rules forces you to stray from the path of least resistance and ultimately make work that is more interesting, more meaningful and more fun to create.

But, that does not mean just be a contrarian for its own sake. It does not mean ignore any and all guidelines. It means take the requirements into consideration and break past them with good reasons and solid ideas. Breaking the rules just to be different is foolish, breaking the rules because you have a much better idea is smart.

Look at everything. Dismiss nothing. Each designer is born from a unique experience. Classmates in the same program will have different educations depending on which teachers they have, what field trips they take, and what books they pick up. As a designer you need to always be looking at the world around you. You need to see everything—the kind of detailed seeing taught in freshman drawing classes—not just looking, but really seeing. You need to be an observer as well as a maker. You should rid yourself of any preconceptions of what is and is not worthy of your attention. Everything has potential to be interesting and influential. Not everything will be, but the more you see the better your chances are at seeing something that will be useful to you.

Be obsessive. The saying goes that "necessity is the mother of invention." I concur, but I think for designers the saying should be obsession is the mother of invention. Obsession is what drives you to explore and find out as much as possible about something that interests you. I do not mean that being clinically obsessive/compulsive is something to aspire to—I have been told that is neither fun or interesting—but I do mean you need to be intensely immersed and engaged in what you are doing. This obsession can move you past understanding and awareness into a translative process where you will start to make things. We are usually taught that obsession is unhealthy, and in some cases that is true. When it comes to how a designer looks at the world, obsession can provide an incredible explosion of ideas as you become so engrossed in something you start to reinvent it inside your head. Obsession can often help you to move through the threshold between thinking and making. You should never hold back your excitement about something that interests you, and by the same token, you should not hesitate to be obsessive about many things since you never know where your interests will lead.

Be uncomfortable. Comfort is tremendously overrated, especially as a designer. You know you can skew some type, add some color, toss in an image and make a decent piece of design. Maybe it's not great, but it's good enough. It is easy to

get into the habit of making the kind of work you are comfortable making. Truly great, interesting, inspiring design comes not from comfort but from discomfort. It comes from the fear that what you are doing might really suck, but it also might just be brilliant. Discomfort makes you reexamine what you think you know and how you think things should work. Being uncomfortable helps you make decisions from the gut, it makes you push harder and take more risks. Grabbing that fear, holding onto that uncomfortable, scary place lets you push past expectations and into the unknown—into a process of discovery as opposed to regurgitation.

Be opinionated. You should have opinions about design and the world around you. Preferably, you should have strong opinions. Ideally, you should have strong and informed opinions. Every great designer I have ever met has an active stance on design, they do not passively allow work to wash over them. They have opinions about what they see. Having opinions means engaging in some kind of internal analysis of the work you see and formulating a response to it. As an educator I do this constantly in the classroom, and I try to do it constantly in the professional world as well. Opinions about design force you to pick a side, and define what kind of designer you are.

There are plenty of designers out there who punch a clock in the morning, mindlessly flow some text into InDesign all day, and then leave at five and don't think about design until the next morning. There are designers who casually ignore art and design while they look for the next reality show on TV. Then there are the other designers who make more design in their spare time. Their idea of a good time is to look at typography or experiment with painting or photography. These are designers who are fully immersed in working visually, designers who are actively engaged in becoming better at what they do every day.

Be a cop. They say that when you are a police officer you are on duty 24/7/365. Cops always look at their surroundings from a cop's perspective. They notice things others do not. They act as a cop would in an emergency situation whether or not they are in uniform. Most cops I have met and read about always carry their firearms and badge, even while on vacation. It is not something they turn off at the end of their shift.

A designer needs to act like a cop. When you are a designer, you are a designer 24/7/365. Always noticing, always observing, always designing, even if only in your head. Carrying a camera with you at all times is a good habit—capture interesting details you come across, not just because you have an assignment due, but because it is in your nature as a visual artist to observe and process the

world around you. Inspiration comes from everywhere and nowhere, all at the same time.

One of the greatest things about being a designer is that you do not finish your design education when you leave design school. You continue learning for the rest of you life, and you should carry these ideas with you as you develop and mature into a creative professional.

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