

A photograph of a cluttered office or storage room. The room is filled with boxes, papers, and various items on shelves and desks. In the foreground on the right, a human skeleton is visible, partially obscured by the text. The lighting is somewhat dim, and the overall atmosphere is one of a busy, perhaps neglected, workspace.

THOUGHT

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70 SCHOOLS

design education programs are combining new disciplines with traditional principles to help tomorrow's designers keep pace with technological change

last winter, my graduate class in graphic design traveled to Chicago to meet with Larry Keeley, president of the Doblin Group, a strategic-design planning firm. My classmates and I sat in a semicircle around Mr. Keeley in an empty boardroom; he sat with his back to a curtain. Arms folded across his chest, he outlined the extensive research his design-strategy team conducted on user interfaces for Amoco. While he explained how this research contributed to a major repositioning of Amoco's brand, a classmate leaned over and whispered to me, "I'm waiting to see what he has hidden behind that curtain. . . ."

But there was nothing behind the curtain. During the two-year course of our graduate program, in which we'd visited design studios and advertising agencies throughout the United States and Europe, nothing had prepared us for what we encountered at the Doblin Group: no visual result. But the experience was eye-opening nonetheless. The Doblin Group is not a graphic design studio. It's a consulting firm that employs such specialists as designers, architects, technical experts, cultural anthropologists, market researchers, and business strategists. Keeley explains, "I use the term 'design' in a very broad sense, about the conception and construction of anything new. When I talk about a transformed organizational structure, I consider that a design problem. I also consider it a design problem to preconceive and re-create information systems in an organization."

Welcome to the modern world of graphic design. New directions are emerging in the profession as advances in technology continue to change the way people communicate, and employment opportunities keep growing. To prepare students, educators across the country are responding to these changes by developing new areas of study, such as introducing classes to firms like the Doblin Group, where graphic design embodies communication in all realms.

By Carolyn McCarron

Photographs by Jeffrey Braverman



new disciplines

As a profession, design now demands skills in multiple media and knowledge in fields such as communications, business, and the sciences. In the *AIGA Journal of Graphic Design* (Vol. 16, No. 2), Clement Mok writes, "Graphic design used to solve communication challenges. Now, because of the convergence of technology, commerce, and design, communication challenges have to be solved in the context of larger, more global challenges."

Modern approaches to design have led the discipline to branch out into the new domains of strategic planning, interaction, and new media—all of which are different perspectives on a common theme: culture. Designers in each of these areas no longer see the computer as a tool, but rather as an integral part of our culture. With this in mind, these designers are collaborating more and more with professionals in the behavioral sciences—such as psychology and sociology—to better understand how humans interact with various media. They are striving to influence the direction of culture. Yet there are differences among the areas of study. Strategic design planners aim to transform industry simply by assisting companies in being more innovative. Interaction designers concentrate on studying and understanding human behavior in order to communicate more effectively with a target audience. In new media design, designers not only want to influence the visual aspects of today's interactive media, but also want to define the new forms that media might take in the future.

The emergence of these specializations could very well be a response to the mass accessibility of general desktop publishing and design software. With the tools of the trade almost universally affordable and available, professional designers feel the need to offer something that goes beyond technical proficiency. As designers attempt to rise above the status quo, the term "graphic design" is being replaced by "interaction" and "communication design" to reflect the new levels of research, inquiry, and collaboration. Richard Buchanan, head of the School of Design at Carnegie Mellon University, asserts: "The term 'graphic design' . . . has been gradually replaced

by 'visual communication' and, most recently, by 'communication design.' The evolution is significant. . . . We have gradually discovered the core purpose of this branch of the design professions: to communicate. We now work in many media to accomplish our purposes. Sometimes in print, but often in sound, moving images, and complex environments that integrate many media. The scope of application of design thinking is widening rapidly, moving designers into new roles in organizational development and communication."

changing curricula

To prepare students for a career in a rapidly changing profession—to keep pace with the broadening industry—educators are revamping existing curricula and establishing new programs and degrees.

A NEW CONCENTRATION. The California College of Arts & Crafts (CCAC; www.ccac-art.edu) in San Francisco recently launched the Design and Media concentration within its graphic design program. Program chair Leslie Becker explains that the concentra-

tion was "developed out of the kinds of areas that the faculty notes are critical to the profession. Our faculty is composed of all working designers, so obviously everyone has an eye on what is going on in the field. It's driven by a professional intuition, an active involvement in both the profession and society, and an understanding of the way the world is and the way the world is going." Faculty members believe that the traditional format of training designers to solve communication problems remains essential, but have launched this new concentration because they want their students to be more "fluid" in terms of communicating via the most appropriate media. Becker adds that "many people are still used to seeing graphic design as two-dimensional. We've moved off the page. We want our students to ask, 'Why is it presented this way?' We see all of this as under the umbrella of communications."

Among the courses being introduced this year is "Hypertext and Culture," which studies the history of digital media and technology and how they have affected culture. Another class, "Future Media," explores technology as a basis for invention; topics of discussion and study include wearable technology, augmentation and implants,

continued on page 34

“The term ‘graphic design’ seems rather archaic in contemporary culture. Is there another profession that defines itself by its medium?” —Richard Buchanan

TOOLS *of the trade* >>

PROFESSIONALS both within and outside of academia say that basic communication, problem-solving, and design skills are more important (and tougher to teach) than particular technologies. Still, students face a job market in which hiring managers frequently list proficiency in certain software applications as a job requirement. And—to point out the obvious—an effective craftsman needs a basic understanding of his or her tools.

If you're still in school, need a refresher course, or just want to add another useful item to your workbench, the following resources can help you get started.

- Adobe's Web site (www.adobe.com/misc/training.html). The training section of Adobe's Web site provides information on various vehicles for self-paced training, user groups, and other support resources for Adobe products, including a searchable database of trainers certified to teach Adobe software. If you're interested in becoming an Adobe Certified Expert (or Trainer) yourself, go to <http://partners.adobe.com/asn/training/main.html>.
- Technology conferences such as with Thunder Lizard Productions (www.thunderlizard.com) or seminars such as with the Dynamic Graphics Education Foundation (dgusa.com) or CompuMaster (compumaster.net).
- Local computer stores—for example, CompUSA—often provide (or can direct you to) a number of training resources.
- Online schools (most search-engine sites include links for distance learning companies and many other educational resources).
- Online centers for design information and opinion, such as webreference.com or webmonkey.com.
- Special-interest organizations such as The American Institute for Graphic Arts (www.aiga.org), which has chapters in many U.S. cities; also, local or online user groups.
- Both Barnes and Noble and Amazon.com have (of course) extensive catalogs of computer-training books; each has a system that makes recommendations.

—Ed.



holography, invisible technology, and transportation. Students in this class form teams with colleagues from the industrial-design program to complete assignments. Becker hastens to add, however, that the classes are "not about teaching a technical skill set—although we give students that skill set. We want them to think in a much broader way about design in culture and the possibilities of communications. We're not talking about being on the cutting edge of just technology. We're talking about being on the cutting edge of culture."

Becker observes that despite advancements in technology in the last decade, people continue to see the computer as a tool. "I say to them, 'No, it's not a tool.' It has fundamentally changed the way we do things, it's changed the way we think about things, and it's changed our values. The computer is an integral part of our culture—it's not even a question anymore. I refuse to participate in a discussion that is fifteen years old. It's time to move forward."

A NEW PROGRAM. Like CCAC, the undergraduate program in the School of Design at Carnegie Mellon University (CMU) fuses a traditional design curriculum with new directions in media. CMU has taken the concept one step further by launching new degrees. In the undergraduate program, a student can now receive a Bachelor of Science in Human-Computer Interaction (a joint degree in design, computer science, and the behavioral sciences); there are also two two-year graduate programs, one in Interaction Design, the other in Communication Planning and Design. Both offer some courses in collaboration with other CMU departments and award the degree of Master of Design.

According to Richard Buchanan, the head of the School of Design at CMU, "Our graduate programs are explicitly concerned with interaction design. We have more than one graduate program because the theme of human interaction is rich, requiring alternative perspectives of exploration."

The Interaction Design program compares the old and new models of technology: In the "old" days, systems interfaces were designed by (and for) engineers. Over time, focus began to shift from the technology itself as the driving influence, to the user and the user's experience in interacting with a system. Today, this emphasis has further expanded to all forms of media and product design.

The Communication Planning and Design program is conducted in interdisciplinary partnership with CMU's Department of English. This program teams writers and designers to study the verbal and visual aspects of communications. As part of a thesis project, one recent graduate examined new modes of communication and how corporations might efficiently

implement these ideas to replace or "evolve" the ubiquitous hard-copy reports that often end up shelved in the offices of company executives. This type of research is proving to be increasingly beneficial to the advancement of design in the business world.

A NEW DEGREE. In addition to more specialized master's-degree programs, the number of Ph.D. programs that focus on research with other fields of study is also on the rise. In her essay "Education in an Adolescent Profession," Katherine McCoy, a professor at the Institute of Design, Illinois Institute of Technology, writes that perhaps "four-year degree programs may not provide a sufficient grounding for this incredibly wide and complex field. Educators are beginning to consider a new model based on a four-year predesign program followed by a two- or three-year professional degree, similar to law or medicine."

Many educators hope that research at the doctoral level will lead the way to the development of new forms of practice in design. In her essay, McCoy goes on to assert the necessity of such collaborative research programs: "Our schools must contribute the training, theory, and research required for this revolutionary dimension of design—and very quickly, too, because a number of other fields are moving into this domain very aggressively, in a number of other university programs including computer science, journalism, communications, technical writing, film, and photography."

true to tradition

Despite the proliferation of new programs and degrees in response to emerging disciplines, some schools still adhere to a traditional design curriculum. Educators at these schools contend that a strong foundation of basic design and communication

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skills will allow students to adapt in a field that will continue to evolve in the coming years. Ken Hine, head of the communications design department at Syracuse University, confirms, "None of the technical stuff is part of our curriculum, yet all of it is. We just don't *teach* it. The emphasis is entirely on problem-solving skills. The fundamental principles stand fast. They can be applied to any situation."

Nathan Shedroff, Chief Creative Officer of *vivid studios* and former professor at Stanford University, agrees: "Design is design is design, and although the tools change, the processes and the approaches do not. . . . a visual designer—what we call a graphic designer—does exactly the same things as before, only within a medium that has its own eccentricities."

a middle ground

Educators who hesitate to change a strong traditional curriculum but want to recognize new directions in the field are finding ways to compromise. Rhode Island School of Design (RISD) and the Art Institute of Boston (AIB) are adding new courses in strategic design planning and media to their core program. They're also adding computer workshops for students to learn the latest software. Geoffry Fried, the head of the graphic design department at AIB, acknowledges, "It's just not practical anymore to teach design without addressing advances in technology. At the same time, you don't want the focus to be on technology and software, because in another five years the current technology will be history."

Even in the newer or more specialized programs being offered, educators agree that students need to learn basic design and communication skills first, especially at the undergraduate level. Not surprisingly, they employ different means to achieve a similar end. At RISD, students can opt to continue study for a fifth year and focus on interactive media, thereby earning a Bachelor of Graphic Design degree instead of the four-year Bachelor of Fine Arts. At CCAC, students must fulfill the level-one and -two course requirements in typography and graphic design before they can study in the Design and Media concentration. And at CMU, the more specialized concentrations in strategic planning and interaction design are reserved for the graduate level.

Varying methodologies aside, the core objective across the educational spectrum remains essentially the same: to teach

designers to be effective problem-solvers and communicators in any medium, present or future. Educators confirm that they are training not computer technicians, but thinkers. Courses that teach the latest software and technology, while valuable and necessary, are seen as nothing more than workshops. And practicing designers endorse this belief in basics by continuing to hire people first for their design talent and communication abilities rather than for their technical skills.

the more things change?

Time will tell, as it always does, how the design industry will continue to change—and the design curricula with it. What remains certain is that the principles of good communication and design will continue to prevail, and that, in the age of exponential technological advancement, design is only one player in the field of communications. In order to be truly successful in influencing media and culture,

graphic designers must increasingly use their knowledge and abilities to collaborate with other professionals and professions.

Perhaps this was Larry Keeley's point. After he had shared his time and expertise for over an hour in that empty boardroom, my classmates and I stood to leave, still somewhat disappointed, and a bit intrigued, by not having seen a slide or multimedia presentation. We appointed Joe—the boldest one in the class—to peek behind the curtain while we said our goodbyes and thanks.

As we walked down East Wacker Drive, the February wind blowing in our faces, I asked Joe, "Well? What was behind the curtain, anything?" He answered, "People hard at work, researching and collaborating." ▀

Carolyn McCarron is a Boston-based graphic designer and writer, currently employed at Houghton Mifflin Company in the School Division's Design Department. She received her BFA from Rhode Island School of Design and her MA from Syracuse University.

