

Year One, Design School: Ups, Downs, and All Arouns

by Steven Faerm

for The Impression

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The broadening chasm between high school and college art and design education is wreaking havoc on our students. If first-year design students are to have a fluid and positive transition between these two growing disparate academic environments — and thus succeed during their college years and beyond — it is incumbent upon educators in secondary and tertiary art and design education to consider how curriculum can be better aligned, and how students' cognitive and emotional development plays a key role in their potential for academic and professional success.

Across the U.S., high schools have slashed art and design education. STEM courses (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math) and other “practical” areas of study are replacing the arts so that graduates may enter “practical” college majors and careers. In New York City alone, of the 232 elementary schools in the City, 38% lack a full-time certified art teacher, and budget allocations for art supplies dropped from \$10.7 million in 2006-2007 to \$1.7 million in 2012-2013 (ONYCC, 2014). The few art and design courses that remain teach students only the very basic technical skills by using a curriculum that has remained unchanged for decades.

Yet our nation's leading design schools are accelerating in the *opposite* direction. Across the U.S., design schools are upending their curricula to adopt coursework that emphasizes conceptual thinking in order to prepare future designers for the knowledge-based economy. As production and other forms of technical work move off-shore, employers increasingly seek candidates who can innovate products and systems through holistic and interdisciplinary means (Pink, 2005). Design schools are adopting curricular changes at lightning speed; jobs for artists and designers are predicted to increase by 43% by 2016 (National Art Education Association, n.d.)

Design schools are preparing students for the knowledge-based economy by teaching conceptual thinking rooted in complex design theory and interdisciplinary coursework (Marshall, 2009). This approach is critical when considering 50% of the most in-demand jobs that exist today did not exist twenty years ago (Darling-Hammond, 2010). Therefore, tomorrow's designer must be highly versatile and adaptable because we simply don't know what the future jobs and required skill sets will be. The new coursework aims to provide students with highly transferable skillsets. Joel Towers, Executive Dean of Parsons, echoes this need by stating, “Our program is capability based, because we are training students for [situations in which] we don't quite know what the needed skills will be” (Wolff & Rhee, 2009).

This bifurcated approach to art and design education is deeply challenging for our first-year design school students (Bekkala, 2001). During the first year, students struggle to leap across an ever-widening gap, from a rudimentary technically-focused curriculum acquired in high school

to a design process-focused curriculum filled with project briefs that question the very *concept* of design. As one of my former students stated, “Art in high school was ‘good’ if it looked like what you drew or painted. Now [in college], ‘good’ art and design is what gets an idea or concept across.”

Today’s design school freshmen encounter design briefs that encourage—and expect—complex design processes, extensive research methods, and sophisticated theories. While students’ final projects are rigorously critiqued, the “in-between” stages from research-to-iteration-to- final deliverable are *particularly* scrutinized. This different pedagogy can feel foreign to some since, as another former student stated:

“...art/design college is such an entirely different experience from a regular university. It really felt like starting this life from scratch. In high school, art class was all about learning techniques, but university is where I learn what a concept is and how to develop it onward.”

Even more telling is how first year design students spend time on their projects; one student stated, “In high school, I’d spend 25% of the time thinking about what I was going to make, and 75% of the time making it. Now, because conceptualization is so important [in design school], I spend 75% of the time just thinking about it, and 25% making it. Developing complex *ideas* are prioritized by my professors.”

The challenges students face when transitioning into this new curriculum are not surprising. Earlier this year, I conducted a survey of approximately 200 design school students and graduates from Parsons and RISD. When asked if conceptual thinking was taught in their high school art/design courses, only 16% of respondents answered “yes.” In response to a question about the similarities/differences between their high school art/design studies and college coursework, the clear majority (72%) said their previous experiences were “very different” from their college coursework.

The design student’s transition is further complicated by an identity crisis. At highly competitive design schools like RISD and Parsons, students encounter a radically different environment from that at their former high school, and this affects how they perceive themselves. Students abruptly transition from being a “big fish in small (high school) pond” to “treading water” in college-level classrooms where—for the first time—they see their peers’ talent eclipse their own. This leads students to doubt their level of talent, choice of college, and even their long-term professional goals. Shifting one’s identity can be a painful process because it involves changing a way of functioning in the world, values, and habits (Evans, et al., 2010).

The student’s identity is further destabilized when his/her long-held beliefs for what constitutes “good” art and design—shaped and conditioned by years of pre-college coursework—is aggressively challenged by professors. This expectation on the institutions’ part that students will abandon long-held, firm beliefs and unquestioningly adopt new ones at the advent of the fall semester leads many students to question the very knowledge and competencies they possess and thus, identity as an emerging talent.

Other challenges are universally shared by all types of college students. These include living on one's own for the first time; being separated from high school friends that helped shaped their identities; forming new friendships with people who are from radically different backgrounds and beliefs; and mastering a work/life balance alongside complex time management. This stage in a student's life is one where boundaries are continuously tested. As a result, often the student will alternately seek guidance from authority figures (e.g. professors) and yet vigorously push against these same authority figures to acquire independence, individuality, and self-reliance.

The college student's relationship with authority is further impacted by new teacher-student dynamics. Theorist and former Harvard professor William Perry coined the term "dualism" to describe the period when a student believes the teacher possess all the answers, information is "black and white," and the student's priority is to make the teacher happy. Conversely, in higher education, students are faced with professors who encourage and often expect students to question, interrogate, and form their *own* opinions.

This dichotomy forces the student to question the part of his identity defined by fulfilling a certain (habitual) role. When their professors *don't* provide all the answers, many first-year students feel abandoned and mistakenly assume their teachers simply don't care about their education. However, the approach is intentional; professors strive to move students out of "dualism" and into the advanced phases of "multiplicity" and "relativism" so that students' ideas, independence, and ultimately, adult maturity all develop.

Although these hurdles can be emotionally charged for many students, the end result can be highly positive. As one survey respondent stated:

"Toward the end of the [first] year, I finally realized that it is *my* work, it is *my* time put into it, and *my* thoughts, ideas, and dreams. I needed to worry about making myself happy, and trying new things, while learning and fulfilling the requirements. There was no way I was going to make some professors happy if I hated my project."

The first year leads students to take greater ownership of their academic and professional goals, thus strengthening their confidence and entrance into adulthood and industry.

While these challenges are commonplace, the design school student is in *particular* need of support given the demographic's high drop-out rate (25%) and the nearly half (48%) that will graduate within six years, not four (Grant, 2004). These statistics put art/design schools more in line with completion rates found at community colleges rather than at most four-year colleges and universities (Grant, 2004).

In contrast to the fall semester's challenges, the majority of students experience a far more positive transition during the spring semester. Usually, the fall term is a period of adjustment, uncertainty, and self-doubt, while the spring term leads students to feel more confident as they are able to *see* the vast improvements in their work. The rigorous critique culture that fostered significant improvements also builds confidence. As one student wrote:

“I don’t think I ever would have been able to deal with the critiques sophomore year that we have in [the fashion design program] if we didn’t have our foundation year. That’s one of the main things I credit foundation year for: helping me grow a backbone. You’ve got to learn to take it. [During] freshman year, it was critique *every single day*. Intense.”

This “backbone” and confidence-building develops one’s maturity that leads to a fulfilling college experience. In fact, most students cite “personal growth” as the biggest influence in a satisfying college experience rather than “lots learned” or “smart professors” (Arnett, 2004).

How can we shrink this gap between high school and college design curriculum so that students have a more positive and fluid transition? At the high school level, career panels must be developed so that the design school experience — and the professions themselves — are demystified; too often myths and stereotypes prevent high schools from expanding courses while parents curtail sons’/daughters’ explorations in favor of “traditional” career paths. Conceptual thinking must be brought into pre-college courses to teach students research methods, design processes, and rigorous critique methods. To strengthen high school teachers’ pedagogy in these areas, art/design colleges must upload recorded critique sessions onto their institution’s website.

In both academic sectors, cognitive and emotional development workshops must be held for all teachers. As Bekkala (2001) states:

“In the literature and course descriptions printed by art colleges, there is frequent mention of self-discovery, personal exploration, and development, yet little is known about how development of college level students in art schools manifests itself, or what the indicators of development are. In the absence of such knowledge one might ask ‘upon what perceptions of students’ art school faculty base their teaching?’” (p. 23).

At the college level, we must redefine what “success” means. For example, how can we mitigate students’ feelings of inadequacy and self-doubt? How can we counter the “small fish/big pond” syndrome? Workshops on “life” must be offered so that incoming students can be taught how to create a healthy work/life balance, how to manage personal finances, how to manage their time, and other “day-to-day” skills. Colleges can no longer assume students already possess these skills or that they will “figure them out.”

Peer-to-peer mentorship programs that currently exist at many liberal arts universities must be adopted. Although college students are provided access to adult advisors, they remain under-engaged; about 1 in 3 have fewer than two meetings with an advisor during the year and almost 10% never meet with an advisor (National Survey of Study of Student Engagement, 2014). This lack of support contributes to low graduation rates and marginal academic—and thus, alumni—success. Pairing first year students with upperclassmen will provide them with a confidant, mentor, and tutor into the rigors of college life while subsequently introducing them to the importance of networking that will be invaluable as alumni.

Bringing first year design students' challenges to light gives us an opportunity to find ways to fortify a weak spot. The solutions will help strengthen the macro-level ecosystem that contains both design education and industry. A more fluid academic and emotional transition will improve students' performance and well-being. Educators in both sectors will adopt a relevant curriculum that better meets students' and industry's needs. Teacher-student relationships will improve as a deeper understanding of adult development is acquired, thus contributing to enhanced experiences across *all* four years.

Supported students become successful and supportive alumni who increase and sustain the institutional brand. Perhaps most importantly, we'll foster a better world since, as Hamilton, Hamilton, and Pittman (2004) write:

“Optimal development in youth enables individuals to lead a healthy, satisfying, and productive life, as youth and later as adults, because they gain the competence to earn a living, to engage in civic activities, to nurture others, and to participate in social relations and cultural activities” (p. 3).

About the author

Steven Faerm is an *Associate Professor of Fashion* at Parsons School of Design (Director, BFA Fashion Design, 2007-2011). A Parsons alumnus, he began teaching in 1998 while working for such designers as Marc Jacobs, Donna Karan, and Kenneth Richard. He has been awarded The New School's University Teaching Excellence Award and the BFA Fashion Design Program's Teaching Excellence Award, and lectures about fashion design education and pedagogy around the world. He received his M.Ed. from Harvard University's Graduate School of Education and BFA in Fashion Design from Parsons.

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