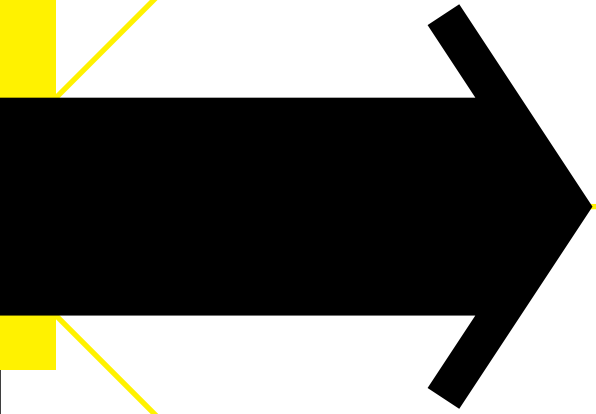
ICOGRADA DESIGN EDUCATION MANIFESTO 2011



International Council
of Graphic Design Associations
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Featuring the Icograda Design Education Manifesto 2011 in Arabic, Chinese, English, French, Russian and Spanish along with 22 essays by international design education experts that inspired it.

Presented in Taipei to the Icograda General Assembly 24, October 2011.

This publication incorporates
Eastern and Western perspectives
on design education.
This book jacket can be turned
to point in either direction.

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Evolve or fade away. That is the challenge for the field of communication design in the 21st century. The profession is facing competing internal and external pressures that threaten to limit its future potential and reduce its relevance. In the context of open, collaborative networks of ideas and outcomes, emergent communication ecosystems will require entirely new and adaptable ways of designing. In this networked, global environment, design educators will need to redouble their efforts in teaching future designers to be both solidly specialised and flexibly generalised. The success of this nearly impossible balancing act will foretell the health and vitality of the profession's future.

The tension between form-giving and contextual attunement is exerting an internal, divisive pressure on academic design programmes. Its impact is seen in the struggles between faculty members clinging to a proud (mostly Swiss) heritage of appropriate form-making, while others demand more attention to the user, the audience or our imperiled world. These two factions may both be right (as I believe), although there may not be a graceful — or ideologically pure — way to reconcile the two positions as of yet. Both camps view this standoff as a zero-sum game where giving in at all means losing something precious. This conflict is not unique to communication design. Since the rise of user-centred design several decades ago it has also challenged product design, architecture and interaction design. Delivering innovative educational curricula to future designers requires walking a tightrope between essential courses, such as typography and colour theory, on the one hand, and essential courses, such as sustainability and cross-cultural hermeneutics, on the other. The risk, of course, is that programmes become diluted and divided, successful in neither dimension while straining to teach both. Another danger is that programmes retreat into narrow specialisation, sticking their collective heads in the sand and refusing to acknowledge the changes in and challenges to the profession. One obvious, albeit impractical, solution is to increase the overall time it takes to educate a communication designer, whether it means five-year undergraduate programmes (as in architecture) or an increased emphasis on graduate education. To be both sensitive to the weight, emphasis and intensity of the mark on the page, and critically aware of the context for which it is being designed, is the nearly impossible challenge that communication designers face.

As if that is not enough of a problem, the design profession is also suffering from an external pressure — the democratisation of design tools and design knowledge. The proliferation of simple, accessible tools for design means that a set of practices that used to be cloistered within a rarefied professional caste is now easily adoptable by almost anyone. Software applications, design templates and open-source typography programmes are combining to create a vast pool of empowered, non-specialist designers who, for better or worse, are grabbing the mantle of design and proudly appropriating it. In this case, however, there is

nowhere for designers to run and hide. This trend will only increase, and there is nothing to be gained by ignoring it. Instead, the path forward is surprisingly clear and uncluttered. Communication designers must become more capable of articulating the specificity of their practice and better able to make an argument for the strategic value that they add to industry.

This means that design educators must equip students to be reflective practitioners and strategic, critical thinkers. Until designers can make a forceful and compelling argument about the centrality of their skills in crafting successful communication, industry will continue to see them as visual stylists.

These tensions play out in a practice where rules for effective communication are constantly in flux. The building of networks and systems at a global scale in the late 20th century created conditions of intractable complexity that designers are only now confronting. As a result, the next generation will need to shift from isolation and individuality to connection and collaboration. Collaboration must become a key skill, as well as a robust research topic, as design practitioners find themselves working more commonly in group settings. Large-scale challenges will make the notion that practitioners (whether designers, engineers, social workers or politicians) can work in isolation from one another obsolete. Industries will require flexible and adaptable communication designers who can work effectively in multi-person teams. To prosper in these conditions, designers will need to cultivate the ability to learn on demand, work in worlds that they are barely familiar with and effectively communicate their roles, responsibilities and capacities to stakeholders. Design educators must, therefore, not only find ways incorporate more teamwork, but also teach students how to work with professionals who do not share a disciplinary language and method. An increased focus on collaboration as a mode of practice and as a research field is required. It is not simply a case of putting designers in group settings — designers must become leaders in developing the dynamics of social interaction and advocate collaboration, whether in partnership, small groups, large groups or crowdsourcing.

Complex systems with global information networks necessitate a different approach to processes as well. In most instances, the objective will no longer be to model visual solutions, but instead to frame the existing, multifaceted context for project stakeholders. To do this, designers will produce fewer static compositions and will instead be called on to craft dynamic, fluid and adaptive solutions. As the primary medium is no longer simply print (or even the web), outcomes will need to translate across different media, channels, platforms and formats. The nature of design products will shift from immutable artifacts to options, recipes, rule sets, algorithms and unexplored possibilities that are capable of move across dynamic platforms. These networks are also increasingly open and open source, and a new ethic of participation is driving innovation.

Anxieties concerning intellectual property will be challenged by this emergent openness; processes will demand transparency and a willingness to collaborate in the building of new ideas, products and services. Ultimately, designers will be creating responsive 'organisms' that must be able to thrive in diverse, open knowledge ecosystems. Strategic thinking will have to merge with sophisticated form-giving to create protean outcomes that respond to volatile conditions.

In the end, design is always a political act. It can weave together or disrupt our system of experience, meaning and communication. It carries with it the cultural values of its practitioners and the institutional stakeholders who underwrite it. Every designer is, thus, a citizen designer. She or he must be aware of the stakes in every project and critical of efforts that do not lead to sustainable change. Balance between form and context, personal and social, the disruptive and the sustainable, is both an impossible and an urgent priority.