GOING TO
UNIVERSITY

USING THE
INTERNET

MAKING
STUFF

**THE BEST WAY
TO LEARN DESIGN**

CHAPTER ONE
WHY GO TO DESIGN SCHOOL?

Most people (and especially most parents who are sending their kid to college) assume that by going to design school you are purchasing a career. Go to school, do well, graduate, get a job, live happily ever after.

Getting a job is an excellent reason to get an education, and working and making money is something I personally enjoy very much. However, deciding to go to design school (or really pursuing any higher education regardless of major) is not about buying a career. The reality is that despite all the time and money spent, there is no guarantee that you will get a job when you graduate, no matter what your school's marketing department says on the website. What you will get when you decide to go to design school is an education in creative practice and active curiosity—which may lead to a job, and very often does. It is a huge investment without any definitive outcome, which leads to an incredibly important question

that you have probably already asked yourself, and it's one I hear frequently. It usually goes something like this:

Instead of spending all the time and all the money to go to design school and maybe not even getting a job when I leave, why can't I just watch free videos and tutorials online and learn the same stuff?

It is an excellent question that deserves a real answer. There is a massive amount of information online that will also be covered at school. While much of this information is out there for free, even the paid sites for learning about design cost a tiny fraction of just one semester of college. Learning online is something you can do at home, on your own schedule, any time of day or night. You don't have to move away, or give up your job if you are an older student. Design school (and higher education as a whole) is absurdly expensive—the majority of students will leave with some amount of debt, and some with a huge amount of debt. Many will have to leave their families and move to an unfamiliar place.

Can't you just do it all online instead? The answer is: yes, you can learn to be a designer online. You don't have to go to design school. But, you will not learn the same stuff. YouTube, and paid learning sites such as Skillshare and LinkedIn Learning, have a massive, expansive set of courses—far, far more than could possibly fit into four years of a BFA. You can just keep following the

recommendation algorithm forever and learn how to use almost everything. And yes, you can do it in your jammies at 2:00 A.M. with your dog sitting in your lap.

Design school is different; it is an experience that comes with a lot more context and a lot more deeply examined connections within its structure. You have the magical situation of a bunch of people in a room together bouncing ideas off each other, and no, an online chat or the comments section of a YouTube video is *not* the same thing. The importance and value of in-person, face-to-face dialogue and collaboration cannot be understated. I have yet to see anything come close online. Yes, I have been in Slack critique channels, and I have seen Discord servers about design critique, and while these are by no means useless, there is a lot that is missed.

Formal education has a strongly developed curriculum that builds upon itself over many sequential classes. You will also take many classes outside of your specific area of interest, both electives and non-design courses such as liberal arts, writing, sciences, and a full range of others. You will learn way, way more theory and history, especially as very few people trying to learn design online take a history class, or a writing class, or a literature class. This is the education: the stuff beyond the obvious stuff and how these topics all connect together and feed each other in interesting and unpredictable ways.

So, what should you do?

Ideally, you should do both. YouTube and design

school both have lots to offer, and ideally everyone would use both together to get what they need. While the commitment of going to a design program is significant—cost and time and geography are obviously huge issues, especially for those who are not from privileged backgrounds and will have to take out loans to make it happen—it is also valuable. Anyone who tells you that YouTube is a one-to-one substitute for a formal design education and asks, "Why would you possibly pay tens of thousands of dollars when you can do the same exact thing online for free or twenty dollars per month?" is not operating in reality. Both have value. Both offer a way into industry. Both can be good or bad for someone. Setting aside the question of money, either can be the right way or the wrong way to learn.

For me personally, going to design school was a life-changing experience that I desperately needed. I knew I would go into debt even with some family financial support. I was prepared to do so. I would not have gotten remotely close to where I am today without it. I also realize how lucky I was even to be able to attend design school thanks to having emotional, financial, and creative support. I don't take it lightly when I say I am very, very aware of how fortunate I am.

Generally, I believe design school will make students much better creative practitioners and will take them far past where they could go alone. That being said, simply attending design school does not guarantee anything.

There are people who are brilliant and successful who never went to school. There are also people who went to elite design schools who can't design their way out of a paper bag.

And let's bust a myth: I often hear people say that teachers at design schools are antiquated and tired and coasting through teaching while they enjoy tenure and show up on campus to teach one or two days a week. Unfortunately, yes, there are a few teachers like this, but the vast majority of educators—especially in art and design—are active practitioners and insanely curious about their field. A hell of a lot of what educators are paid for is being actively interested in stuff. It is literally in the job description. That old saying "Those who can't, teach" is utter bullshit. The saying should be "Those who can, and can explain why and how they can, teach." I personally look at teaching as a part of my creative practice. It feeds my work and my work feeds my teaching. Much of my motivation is being curious, while much of a YouTuber's motivation is view counts. It is just something to be aware of: understand who is teaching you and why they are doing so.

Conversely there is often a sense among those who teach at design school (especially among older faculty) that YouTube is just a bunch of unqualified kids making worthless videos for the views. This is a gross mischaracterization and incredibly ignorant. There is a massive, valid, highly accessible wealth of knowledge

online, and you should not be so quick to dismiss it. Do you need to vet YouTube videos to make sure they are accurate? Sure. But if someone is posting to YouTube they are going to be easily findable online. Look at their portfolio. Check their qualifications. See if they are worth listing to, and—this is really important—you should also do this with your design school teachers.

So to answer the big question: Should you go to design school or just use YouTube?

The answer is simple: Yes.

ART OR DESIGN?

While we are here, let's also discuss some language: What's the difference between "art" and "design," anyway? I have thought about this a lot, spoken with many people, and considered and reconsidered this question for my entire career as a maker and an educator. And, after much debate both with myself and with others, I think I have reached a clear, definitive answer:

It doesn't matter.

Or to put it more accurately: it doesn't matter to me. I don't care what the difference is. This does not mean that art and design are not, in fact, different—it just means that I have never found those differences useful to how I teach and make work. After all, there are many designers who approach their work as art. There are also many artists who approach their work like designers. Labeling a project as one or the other does not give me

any useful understanding of what it is and does not help me know what to make or how to make it. I think this unlabeled, fuzzy, ambiguous gray area between art and design is the most interesting place to be. Slapping labels on things and eliminating other ideas or approaches is the most boring place to be, so I won't be doing it in this book, or in my own work, or in my classes.

In this book I will mostly be sticking to the word *design*, but 99 percent of what I speak about here in the context of being a design student can also be applied to being an art student or a craft student or, for that matter, a writing student or a music student—any discipline where we use our creativity and knowledge to make things that don't exist yet.

I bring this up in the first chapter of this book because humans like to put nonverbal things into verbal forms. Words have meaning, and yet art and design are primarily visual or experiential things. While I need words to discuss being a design student in this book, I do not want there to be a semantic debate about what design exactly is or is not.   ●

STUDENTS · TEACHERS

**PEOPLE WHO
ARE CURIOUS**
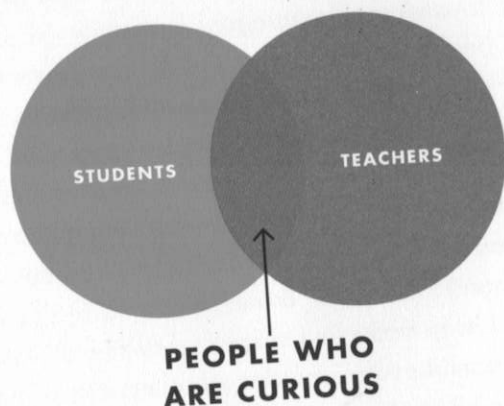
LEARNING CURIOSITY

You attend design school to learn how to be a designer, right? That sounds very straightforward, but it raises the question: What will you actually learn?

The answer is rather complicated, but the short version is that you will learn lots and lots and lots of things. No matter which specific discipline of design you major in—graphic, industrial, new media, interactive, spatial (just to name a few)—the basis for all of them is the same. Most undergraduate programs will have you go through some version of a foundation year, which is a catchall term for classes that cover the basics of visual art and design. Usually, you will have classes in drawing, flat or 2D design, sculpture or 3D design, and possibly some time-based design as well (like animation or film). You might also have some general technical classes on software and equipment, in addition to history or other liberal arts classes. But you are not just learning how to

draw, or how to make 2D things, or 3D things, or movies. You are not only learning how to use a pencil, or charcoal, or paint, or software, or machinery.

Once you get into your major classes you will learn concepts and methods unique to that major. In graphic design you will learn a lot about typography, branding, publication, interaction, and more. In industrial design you will learn modeling, sketching, fastening, manufacturing, utilizing materials, and much more. This list goes on and on and on. But you are not only learning how to set type or how injection molding works.

I think that every single art and design program at every reputable school is really teaching one thing, in a variety of different ways, over and over: to be actively curious. You are learning how to ask interesting questions and then try to answer them through research, making, ideation, and conversation. Active curiosity is an "applied interest" in something—you are not passively wondering how stuff is done, you are intensely interested and act upon that curiosity to make things. Active curiosity will be the DNA of your creative practice (which we will talk more about later). You will certainly spend a lot of time in design school learning how to do things, the tools to use, the techniques to master, and so on, but underlying all of that is active curiosity. You will learn how to be endlessly curious, but in a way where you can do something with that curiosity.

It is easy—*extremely* easy—for design school to show you how others have done the same thing you are doing, and then teach you how to do it the same way. If this is all you are looking for, you are being trained, not educated. Historical precedent is very important, as everything you will make as a designer has a context, and some of that context is historical, so knowing where things came from, how they came to be, and why they came to be is central to understanding how the world at large affects your work. What is completely unimportant is looking at others' work and thinking, "Well if that's how *Famous Designer* did it, I should do it in a similar way." This is the opposite of learning; this is simply filling out a template someone else created.

Part of learning active curiosity is learning how to make work the way you would do it—not the way your teacher would do it. Not the way *Famous Designer* did it. You are interested in the work, and you are acting on that interest by thinking about what to make, then figuring out how to make it, and then reflecting on what you made and whether it was successful. Active curiosity is about trying to answer interesting questions by making stuff. These questions should never end.

The cool thing about being actively curious is that your teachers are doing the exact same thing. Most students do not realize this, but full-time, tenured or tenure-track teachers have three jobs at a school. Our

first job is, of course, teaching: developing projects, going to class every day, critiquing, showing students tools and techniques, explaining concepts, grading, etcetera. The second job is service: all the stuff that students don't see—committee meetings, developing curricula, doing portfolio reviews, putting together exhibitions for students, serving on things like academic senate, etcetera. We serve the program we are teaching in as well as the university and really the entire field of design beyond school. The third job (the most relevant to what I am talking about in this chapter) is research (sometimes called scholarship): the stuff that requires active curiosity. Research can look like a million different things: sometimes it is creating work as a designer, sometimes it is teaching workshops and lecturing about things at conferences and other institutions, other times it's working on initiatives outside of the classroom. Often research is writing books or articles about the discipline we are in. Regardless of exactly what it looks like, research is being actively curious in what we do as educators and designers, and that is literally a part of our job; we are being paid to be curious.

So, when I say that part of your role as a student is to be actively curious, I mean it. This is coming from my own experience as both a former and current student and an educator. As I write this book, I am in the middle of pursuing another master's degree in furniture design at

RIT. Curiosity is part of what makes a good student a good student, and a good teacher a good teacher.

FOR TEACHERS, I think it is very important to let students into your own creative practice so they can see and understand your curiosity. As an example, I really enjoy posting my work on social media to allow students to know what I'm working on and to let them see the inside of my brain (to some extent). There are lots of good reasons I do this, not the least of which is it helps me more clearly understand what I'm doing in my own work by seeing it through their eyes. Generally one of the first things I do at the beginning of the semester is show students my social media accounts, and I encourage them to take a look at my work, take a look at my writing, take a look at what I'm thinking about and talking about, take a look at what I have to say, and then decide for themselves if I'm worth listening to or not. This shows that I am not distanced from the experience they are all having. Instead, it helps them clearly understand that I am exactly where they are and I know exactly what it is like, because I am doing the same things they are.

Social media, streaming platforms, and the Internet in general are all amazing ways to talk about your interests that can reach a massive audience far, far beyond just the students in your classroom. I use social media constantly, and this is why I was asked to write this

book—I've been spending years talking about teaching art and design in an open, accessible, and public way on the Internet. Explaining what I'm thinking about in small, social media–friendly bite-size nuggets has turned out to be an excellent way for me to understand what I'm doing both inside and outside of the classroom. If I want to teach a specific idea, explore something interesting I just discovered, or show something useful I want students to know about, I don't have to write it into my curriculum and then wait three semesters to get a class I can teach it in. I can just write a tweet or upload a YouTube video and immediately get it in front of people.

Behind the scenes (and what people don't usually realize) is that everything that I post on the Internet is first directed at me—me as a teacher, me as a student, me as a practitioner, and me as someone trying to understand what I'm doing in the world. Students frequently tell me how much they appreciate something I've said online, because it offers additional context to what I'm saying in my classes and helps them understand that I am not just casually teaching to cash a paycheck and get summers off. I am doing this because I can't not do this. It is what I'm here to do, and posting interesting things at ten o'clock on a Tuesday night in July proves my commitment. Social media offers an open, honest, unrestrained, and unfiltered opportunity to speak about what I am doing and what I am trying to do—and this is not only very good for me but also very good for my

students. They understand that I am right where they are, trying to figure it out every day. This makes me a lot less authoritarian and a lot more approachable in the classroom, and it also makes my students realize that I truly empathize with their struggles, because I am having the same struggles.

PROCESS

OUTCOMES
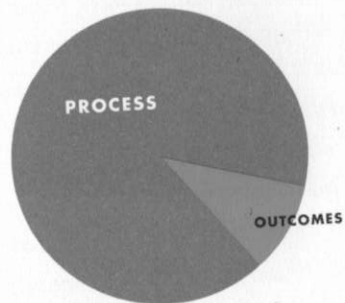
**WHAT YOU FOCUS ON
AT DESIGN SCHOOL**

CHAPTER THREE

PROCESS AND PRACTICE

Let's get off campus for a second. What does a professional designer actually do, anyway? You are coming to design school to learn how to be a creative professional in any number of different fields, so you have to be wondering: What is the job really like? What are the expectations and goals of working as a designer? This can look very different depending on lots of factors: the field, the location, the market, and the kind of place you work, whether it's in-house or for a design studio. But generally speaking, no matter the specifics, all design jobs share a few similarities and common goals.

First and foremost: professional practice is a business, and a primary goal of a business is to be profitable and make money. A lot of time is spent on money—making budgets and bidding on projects. Invoicing, collecting, and accounting for money. Paying expenses and employee salaries. Buying equipment, supplies, software, office

furniture, and everything it takes to run a business. Making money, spending money, and accounting for the money made and money spent takes time and…money. This attention to money applies just as much for a single freelancer as it does for a huge agency—the scale of the numbers may differ, but the general idea is the same.

Second, the goal of professional practice is not primarily learning, it is executing what you have already learned. Clients and studios hire you because they assume you already know what you need to know in order to complete the projects they are hiring you for. As a human who is curious, yes, of course you will always be learning new things—but that is not the point of them hiring you. They hire you to complete a job, which they expect you to be able to do on time and within the parameters the client has set, be it within a tight budget, too little time, or more often both.

Last, professional practice is generally focused on the needs of the client and their audience by way of the deliverable thing you give them at the end of the project. They are hiring you to make a thing that satisfies the needs of their business and the people who spend money at their business. Design is a service industry, and you are paid for your services—that is, making things your clients need. Part of that is knowing how to communicate with a client, how to talk about your ideas, how to listen to their ideas and needs, and how to translate that into things.

This is often forgotten by students and their teachers: design school is not commercial practice. The goals of school are almost the exact opposite of the goals of a job. The goal of school is to learn, not to be profitable. You do not have clients, you have teachers and classmates. The final thing you make is so often less important than how you got there. Commercial practice is mostly concerned about the destination, whereas school is mostly concerned about the journey. You will absolutely make "final" things in your classes. You will do research to understand the needs of the audience you have been given in your assignments. You will do a lot of things that parallel what you will do in professional practice. You will not ignore the world beyond school, but you will shift focus to the process of making. Does this mean the final stuff you make does not matter, as long as you had an interesting process? Sometimes, yes. In my own classes, very often yes.

The reason why there is such a strong focus on process during school is that it takes a lot of practice to understand how certain decisions at the start of a project affect the outcome. Making decisions—hundreds or thousands of decisions in one project—is part of the process of making work, and it takes time to learn how to make useful decisions. You do not get a project, figure out exactly what the final outcome should be in a few minutes, and then just spend your time making that exact

outcome. Design does not work like that. There is a long, deep, involved process that goes into it, and having a really good process will help you make really good work. Creating a design process is something you have to learn how to do, and that is why the focus at school is so much on process instead of just outcome—this is where you learn how to do it, through a lot of testing, trial and error, experimentation, and just doing stuff and seeing what happens. Sometimes what happens is good, sometimes it is not.

At school there is a huge, important benefit to making "bad" stuff: making bad stuff helps you understand how to make the good stuff. But in commercial practice you are always expected to make the good stuff. No client is going to hire you with the understanding that you will make lots of bad stuff as part of the process—they assume you already did that while you were at school. This is why it is all in the process: as a student you will spend a lot of time thinking about and talking about the choices you make, why you made them, and what the results of those choices were. This is how you start to diverge from your classmates—in making the choices that you make, you will make the kind of work you want, which can be very, very different from the choices and the work of the person next to you. Understanding why your choices shape your work in a certain way is critically important, and you will spend your entire career figuring this out.

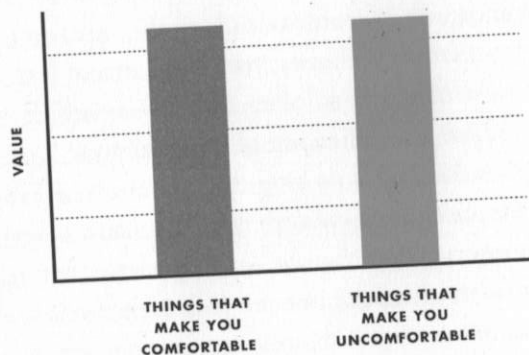IT'S CALLED "CREATIVE PRACTICE" BECAUSE YOU NEVER STOP LEARNING HOW TO DO IT.

A term you may hear a lot both at school and in commercial work is *creative practice*. This catchall term means all the stuff you do as a designer and artist—the work you make, the projects you complete, the topics you research, the meetings with clients or commissions—all of this is your creative practice. However, there is a lot more nuance to it than just "this is all this stuff I do." Creative practice is really a direct extension and continuation of school and curiosity, but out of school, you no longer have assignments, dorms, finals week, grades, and all of the many distractions of being at college. Instead, you have the ability to focus on exactly what you are deeply and passionately curious about. Your job can be (and ideally should be) a part of your creative practice, but it does not have to be; it can be the thing you do for money outside of your practice.

Your creative practice could focus on what you do outside of work, and it may not even focus exactly on the discipline you studied at school. Your BFA in graphic design might be what helps you get a job as a graphic designer and pay your bills, but your creative practice might be painting, writing, music, sculpture, performance, ceramics, or a million other things that are tangentially related to, but not the same as, what your degree is in. In addition to teaching, I also create design, make fine art, do a lot of writing, speak at events and schools, run workshops, and so on and so forth. I consider all of this

my creative practice, and it all mixes together in one big giant ball of interesting things I enjoy.

What you're learning in school is a lot more than the pragmatics of being a designer—the tools, techniques, rules, and how to be a "professional." Those things are extremely valuable, and you really do have to know them—if you cannot execute your ideas, they are not of much value to anyone, including you. You have to learn the applied parts of your discipline: Is knowing which typeface to use for a specific kind of mood or tone important? Absolutely. Is knowing the properties of a material you are thinking about using for a consumer product important? Of course. Is learning how to test designs with focus groups important for user experience projects? Unquestionably. The application is one leg of your creative practice, the one most people see.

However, creative practice is about much more than just the tangible, practical, applied, deliverable work you externalize (and hopefully get paid for). Once again, let's use the iceberg metaphor: what everyone sees sticking out of the water is just a small part of what goes into making work, and creative practice is exploring the whole iceberg, including everything below the waterline that nobody but you gets to see. Ultimately what you do for the rest of your life as a creative practitioner is both practical and conceptual, both the thinking and the application.

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         MAKE YOU        MAKE YOU
         COMFORTABLE     UNCOMFORTABLE
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CHAPTER FOUR
DISCOMFORT

At college, most people are thrown into a group of people they have never met before but will spend the next few years with, learning and growing together. You will be grouped with people from different backgrounds, different places, different educations, and different skills. You will soon start to realize that everyone learns differently. The good news is that there is no "right" way to be a student. The bad news is also that there is no "right" way to be a student. Even though you are reading a book right now that is literally about *how to be a design student*, I have no expectation that everything I say will apply to every student universally; everyone processes the experience differently. This is what makes design school so incredibly interesting from the perspective of a teacher: there is no "right" way to be a design teacher, either. I always experiment with my classes and try different things in the hopes of everyone

getting something from the class. Every student should try to be aware of what kind of student they actually are, in terms of their personality, their process, and their goals and wishes. Knowing how you learn best and what does and does not work for you will help you navigate your education and help you let your teachers know what you need to get the most out of your time.

Some students are outgoing and convivial. You know this kind of student: they always have a comment during critique (some of which are useful and insightful and some of which are not). This is the student who loves group projects, who ends up running a club or organization, who you can always hear talking to other students in studio after class. Other students are more reserved. They may be much quieter during crits and avoid leadership roles. They might like independent work more than group projects. In the same way that there are different kinds of students, there are also different kinds of teachers. The exact same set of characteristics applies—there are teachers who are loud and outgoing and those who are quieter and more reserved. Some teachers thrive on leading big group critiques, and others much prefer to meet with students one-on-one. Some are very experimental and ambiguous; others are more goal- and rule-oriented.

Regardless of which kind of student you are or which kind of teacher you have, there are things to be aware of as you go through school. Since neither of these

is the "best" kind of student or teacher, neither approach is bad or good. You do not have to be outgoing to make great work. You do not have to prefer being alone to make great work. Since neither end of the spectrum is a goal to achieve, you can lean into who you are. Consider the kinds of projects and classes and teachers you are picking and cater them toward your personality. We all learn differently, so gearing your education to serve how you learn can be a good strategy. Differences are what make design school, and design in general, extremely interesting. If everybody had the exact same personality, learned the same exact way, and did the exact same kinds of things, school would get extremely boring, extremely quickly. Differences are good. Knowing what you want out of a class or a teacher—and being able to let your teacher know that—can help you feel comfortable in the class and maybe get a lot more out of the experience.

This does, however, present a serious problem: discomfort is also valuable. School is an excellent place to be awkward and uncomfortable in your work. To some extent, comfort can lead to stagnation and predictability—yes, it may be more aligned to what you think you want and need, but that can do more harm than good. How can you grow if you do not try new, uncomfortable things? Leaning into the discomfort will likely help you grow far beyond what you could do if you stuck with the familiar and safe. No matter where you end up working after graduation, whether for yourself as

an independent designer, in-house at a non-design company, or for a large, cool, hip agency, you will rarely be able to tailor your day-to-day existence. Even if you decide to work for yourself, you will still have client relationships to navigate, and they will not all go the way you want them to. So, there is something extremely valuable to being very uncomfortable with how you learn. It will help you be more flexible, agile, and empathetic to other designers and clients.

With all of this in mind—and this goes for students and teachers—you should embrace both the comfort and the discomfort. It is not healthy to be constantly and endlessly uncomfortable and on edge the entire time you are at school—that can become damaging emotionally and physically. It is also equally unhealthy to always feel safe and perfectly in your comfort zone—so you become stagnant and float through your classes. You should seek out places to be both comfortable and uncomfortable. This extends to your life both while at school and after. You can strive to have a very calm home life if that gives you a stable foundation to be awkward and uncomfortable in your work. The point here is that you need the contrast of both comfort and discomfort for each of them to be more valuable. You want to avoid an easy, predictable, and neutral design school experience.

FOR TEACHERS, despite how counterintuitive this sounds, you should *not* just teach in your comfort zone and about topics that you feel incredibly comfortable with. A lot of teaching is about helping students ask interesting questions and then helping them find the answers. When you know a topic inside and out, when you have taught the same class or the same projects over and over and over, you stop seeing the interesting questions. It becomes impossible to see what you are teaching with fresh eyes. Teachers need to be students at least as much as their students need to be students.

Even if you teach a class that you have taught many times before, you should not just repeat the same projects over and over every semester. Experiment, try new prompts, and make sure to accept that just as students can screw up projects, so can teachers. That doesn't mean your new project was not valuable; this does not mean you and your students won't learn an awful lot from a project that crashes and burns. Art and design education is about as far as you can get from an exact science, and as an educator you should use that to your advantage. One of the worst things you can do as an educator is to stagnate—while every semester a new crop of students experiences your class for the first time, it is far too easy to just change the dates on your syllabi and teach what you have taught before. Changing things up will keep your perspective fresh and the class exciting for you and your students, and it will help you find new ways to talk about design.

TEACHER

TEACHER

STUDENTS

STUDENTS

HIGH SCHOOL

DESIGN SCHOOL
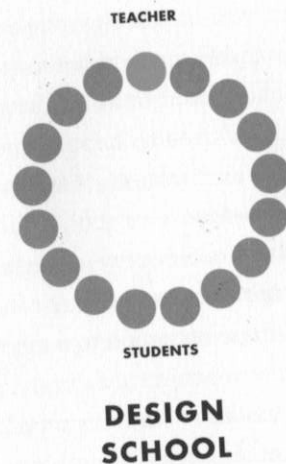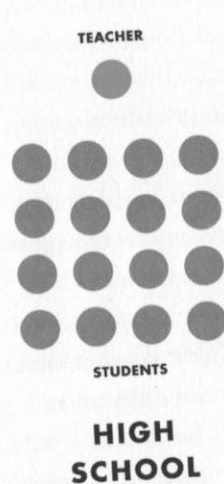
TEAMMATES

There is a style of teaching known in education circles as "the sage on a stage." This is shorthand for the attitude that the teacher knows all the stuff and that the students need to absorb as much of this knowledge as possible. Therefore, the teacher stands up in front of the class in a lecture hall and talks while the students all try to write down everything they say and remember it all. While a fair bit of this does still exist in higher education, it is clearly an antiquated idea: teacher knows everything and student knows nothing.

The sage on a stage scenario happens a lot less in art and design schools, and that is because any good art and design educator does not just stand in front of the room talking. Good educators are in the trenches with their students. They are also asking questions, finding new ways to think about their field, seeing which choices work and which don't, and using inquiry to discover new stuff.

They are in partnership with their students, teammates working toward the same goal—making great work. Unlike the sage on a stage, they make no pretense of knowing all the answers or holding all the knowledge. A good design teacher discovers answers right alongside their students.

This is usually a really big surprise for college freshmen coming from a standard K through 12 education, who are generally very used to tests and exams and papers and twelve-plus years of things that are right and things that are wrong. They understand that the teacher is the ultimate authority and decider of good or bad in the classroom. They have been used to trying to impress the teacher with the right answer at the right time. The idea that the teacher might also not know the answer seems absurd. If they don't know the answer, what business do they have teaching?

Now we circle back to the idea of curiosity and process: so very often art and design are not about finding the right answer—they are about asking an interesting question and figuring out ways to answer it. Design is a lot less about facts than most disciplines. There are far more fuzzy gray areas, and that's what makes it such an incredibly interesting field to be in. This is also what can make it a frustrating field to learn (and, if we are being honest, to teach). Students want to be guided, told what to do, and given clear directives on what way is the right way and what way is the wrong way.
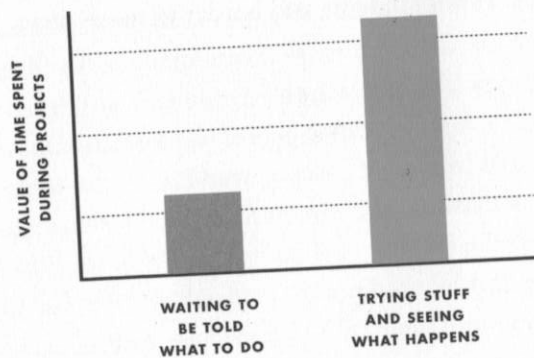
This does not mean that good teachers have no idea what they are doing. Really good design educators are not ignorant—quite the opposite. All good teachers have a deep and applied understanding of their discipline. Graphic design teachers fully understand typography and image. Interior design teachers have knowledge and experience in spatial relationships, materials, textures, and so on. They know the field they are teaching very well, and they can clearly and usefully help their students learn and understand the established principles of that field. They have a deep well of knowledge of the "rules" of their discipline (and when to break them).

Really good design teachers also know when it is time not to know. When not to give the easy answer or the clear direction. They understand that in the quest to learn, sometimes simply giving answers is the least valuable lesson. I often do this in my classes: after giving an assignment, a student (usually many students) will start a question with something like "Is it okay if I ____?" I look them in the eye and say, "That's a great question!" and then turn to the next student and ask, "Any other questions?" This is not a funny joke written just for this book—I really do this all the time in my classes. As you can imagine, this does not go over well. The students get annoyed that I will not just tell them what to do. I have to admit that while I delight in messing with their heads a bit, it really is a valuable lesson in process; it is me saying, "I don't know whether that's okay. Try it and let's find out!"

This is the key thing to understand about the relationship between student and teacher at design school: the teacher almost never knows the correct answer because there is so rarely a correct answer to know. You are all in it together.

FOR TEACHERS, this may just sound like silly semantics, but it is really important: insist that your students call you by your first name. I understand and appreciate the cultural respect that being called "Professor Goldstein" signifies. I know I have worked very hard to earn that title, and it doesn't irritate me that students want to call me "Professor," but I think it represents a breakdown of the partnership teachers should have with their students. Yes, I am their professor, but first and foremost I am just Mitch. For some students who just cannot bring themselves to call me only by my first name, I am "Professor Mitch," which is close enough. It is extremely important for students to understand that I am just a person who likes to make stuff, and likes to help others learn how to make stuff as well. I am in it with the students—I am not above them, I am not removed from their struggle, I am very much right next to them in almost identical circumstances, despite being the teacher of the class. The sooner that you can break that professor/student barrier, the sooner you can start acting as your students' teammate.

There certainly is a place for that authority: grading, writing recommendations, developing curricula. It is not useless or invalid, and sometimes you will need to be Professor You. What you do not want to do is establish a hard boundary between you and your students during the day-to-day of the class—this makes it harder to empathize with your students and harder to teach them.

VALUE OF TIME SPENT DURING PROJECTS

WAITING TO BE TOLD WHAT TO DO

TRYING STUFF AND SEEING WHAT HAPPENS

PULLING

It is Day One, and you, the student, sit in the classroom or studio, ready to get started. You are excited. You are nervous. You can't believe you are actually in college. So, what happens now?

Here is what a lot of people think happens: you are about to be told everything you will ever need to know about how to be a successful designer. You will be given projects and assignments that will test you on exactly what you have to understand to go get paid as a designer. Your teachers will tell you what to do and the exact right way to do it. You will pay close attention, write it all down, memorize it, and then recite it back to your teacher, and by doing exactly what they say, you will hopefully get an A for your efforts. All you need to do is whatever your teachers tell you, and you will have a perfect GPA and get an amazing job as a designer when you graduate in exactly four years.