

CONFERENCE REVIEW

IGA design educators conference 2016

Nuts + Bolts: Tightening Up Classroom Fundamentals, Reinforcing Careers, +Constructing the Future of the Discipline

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During the 2015 AIGA national conference, Revival, there was an affinity session titled, 'Thinking About Teaching? How to Trade Clients for Curriculum'.¹ The session was targeted to non-academics, but it turned out to be a packed house of educators. This unexpected audience led to a discussion about current educators needing an opportunity to learn more about the nuts and bolts of teaching. Thus, the Nuts+Bolts AIGA Design Educators² conference was born. The conference took place on 14–16 June 2016, at Bowling Green State University. The conference was framed as a context for educators to demystify academia; clarifying teaching methods, assessment, and relevant project ideas specific to the field of graphic design. What was supposed to be a valuable, pragmatic conference turned into a rich discussion about our identity and values. Is graphic design classified as a discipline, a profession, or a pre-profession? And why does it even matter to define ourselves? Furthermore, are we properly preparing students to be researchers and makers in a world that requires cross-cultural literacy? And finally, how are we even able to accomplish it all?

Who Are We?

All keynote speakers addressed this question of identity. Deborah Littlejohn, Assistant Professor at North Carolina State University, proposed that we are not yet there as a discipline. In Littlejohn's compelling keynote, she stated that a discipline has specific characteristics that define it, including a large and diverse number of academic journals, a specific disciplinary vocabulary, and a critical mass of active researchers and historians. She pointed out that a scientific field such as Physics has hundreds, if not thousands, of journals, while graphic design supports only a mere fraction of that number. She argued that the many ways in which we define what constitutes 'research' ultimately dilutes its meaning and power, especially when compared to other, more established disciplines. There is a distinct difference between empirical research and research that happens in professional practice, which also requires a different kind of curriculum than the traditional studio model for training professional practitioners. Does harping on the clarity of language really matter? Yes, if we intend to be truly collaborative beyond our own walls and to be interdisciplinary. Deborah states that to be interdisciplinary, to be able to have a seat at the table to solve the world's, messy

problems; we must first understand our own area of work and this comes with clarifying our language, among other things. One of the most compelling points made by Littlejohn was that it's time for educators to push back against the notion that our sole purpose as educators is to prepare students to practice. Teaching to fulfill the aims of professional practice is very different from teaching to help students understand how to study a subject. With over 2000 active design programs in the US (versus 120 in architecture, for example), perhaps it is time to truly diversify and specialize. Not all programs can be all things and we need to create the conditions for empirical researchers, historians, and scholarly writers to thrive.

Louise Sandhaus, faculty at California Institute of the Arts was one of the conference moderators. She stated that we are educators, researchers, but also a profession. Educators are often sidelined to 'professionals' working in the field and it is important to recognize and value our own work as educators and researchers.

Cross-Culture Literacy

Audrey Bennett, Associate Professor of Graphics at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute, shared her cross-cultural and trans-disciplinary work focusing on HIV/AIDS awareness in Africa during her opening keynote. Bennett stated that students *must* be cross-culturally literate and possess the skills to be collaborative, empathetic, and curious. Bennett placed value not on design aesthetics, but on the appropriate fit of solutions. Furthering her point about the value of this type of work, Bennett expressed interest in which fields are citing our work. There is a great deal of discussion about the need for more quality design research, and it's critical to look beyond our own colleagues to consider the impact our research is making in other fields.

Nuts+Bolts

Pivoting back to the impetus for the conference, there were several break-out sessions where educators shared approaches to the following themes: assessment, assignments, becoming a design educator, critique, curriculum, culture of care, defining research, design thinking, environments and space, faculty engagement, learning models, navigating academia, science of teaching, scholarship of teaching, standards of teaching and ethics, teaching beyond the designer of 2015, and finally technology and teaching.

One of the most exciting and inspiring break-outs was a fast-paced Pecha Kucha which featured a variety of student projects and pedagogical methods, ranging from experience mapping to entry level typography. Two stand-outs were Tyler Galloway, presenting from the University of Kansas, titled Ten Methods for Critique, and Joseph Galbreath, presenting from West Virginia University, titled In Defense of Collecting: Artifact-based Research in the Classroom.

Another interesting breakout session featured Stacey Cannon, an educator who specializes in assessment from Liberty University. Cannon presented her approach to making assessment more approachable and useful by reinforcing the point that assessment should not be punitive. Cannon works to establish a culture of continued improvement – when focusing on course and program learning objectives, faculty need not be afraid of weak outcomes. Cannon connects outcomes back to Blooms taxonomy³ as well as Boyer's⁴ scholarship of

teaching, both excellent resources for educators writing curriculum and managing assessment.

Do we all need to be researchers?

During the closing panel with Deborah Littlejohn, Geoff Kaplan, Aubrey Bennett and Louise Sandhaus, the discussion came full circle addressing the pragmatics of the need for research and cross-cultural work. Many educators asked how they could prioritize this approach when they need to also prepare students to enter the current workforce. How can we expect students to learn the basics and create compelling portfolios while also understanding research in a four-year, or even two-year program? The speakers made it clear that not all designers need to be researchers and that there is absolutely a value in 'traditional' practice. However, there does need to be more support for educators wanting to incorporate research into their classrooms, that we need to build programs that incorporate research at the outset, and we need to diversify our programs and degrees. Further suggestions included establishing collaborative, interdisciplinary, project-based approaches and a reminder that teaching curiosity and empathy even in small doses have lasting impact.

Conclusion

The weekend was an inspiring and motivating investigation into the balance of teaching traditional practice while pushing back against that very expectation. The conference presenters instigated a reflective state, asking attendees to work to define our profession – the profession of design teaching and design research.

Note on contributor

Marty Maxwell Lane is as an Assistant Professor of Graphic Design at The University of Arkansas. Her research explores pedagogy, collaboration, and participatory design. As a long time AIGA member, Marty has served on numerous boards, including the Director of Education for AIGA KC and currently serves on the national AIGA Design Educators Steering Committee. Marty holds a BFA in Graphic Design from the University of Illinois-Chicago and an MGD from North Carolina State University. As a mother of two young kids, Marty aims to be a mentor for other new moms navigating the world of tenure.

Notes

1. <https://educators.aiga.org/thinking-about-teaching-dec-affinity-session-at-revival/>
2. <http://nutsandbolts.aiga.org/> Supported by AIGA DEC www.educators.aiga.org.
3. Bloom, B. S. (1956). *Taxonomy of Educational Objectives, Handbook I: The Cognitive Domain*. New York: David McKay Co Inc.
4. Boyer, E. K. (1997). *Scholarship Reconsidered*. New York: Jossey-Bass.