

CONFERENCE REVIEW

## Pedagogic research symposium, graphic design education network, Loughborough University, 20 April 2016

Jonathan Baldwin

University of South Wales, Cardiff, UK

I have been to a couple of events (the now-legendary *New Views 2* held at London College of Communication [2008], for example) where I could not help thinking the world would be a better place if most of those present just barricaded themselves in the building and founded their own design school. The second Graphic Design Event Network (GDEN) event, held at Loughborough University's recently built (and rather impressive) School of Art and Design was one of these – as, indeed, was the first in Salford in 2015. Given that this meeting was compressed in to a single afternoon it just goes to show that, given the right audience and the right speakers, you can achieve a great deal in a short space of time. The organizers managed to pack more into a single afternoon than most longer events I have experienced.

The event could be summed up in two statements

- Interesting research.
- Good discussion.

What more do you need? For me it revealed (or reaffirmed) a split in the positive sense of the word between those who see graphic design as a practice with a sense of tradition that needs preserving and those who see it as progressive, in need of renewal and new relevance – a range of conceptions hinted at in James Corrao's soon to be published PhD work which looks at how students see themselves and their roles.

GDEN was set up in 2015 by a group of UK-based graphic design educators and their mission is to incite discourse about graphic design practices and to advance its practices. A demand for GDEN to take on a role in building or redefining relationships with industry was apparent, with some noting the irony that the loudest critics missed the point that courses are heavily populated by practicing designers. However, it was acknowledged that the majority of interactions with industry were positive but there does seem to be a need to be more assertive in making our case to be experts in our field and a member of the sector, rather than simply providers of entry-level employees who need to be told what and how to teach.

But most importantly it was encouraging to hear from a range of speakers engaged in active research in to their practice as teachers, with a desire to not only understand what it is they are doing, but to enhance it too. A lot of pedagogic development takes place under the radar, because it is easier to seek forgiveness than it is to ask permission. I noticed a mix here: some projects taking place out in the open, and others developed almost in secret in

case the QA department found out and stamped it out. But universities, and design courses in particular, are creative organizations where variation, experimentation and risk taking are to be encouraged.

That being said, it is important to share what we do (a key factor in the most successful creative environments) even when, and arguably *especially* when, it doesn't work. Each of the speakers was rightly proud of what they were doing, but none were closed to constructive critique. Networks like this, and their events, are likely to be successful if they encourage teachers to stand up and share their work, and the audience to provide support, encouragement and (well-meant) questioning.

There are ongoing events from the network on a yearly basis – see their website for the latest update – [www.graphicdesigneducators.network](http://www.graphicdesigneducators.network). I recommend active membership to anyone involved in the delivery of graphic design education.

### **Disclosure statement**

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

### **Notes on contributor**

*Jonathan Baldwin* is the Associate Head of School in the Faculty of Creative Industries at the University of South Wales. Prior to taking up this post he was the Director of Teaching and Learning in the Institute of Continuing Education at the University of Cambridge. He has particular interests in interdisciplinarity in research and teaching, and in creativity and innovation of the curriculum.