



# Plain Talk

## About Learning and a Life...in Design

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### **A critical moment in the field**

Communication and technology are at the core of an increasingly complex world. Consider the vast number of messages we process daily, and our reliance on computers, cellphones, and palm pilots for their transmission. Think about the channels of digital media—sound, image and motion—that can be merged to create larger experiences. And what about our information needs? We are consumers of healthcare, jurors making judgments involving DNA or pollution, and net-surfers searching for abstruse and specific details. The volume, media and nature of information coursing through our culture has revolutionized our world and the role that designers can play in it.

Design is at a crossover point—a place where art and science overlap. Eames' film *Powers of Ten* merges elegant design with scientific data to help its audiences visualize the macro and micro, outer space and minutiae within the human body. This project set an important interdisciplinary precedent; it merged two distinct professions and modes of thought into one unified communication. Given technology and culture today, our need for the kind of intersection that the Eames' work proposes is more important than ever. Many graphic designers, thoroughly trained in the properties of image, color, composition, line and shape, have little understanding of science.

And there have been significant scientific developments lately in technology and beyond. For example, in the past two decades, our world has deepened its understanding of human cognition, which has profound implications for our knowledge of how people use and process information. If graphic designers are message makers, information organizers, and large-scale communicators then our field must engage the study of perception, memory, creativity, motivation and feedback in order to stay relevant to the world around us.

How can designers become prepared to cross back and forth between C.P. Snow's "two cultures"—art and science?

### **The early years for a designer**

An undergraduate design degree from a strong university teaches tools in both camps. Students gain a preliminary understanding of the contemporary world (albeit in a very abbreviated fashion) and a basic design education. They learn about history, science and literature on the one hand, and perception, composition, problem solving and design making on the other. In stronger undergraduate programs, these two worlds become blended as students bring the content, methodology and philosophy of their world investigations into the design lab, yielding more ambitious and stronger investigations in design. However, given the specific complexities of both pieces of their education, the challenges of combining them, and the short dura-

tion of even the strongest design programs, successful undergraduates can do little more than complete their course of study with a strong foundation and a vision for the future.

While the workplace—often the next step for a graduating senior may not expand the new graduate's view of the field of design as a whole, it is an important step. Entry into the design profession might be seen as a reduction in scale; it shrinks the world with its enormous, perhaps unattainable possibility, to an office or a studio with practical problems to solve and work to be done. It provides a place for growth and development of visual and practical skills—perhaps a safe place from which to view the technological change, globalization and interdisciplinary work that defines the profession today. Additional learning opportunities are often available to those who find mentors and become active in their local design communities.

For four or five years, this informal learning and growth provides a rich reward—money, professional growth and recognition and personal satisfaction. Then, as often happens in life, there is a period of plateau. For some, work becomes less challenging, problems seem more routine, and a deeper satisfaction (previously experienced) is missing. The designer may be stuck as a stylist, executing others' decisions—he or she may want to participate in and shape the early conceptual stages of communication problem solving and development.

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# living

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The designer reaches a plateau in his career. Options different from earlier directions are considered.

DISCOVERING DESIGN

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The educational experience shapes the student's awareness of design.

LEARNING DESIGN

Some will work through this circumstance, some will change jobs as a means to reinvigorate their growth, and some will leave the field altogether. Others will seek out a graduate program in design. Whether this decision is made opportunistically or based on contingency, it is a crucial moment in the designer's professional life.

## A very brief history of design education

In the middle of the twentieth century, few designers had a bachelor's degree in design. Most learned on the job or were self-taught. In fact, many of these individuals denigrated those who were more formally educated. By the 1980s, the terrain had shifted and a bachelor's degree was expected. As mentioned earlier, an undergraduate education in design was thought to provide entry-level design skills and a liberal introduction to the world of ideas. Over time, this idea about the importance of design education has expanded, and now, a master's degree is terminal for design practice, and doctoral degrees in design are springing up all over the world.

Many emerging nations are funding their best and brightest to do doctoral work in design because they understand the direct connection between design and economic development. In these programs, the focus is research—to answer difficult, design-based questions that enhance design performance. Conferences that focus on design research, a rarity a few years ago, are now abundant. The growth in design research signals the development of design as a discipline—a developed body of thoughts and practices. It suggests that design is now ready to make a stronger, more defined contribution to other academic and practical disciplines, with longer heritages.

One of the biggest challenges that design researchers currently face is how to bridge their knowledge with that of practitioners of design, the very people working in the design

offices described above. It is clear that practice and research need to share ideas for a deeper result. They are not isolated perspectives, but closely connected moments in a larger conception of design.

## After the early years

What can graduate work in design provide? In essence, it can expand the discourse introduced on the undergraduate level for students who are now more mature and knowledgeable as they have experienced the complexity of their field as practitioners. Graduate school offers the discipline with which to explore new ideas and possibilities in design, the means with which to deepen design knowledge, and credentials with which to begin new chapters. Discipline, means and credentials are essential instruments for the growth of a designer with a larger purpose in mind.

What might these students study? Exploration of user issues in design, deeper understanding of interdisciplinary work, investigation of technological horizons or communication theories, reinvigoration of aesthetic sensibility, investigation of visual systems, exploration of ecological or sustainable futures are just a few possibilities. Often a graduate student will have a burning question

that he or she wants to answer. The question may linger unanswered from previous education or it may emerge from the experience of design practice. It may even be a product of the changing world we live in or an inescapable curiosity of a more personal nature. In the end, graduate school is about taking a deep dive into something—something important about design.

Not all graduate programs are equal: there may be just a few places where this burning question can be answered. Or, if no question exists, then assessing one's strengths and weaknesses and desired directions for the future is important for finding the right match. If undergraduate design education is a series of tapas or a dim sum feast, then graduate school is a selected, multi-course meal. The best graduate programs are distinct and clear about their philosophy of design and their learning goals. Some programs are best for aesthetic growth, some for design planning, some for technological development, some for human-centeredness, some for the exploration of design methods or design in relation to social issues. The faculty and their interests drive the program. If the choice is made carefully, there will be a knowledge-

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Skills and experience are rapidly gained. Designers may switch jobs as they seek new challenges.

PRACTICING DESIGN

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The designer reaches another plateau in his career. Options different from earlier directions are considered.

THE PLATEAU

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able network of designers who care about the same issues that the new graduate student does. This network consists of faculty, fellow students, and practitioners—all engaged in contributing to the feast.

#### **New problems for graphic design today**

Many graduate programs focus on the relationship of design and our world today. Instead of emphasizing the so-called delivery vehicles (print, broadcast, web, CD, etc.), these programs investigate the role and development of information, and user-centered structures for its delivery. Inquiry such as this expands the field of research in the area to include the study of user interaction and feedback. Multi-channel communication is also important to consider. How do we synthesize what we see and what we hear? How should motion graphics and text be combined? What are the emotional underpinnings of what we create? Designers know their work has affective dimensions, but they are seldom guided by anything but intuition. How can that be changed? What is gained or lost by adding a more scientific perspective? Perhaps more than ever before, we now find the field of design rich with possibilities and new questions.

We also find our designs reaching farther and engaging audiences that are more culturally diverse. As we seek to communicate across cultures, we are required to adopt new design criteria. If we wish to consider ourselves designers of experience, then our work must be accessible to more points of view and engage communication in a more holistic way. It requires an understanding of exchange between objects and people, and people with each other. This suggests the need for design's involvement with cultural norms, language, symbolic resources and taboos, as well as an understanding of daily life in contexts other than our own. Instead of guessing at the unknowns in a scientific or cultural investigation, it is necessary to engage science and scientific process to expand our own knowledge of the world, and to merge it with the base of visual skills that continue to be an important backbone of the practice of design.

Fundamentally, design—the process of bringing into existence the unknown or invisible—envisions the future. It provides an opportunity to transform the world of information and communication into something richer and more relevant for the people who use it. This suggests that

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# in design

designers must continue to engage the present-day world, and move beyond tradition. A brief look at technological development, from the introduction of the Apple Macintosh in the 1980s, to the development of digital typography, email, Internet, Web frenzy, broadband, infra-red, motion graphics of the 1990s, supports the idea that our world—including tools of delivery, channels of communication and audiences—is changing quickly. In spite of these rapid evolutions in technology, in many ways, our structures and methods of thinking about communication have remained the same. Many graphic designers still define themselves as makers of books and posters. Communication is migrating from a visual form to a combined sensory experience; communication designers are breathless in their attempts to catch up, rather than truly envisioning the future.

## The brief summary of graduate school

Having taught extensively in two distinct graduate design programs (Institute of Design, IIT and Rhode Island School of Design), I can give testimony to the experience of graduate school from a faculty perspective. Competition with peers can be intense. Collaborative work may put

you into a globalized, multi-cultural or multidisciplinary context. You will be asked to explore questions that as yet have no answer; in this way you help build knowledge. A contribution to the design community is expected, based on your past experience in design and in life. You will create life-time friendships and, periodically, get little sleep. Stretched beyond your immediate reach, you may overcome creative blocks or become more analytical. You may develop deep knowledge about some aspect of design. You may risk the cost of being out of the workforce (or at least on its fringe) for the luxury of time and colleagues to help you investigate something that you feel the need to answer. Graduate school is one way to reinvent your life in design.

## A full life in design?

Is a full life in design possible—from sixteen or whatever age you discover design until seventy? Look at the lives of Bradbury Thompson, the Vignellis, Paul Rand, the Eames for affirmation. For each of them, design was much more than a job, or even a career—it was a perspective on life. It was a way of being alive in the world.

But is an entire life in design possible today? In a world where most people have at least four careers, and technology, information flow, and media are changing constantly, the answer "yes" suggests the need to engage these changes in our world and reinvent what design means, whenever necessary.

Advanced degrees are one way to reinvent or redirect a life in design. Whether they are the right choice depends on the desire, discipline, resources and vision of the individual. What is important above all is to find ways to keep on learning, to nurture creativity and curiosity, to continue to question and reflect on design process and actions and the culture in which we all live.

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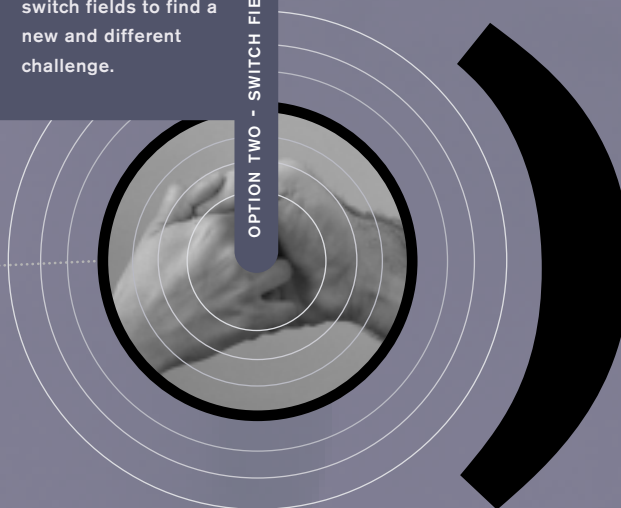
A more challenging job might include increased responsibility, interdisciplinary approaches or greater complexity provides the next step

OPTION ONE - NEW DESIGN JOB

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The designer might switch fields to find a new and different challenge.

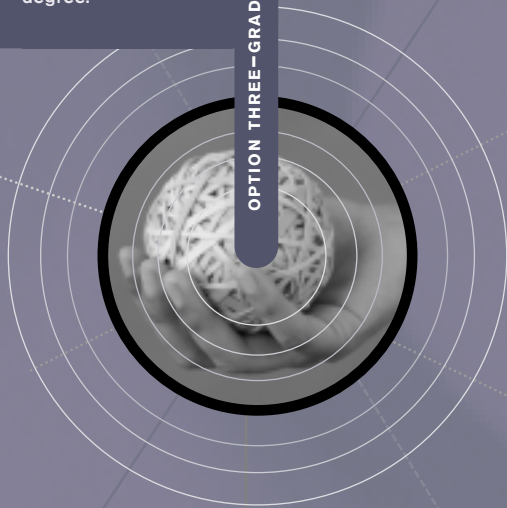
OPTION TWO - SWITCH FIELDS



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The designer attends grad school and obtains a master's degree.

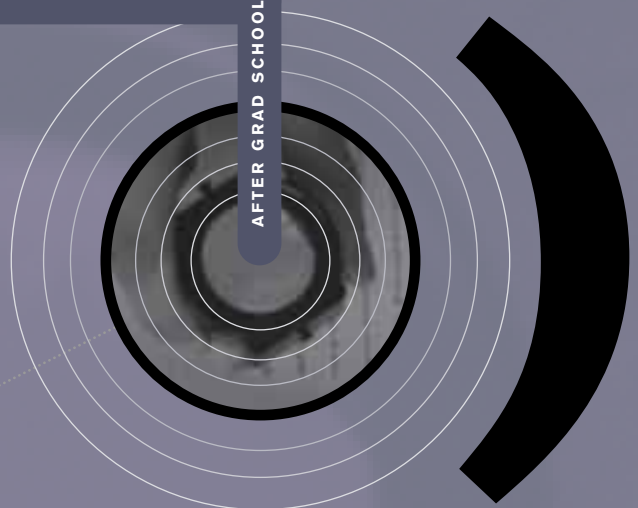
OPTION THREE-GRAD SCHOOL



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A new job that taps into the skills and knowledge gained in grad school.

AFTER GRAD SCHOOL - NEW JOB



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Teaching, either adjunct or full time provides a variety of benefits.

AFTER GRAD SCHOOL - TEACHING

