

A Case for Design Study in Art Education

I am extremely pleased that the Connecticut Art Education Association has decided to devote a number of its Visions editions to an exploration of the role of design education within art education. For a number of years, I have taken opportunities in my teaching with pre-service students at RISD, my professional development work with Rhode Island K-12 educators, and in regional and national presentations to argue that art education should adopt a much more expansive attitude toward curriculum content - one that includes the study of design. It's important to note here that I am not speaking of the elements and principles of design, but of design in reference to the areas of communication, products, spaces, and systems. If one believes that the things that humans create carry with them a whole range of meanings and that through these things we can glean a sense of who we were, who we are and who we aspire to be, why is art education so mesmerized largely by those things we call fine art? This has not always been the case, for if you look back to the art education texts of the 1930s and 1940s you will see that the study of graphic design, architecture, dress design, and interior design take their place alongside the so-called fine arts.

In advancing a case for design education within art education, I am cognizant that we live in a time when the classification of things as being either art, craft, or design is becoming increasingly problematic. The boundaries within which certain objects are located are no longer fixed, and indeed, are so permeable that I argue that art education needs to be much more responsive to such shifts if it is to provide students with opportunities to make sense of a truly dynamic object world - an object world in which the pervasive sign and symbol informs, directs, and persuades, products of all sorts meet the needs of our every conceivable daily function, and spaces enclose us for a myriad of purposes. I am, though, not arguing that we set about the task of training future designers, but rather we shape design study in K-12 to meet broad educational goals and not those of professional practice.

Any discussion about design education will inevitably have to deal with the issue of definition, for there is no consensus as to what is actually meant by the term. Terms such as design thinking, design in education, design-based learning, and design education are used as if they were synonymous - but they clearly are not! In certain circles design education appears to be viewed as some kind of panacea that will ignite students' critical thinking skills if they adopt the problem-solving strategies commonly used by architects and designers. In this situation, design is viewed as a universally applicable organizing tool that can assist students in thinking thorough problems no matter what the subject matter. While this may be laudable, I am concerned that here design education is merely being cast in terms of method. I believe that for K-12 art education design as method holds little real merit. The study of design must not lose sight of meaning. The design world of architecture, communication design, and product design will not be understood if viewed as method, so I would urge the field to develop curricula that examines how method creates meaning and, indeed, in how design talks. I advance these cautionary notes because in an eagerness to address the absence of design in the visual arts curriculum it is far too easy to believe that it's merely a matter of acquiring a new skills set that provides students with a degree of proficiency with technical drawing or computer-aided design. Far from it! I would prefer to see art teachers, whose training for the most part has been in the fine arts and not design, seeking professional development opportunities to familiarize them with designerly ways of approaching tasks and that such events occur in collaboration with professional architects and designers. Moreover, we need to take advantage of programs that will enable us to come to understand how objects as disparate, for instance, as a New Beetle, a Swatch watch, or a CD case come to have meaning.

I am under no illusion that the inclusion of design in art education I am describing here will require a significant paradigm shift, especially in the way that art teachers are trained and in the professional devel-

opment opportunities that are provided for those already teaching. Higher education has a pivotal role to play in both of these arenas, in that there is a general understanding that if a subject is not a required part of a teacher preparation program, there is very little likelihood that it will find its way into schools' curricula. Design study is just such a subject area.

While there is little discussion about design in our professional association's publications or conferences, I am heartened by an emergence of some exciting design education initiatives that are occurring across the Country. At RISD, we established the Center for the Advancement of Art & Design Education and have made a commitment with our Design in Schools Initiative to provide professional development in design education for K-12 teachers. Dr. Martin Rayala, Art Media and Design Education Consultant in the Department of Public Instruction in Madison, Wisconsin is leading a charge that has embedded design within that state's K-12 art curriculum. Dr. Rayala is also putting together the Design Education Coalition - a diverse group of art educators who share an interest in establishing a place for the study of design in the K-12 curriculum. If you would like to find out more about this group and you plan to attend NAEA's Miami conference, make sure to check out those sessions dedicated to design. At the Cooper-Hewitt, National Design Museum in New York a Summer Institute in Design is a well-established professional development event that brings K-12 educators, museum curators, architects, designers, and design educators together to explore strategies with which to engage students in the study of design.

For those interested in reading more about design education, one could not do better than getting a copy of Joanne Guilfoil and Alan Sandler's NAEA publication Built Environment Education in Art Education. Meredith Davis and Peter Hawley et al's book, Design as a Catalyst for Learning, available from the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (ASCD) provides a critical analysis of the state of American design education and provides a compelling rationale for its inclusion in the K-12 curriculum. But if you are one of those teachers who really wants a "nuts and bolts" book that provides a whole host of strategies for introducing design to kids, do all you can to get a copy of Anna Slafer and Kevin Cahill's book, Why Design?, published by the Chicago Review Press. It's a wonderful book that, while, sadly, out of print, can still be found if you are determined.

My personal experience has shown that design has a way of captivating student interest in ways that fine art does not normally do, perhaps because design is so much a part of our students' daily lives that this familiarity allows them to feel that they have something to contribute when presented with design-based problems. In short, there is an authenticity to design education that is not so apparent in the realm of fine art. I do, though, wish to declare that I would much rather see an encyclopedic approach to the content of the visual arts curriculum. As I alluded to earlier, the compartmentalization of things gets in the way of making sense of the world. So, I single out design education here just to provoke discussion, and hopefully, to prompt my colleagues in the art education field to expand not only their view of the object world, but also of their students.

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