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With new changes to the role and view of design, design professionals are now a part of greater thinking and action on issues that are traditionally outside of the designer’s realm. How does design education adapt to this reality? Russell Kennedy explores this and the role that the Icograda Education Network plays in the future of design education. Highlights of this article were originally published in Cumulus’ DESIGNER: Careers and Professionalization.

Striking the right balance between design thinking, research and vocational training is an issue facing the educators of design worldwide. A shrinking world, advancing technologies and the merging of creative disciplines encourages us to both redefine our profession and our approach to its education. But it is more than that; design is now regarded internationally as the next major socio-economic and cultural driver. Designers are now employed as business leaders, strategists and corporate planners. The dilemma now is how do we train creative professionals for the additional demands and responsibilities of the profession. How do students plan their careers when the profession is, and will continue to be in a state of flux?

The borders between graphic design and its associated creative disciplines have been blurring for some time. This is due in part to the computer revolution and the multimedia phenomenon, but mainly to a changing attitude and greater understanding of the value of design. Design is now referred to holistically as a provider and facilitator of innovation. Multi-disciplinary and cross-disciplinary practice is growing and designers are becoming aware of their environmental and cultural responsibilities. As Lise Vejse Klint, Program Director of INDEX: Design to Improve life says, "If a designer has a respond-ability then they have a responsibility."

Design schools are trying to adjust to the increasing demands and dynamic changes in design. It could be argued that Marc Newson's ambivalent generalisation about design education suggests that there is something missing, "Design schools are good, I guess, sometimes I visit schools, but they are very, very limiting."

On one hand there are sectors that call for a skill-based program in design education. Others argue that we need to educate designers to challenge industry and contribute to the social, economic and environmental agenda. So should design schools follow a vocational training path and focus on producing job-ready designers or should they place greater emphasis on design thinking and research? The answer is probably both. Most university design programs around
the world now concentrate on design thinking and research while many countries
balance this with separate tertiary institutions, which offer vocational training
design programs.

Emily Campbell, Director of Design from the Royal Society for the encouragement
of Arts, Manufactures and Commerce (RSA) makes a general observation about
design education: "The education of professional designers traditionally prepared
them to design functional and pleasing objects for commercial, industrial
manufacture. As the market for design has expanded into branding, business
consultancy and service innovation, and as young designers have become
increasingly eager to personify social or ethical value, many design schools have
incorporated the study of business and social science into design education. But
still design schools are left unsure how to provide a complete education to
emerging professionals today. With the right specialist education, professional
designers can combine high levels of formal judgment and technical competence
with behavioural understanding, political engagement and a commitment to
increase the resourcefulness of others."

It is interesting to note that more and more graphic designers are working in the
new media areas of web, video, animation, sound design and design
management. These changes are not all due to advances in technology. The role
of the graphic designer has extended far beyond the areas of visual identity,
typography and design for print. Many graphic designers now target both
 corporate and cultural design clients. They find that the balance of both corporate
and culturally themed work helps to keep them fresh and creatively stimulated.
Designers are also becoming more entrepreneurial in their approach to practice
by developing and marketing their own products, publishing books and producing
their own exhibitions. An increasing number of designers are practising and
exhibiting within a visual arts context. Those designers who operate outside of
the traditional paradigm have the ability to control their destiny more so than at
any other time in the profession’s short history.

The speed and dynamic nature of change necessitates a far more proactive
approach by design educators and the profession itself. To quote the AIGA’s Ric
Grefé, "We need to move design beyond the limitations of its past self-
perception."

Design educators must continue to respond to the changing demands of the
profession while also challenging established conventions by pushing the
boundaries even wider. The continual evolution communication design specifically
has prompted much discussion about the future of the discipline but although the
dynamics and mediums of the discipline has changed and will continue to do so,
the primary task of communication design will always remain the same... that is
to say, to tell a story.

In June 2002, Icograda, the international professional body of communication
design, held an Educational Network Symposium in Brno, Czech Republic. It did
so because it felt a responsibility to support design education by creating
interface with the profession to deal with the dynamic nature of design and the
changing demands of practice. The main purpose of the symposium was to
discuss the formation of an international educational initiative entitled "The
Icograda Educational Network (IEN)." This two-day symposium featured a series
of speakers, discussion forums and workshops, which were designed to help
formulate the initiative’s structure and content.

The symposium concluded that the IEN would have two platforms. Its primary
function would be to provide design students and educators with the opportunity
to interact with like-minded people around the world. This would be achieved
through face-to-face contact at regular international conferences and seminars.
The second platform would be a supporting Internet website that could act a
conduit for the exchange of information and to provide worldwide exposure for
design institutions and their students. It would also provide a vehicle for dialogue
between academics and students internationally, facilitate the exchange and
development of curricula, foster international design research projects and
encourage the expression of new ideas and thinking.

Eight years on, the Icograda Education Network has proven to be of enormous
value to both students and educators, especially for geographically and culturally
isolated countries. It is an exciting initiative with the potential to be a major
factor in shaping the future of design education worldwide.

Apart from a career in design practice the IEN also encourages students of
graphic design, aka communication design, to contribute to the social agenda
rather than respond to it. Like writers, novelists, filmmakers and fine artists, it is
now common to see graphic designers contributing to social commentary, which
sits outside conventional notions of design practice. Designers are more multi-
skilled than they have ever been. Once a designer understands the language of
design they can engage more effectively with other design disciplines. The blurring of the borders makes it easier to seamlessly move between the associated areas of design.

Design education will continue to respond to the changing state of the profession. The design industry has always produced intelligent designers with strong conceptual abilities and graduates who have proficient technical and production knowledge. Universities are now placing increased emphasis on design history, theory, research methods and design management. The demand for postgraduate study is increasing and cross-disciplinary activity is encouraged. The future of design is fluid, and it is moving into areas outside the traditional vocational paths. The challenge for education is not only to support the requirements of the profession, but also to encourage its evolutionary growth and continual redefinition.

As Isaac Asimov said, "the only constant is change," so as long as a designer is trained to think he or she will always be able to adapt to change. Trained to think - trained to design.

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**About the author**

Russell Kennedy (Icograda President 2009-2011) is a Senior Lecturer of Visual Communication at Monash University in Melbourne, Australia.

He is a Fellow of the Royal Society for the encouragement of Arts, Manufacture and Commerce (RSA), member of both the Australian Graphic Design Association (AGDA) and the Design Institute of Australia (DIA), Regional Ambassador to INDEX: ‘Design to Improve life’ (Denmark’s international design awards), and an advisor to the City of Seoul for the World Design Capital, Seoul 2010.

Since joining the Icograda Board in 2003, Russell has been active in the establishment and development of the IEN and the deployment and promotion of worldwide educational exchange initiatives. Russell initiated INDIGO, the international indigenous design network, launched in October 2007 at the Icograda General Assembly 22 in La Habana, Cuba.