Education and Professional Practice in Design

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Icograda (the International Council of Graphic Design Associations) held a working conference on graphic design education as a section of its XVIIth World Congress. Hosted by the local Society of Graphic Designers, it took place in Punta del Este, Uruguay, on October 21, 22 and 23, 1997. Some 250 of the 900 participants of the congress met at the education section in several working groups, to discuss aspects of design history and theory; undergraduate studies; graduate studies; and globalization and regionalization in design education. It was an occasion to continue the work initiated by the Edmonton '95 conference, but focusing on North-South differences and similarities.

The aim of the working sessions was to open lines of communication and reflection, to identify relevant issues for discussion and to intensify existing dialogues on design education across continents (a full report will be shortly available from Icograda). The following document was prepared in Uruguay by Richard Buchanan as a response to several concerns raised at the meeting, and it was presented to the full congress during the closing session.

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Chairman, Icograda/education

The organizers of our meeting have invited me to present some general observations on the relationship between education and professional practice in design today. This is an important issue for the XVIIth World Congress and perhaps a central issue for the future of Icograda, so I am grateful for the opportunity to share my reflections.

We have all noticed that the Congress was divided into two parts, with separate meetings for design education and design practice. There were very good reasons for the division—each group had special tasks to perform. And we are, of course, now meeting together to share the summary of the educational working sessions. However, I want to suggest that even in the Punta del Este Congress we have seen the beginnings of a significant change in the relationship between education and practice. I want to discuss the nature of this change because I believe it will have great bearing on design practice as well as the future of design education in Latin America and elsewhere in the world.

As background, we should remember the pattern of the development of design in the twentieth century. Design began as a trade activity, closely connected to industrialization and the emergence of mass communication. After a period of time, professions began to emerge, with traditions of practice and conscious recognition of a distinct type of thinking and working that distinguished our professions from others. Professional practice diversified in many forms—in a process that continues to the present. However, we are now witnessing the beginnings of the third era of design, marked by the emergence of design as a field or discipline.

For our colleagues in other areas, such as physics, chemistry, or biology, a field is characterized by a coherent subject matter, a body of methods and processes, and a community of individuals who seek to understand the operating principles that shape the field. I believe this is beginning to emerge in design, with a critical mass of individuals who are motivated to understand the nature of design and to act on their understanding in order to affect design practice. Of course, the effort to understand design is not new. What is new is the critical mass—comprised of individuals within design as well as individuals in other disciplines, all of whom see the possibilities for new inquiry in what is surely one of the most important and least recognized arts of human culture.

What bearing will the existence of a field of design have on professional design practice and design education? How will it affect their relationship? To understand this matter, we should confront a misunderstanding about design education that has been common for many years, particularly among some members of the design professions but also among some design educators. It is the belief that design education must follow behind design practice rather than work as an equal partner. This belief began, naturally enough, in the era when design was a trade activity, supported by trade schools. Our trade schools—and there are still trade schools of design in all countries—do, indeed, follow behind practice. They teach basic skills suited to the needs of the trade, but little else. And the skills are typically dictated by the trade.

In the second era—the era of professional development—design education plays a more complex role. It is certainly part of the advance of design thinking, but it continues to follow behind professional practice to some degree, depending on the nature and vision of each school. We still teach basic skills—as we always must—but we add to these skills other elements of learning that contribute to the formation of a liberally educated professional. Of course, we are conscious that the skills and other knowledge that we share with our students should be the skills of today, not the skills of yesterday. For this reason, we are more cautious in seeking the advice of professional designers regarding what we should teach. As the theme of this World Congress indicates, we are living in a world of massive and rapid change. We must be alert to new

developments and prepare our students for a changing world—not only in technology but in the needs and expectations of the human beings whom we ultimately must serve.

In the third era of design—the era that is emerging around us today—education and practice are partners. They are partners for a very important reason, reflecting the proper role of education in both discovering and disseminating new knowledge as part of the field of design. While design educators continue to teach basic skills and provide the broader knowledge required for a liberal professional education, they are also engaged in investigating the nature of design. Research has become a central issue for many educators, and it plays an important role in shaping educational programs on all continents. I have seen evidence of this in our educational meetings throughout the Congress. If there is any doubt on this matter, consider the task of the natural scientist and compare this with the task of the design researcher. While the natural scientist must study his or her subject by creating experimental conditions that bring nature into the laboratory, the design researcher has the subject of investigation ready at hand in the work of the studio. In the very process of teaching students how to design, the design educator is also investigating the nature of design, seeking to better understand its methods and principles.

Instead of following behind current practice, the design educator may, in fact, anticipate new conditions of practice. Our research tends to pose questions about what design will be in five years or in ten years. As this work unfolds, we begin to influence practice itself. In fact, we see design firms coming to interact with design education programs in an entirely new way—coming not to sell their work with portfolios and marketing materials but coming to tell us what are their problems, what they are thinking about those problems, and to ask our views—indeed, inviting us to be part of the ongoing exploration of new forms of practice. Quite frankly, I have indicated to the many visitors who come to my school, "Please do not come and present a portfolio as if you're selling to a client. We would like to talk with you but we want to hear the problems that you're working on—because often those problems are precisely the problems that are we are addressing in our studios." Indeed, the problems that we address in our studios are often ahead of the current state of design practice, anticipating the future directions of professional practice.

I would like to conclude with a final observation that is also directly related to the emergence of a field or discipline of design. As the field of design matures in the coming years, we will begin to teach design as a liberal art of contemporary culture. In other words, we will include within our programs individuals who come to study design but with no intention of entering into professional design practice. They will study design as a preparation for many

other types of careers, in the same way that students today study literature or natural science or history or social science.

Such a development may frighten some design practitioners, and it may frighten some educators. Certainly, it will frighten our colleagues in other parts of our universities and colleges—colleagues who are comfortable with the liberal arts and sciences as they have known them in the past. But we will learn—and our students will help to teach us—that design is an excellent preparation for a productive and satisfying life. When properly understood and studied, design provides a powerful connective link with many bodies of knowledge. Design integrates knowledge from many other disciplines and makes that knowledge effective in practical life. In my own institution, we have already begun to introduce a pathway in Design Studies for gifted students who are dissatisfied with the traditional liberal arts and sciences—and who do not intend to become professional designers. This has not harmed our professional programs. In fact, it has added strength and confidence in the future of design.

We face great challenges in shaping design for the future, but I am optimistic that a new partnership between education and professional practice is beginning. Thank you.