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Integrating Sustainability Into Design Education

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Sustainability is the wicked problem of design in the 21st century. From now on, all problem solving, decision and policy-making, and all aspects of design have to consider their impact on the health of individuals, communities, societies, ecosystems and the planetary life-support system in order to be sustainable. Sustainable solutions require transdisciplinary integration of multiple knowledge bases. Design can play the role of integrator and facilitator in this process. The complexity of the interrelated social, economic, cultural and ecological problems that are facing humanity not only call for collaboration between diverse disciplines but also for political and civic cooperation on a local, regional, national, and global scale. The creation of a sustainable civilization is a design challenge of unprecedented magnitude and generational importance. (Wahl, 2006)

Given the *magnitude* and *generational importance* of sustainability, and the role that design can and must play in all *problem solving, decisions and policy-making* exercises that impact the *health of individuals, communities, societies, ecosystems* and *planetary life*, it is a wonder to me that sustainability has not yet garnered more attention from our current post-secondary design curricula. As I understand the issue, it is a matter of prioritization. Most all schools today have sustainability agendas and are looking at ways of better understanding and integrating matters of sustainability into the operations and perspectives that the institutions are working with on very high levels. But my experiences to date have been that sustainability is not yet a priority in the actual classrooms where learning is taking place, primarily because it is seen as being less of a priority than the canon of knowledge that must be administered in each course.

On the topic of Sustainable Design, there are various frameworks and tools that exist and are freely available to anyone who would choose to seek them out. This content may give design educators a glimpse at the amount of information that is available to them, should they decide to cover sustainability issues directly in their classrooms. However, integrating sustainability into our design curricula may be a simpler concept than perhaps even the highest levels of administration might currently realize, but it will require a change in perspective on how their curricula are implemented.

Getting students to engage with their design processes through collaborative exercises and discussions that direct them to interact with the their material on a passionate and values-based level, requires a different perspective on how content is administered within the four walls of our classrooms. It requires more work, more diligence, and more passion on the part of the instructors who facilitate the classroom environment. Similarly, addressing design departments on a curriculum-wide basis and prioritizing matters of sustainability will require the administrators of our design departments to be more diligent in ensuring that their faculty understands this new mandate and how it will be implemented.

Integrating sustainability into our design classrooms may require instructors to look at the content of the individual projects they are assigning, but *far more effectively*, the professors and administrators of our design departments should be looking at

the methods used to teach and facilitate their courses. The canon of design education will always be there and it is a hefty amount of information to learn in any four-year undergraduate degree program—let alone the majority of two- and three-year diploma programs that are out there. A shift in the way that design education is facilitated will still allow for the canon to be assigned, but it can be done in ways that will promote the sort of collaborative and transdisciplinary operating procedures that are necessary for our young designers to relevantly contribute to their local, regional, national and global communities, after they graduate.

If sustainability is *the* wicked design problem of the 21st century, then it will require more than the knowledge of facts and figures, software, principles, and frameworks to try and tackle future circumstances that we cannot possibly foretell. It will require perspectives on how to deal with the new and changing landscape of our wicked problems. Future generations of designers can focus the expression of their intentionality on some of the most difficult questions our civilization has ever encountered, but they will not know how if we do not embed those procedures into their processes while we have the opportunity to do so.

The content of design education may prepare our students for the workforce, but the way they learn can prepare them for life.

In 1972, Horst Rittel told us that many people are required to tame a wicked problem (Rith & Dubberly, 2007). Those people have to talk to each other, they have to deliberate, and they have to argue. This collaborative approach to problem solving needs to be embedded into our young designers' processes so that the world might benefit from their creativity, vision, and imagination.

I am not suggesting that designers are the only citizens of our diverse societies that are equipped to deal with the wicked problems we currently face. But their abilities to collaborate with others, to recognize the values that others bring to the discussion, and to use their imagination and creativity to look at wicked problems from new and fresh perspectives, can empower them to be an integral part of the discussion. If design education does not begin to prioritize sustainability as a mandate for its curricula, it is not only the graduating students that will have missed out on opportunities that might have furthered their careers, but societies on local, regional, national, and global scales will not benefit from the unique perspectives and creativity that designers can offer to any problem solving activity.

References:

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Todd Barsanti is a graphic designer and design educator. He has been operating his own design studio, Elemeno Inc., in Toronto, ON since 1998. He has also been teaching design at the post-secondary level since 2002. In 2011, he completed his Masters Degree in Environmental Studies with a concentration on Sustainable Design Education. Todd promotes discussion about sustainability issues in the design community through is blog at www.design-sustainability.com