

Views and Reflections on Design Education: Local Voices from Puerto Rico

By María de Mater O'Neill

Limited inquiry that explored ways of knowing, experiences, and procedures in teaching design in Puerto Rico using a critical reflective practice approach.

This paper narrates a group discussion of design educators organized in 2014, and individual structured interviews with design educators working in Puerto Rico. The event was presented at Beta Local¹ and to co-host the conversation Dr. Kevin Hilton² was invited. The discussion provided an opportunity for an open process of limited inquiry about ideas on education within local academic and professional design practice. The event was recorded using Storify.³ This paper describes my reflections of the discussion and the individual interviews that were conducted with a Dean and design educators.

It is my understanding that the design practice has changed drastically due partly to the social cultural effects of technology and to changes in how business has become more interconnected. Therefore, new skills and knowledge-sets are needed by designers.⁴⁵⁶ Such as:

- Empathy, in order to understand the user experience and context
- The ability to create systems (services instead of products)
- The capacity to manage Transmedia systems (user generated content across multi platforms that are synchronized)
- The use of Lean working models
- Strategic thinking
- Multiliteracy
- To have complex problem-solving skills and other Executive Functions competencies

- The ability to collaborate with other practitioners from different fields

Traditional design education has focused on specialized work and study through an apprenticeship model, with the aim to achieve the “craft” know-how and learn the design principles.⁷ We asked the participants to prepare a brief case-study on how they were educating undergraduates, within a real-life situation, departing from the apprenticeship model. These case-studies had to explore one or more of seven criteria⁸ that we pre-established.

Brief Note on Our Design Education

There are two undergraduate bachelor’s degrees in design and three architecture schools in Puerto Rico. This is quite a lot considering a population of roughly 3.5 million that has decreased the last few years due to economic depression.⁹ In the Architecture and Interiors industry realm, business volumes for 2007-2011, reflected a decrease of 22% and 66% respectively. To illustrate this, in 2007 there were 158 Architectural firms and 36 Interior Design firms. By 2011, there were 115 and 18 firms, respectively.¹⁰ Data about other design practices are grouped by a confusing system. It must be noted that business classification under the Graphic Design category may also include digital printing companies that offer basic graphic design service for postcards or flyers. It does not mean they are graphic design firms. This confusion does not affect Architecture and Interior Design, since by law, they have to be certified by each State’s regulations.

Most faculties have design schools with adjunct or temporary instructors, and very few consider teaching design as a practice by itself. This is because the educators either teach as a way to supplement their income, or there are no full-time teaching positions available. It’s rare that Design educators, including architecture, are required by the local schools to publish, to participate in conferences, and to apply for research grants, as it happens in other practices.¹¹ Their teaching practice tends to be mostly experience-based, as few design educators have formal training in pedagogy. On the other hand, the job instability does not support growth of pedagogy knowledge.

Most of the practitioners that teach (not so in architecture) do not hold a permanent job at a design business or own one. It must be noted, that there is an entrepreneurial mindset, especially in industrial design practitioners – some of them emigrate from the architecture field looking for work opportunities. Most of these are furniture design-driven. Service and industrial design for Healthcare are still unexplored.

Making Sense of Findings

What is agreed to be the case presently

Based on the discussion group, these design educators are keeping in touch with new processes, some with a reflective practice mindset. But it seems that design schools cannot support their approach in a systematic manner. In my own experience, schools will often support initiatives, nonetheless, the educators' efforts are not replicated, documented, critically evaluated nor maximized afterwards. This situation has been confirmed by an adjunct instructor (interviewee preferred to be anonymous):

“They have the good will to give you classes, but maybe by the summer I don't have any [...] I would like to have students for research [but] they force you to be part-time [...] [teaching] is combined with other jobs, our life is in a fast-lane as our students, we have no time to reflect [...] I don't know [local] architecture school that has a design research group [...] They [school] will support with a plane ticket for a conference, but, giving out grants so one can do design research, that does not exist.”¹²

The case studies in general were research-oriented, some co-teaching with different faculties, and few focusing on the user instead of being client-centered. The following are the highlights agreed by the discussion group:

- Client factor might derail education aims; but students might acquire real professional knowledge.¹³
- There is disappointment to the practice itself.¹⁴
- The present design curriculums are an obstacle.
- The working situation as adjunct educators is precarious.
- There is a need to teach the business side of design.
- Recognized that the designer's role have changed (facilitator, producer) and for educators to be more proactive in creating academic opportunities for transdisciplinary projects.¹⁵
- There still a need of mentoring.¹⁶
- There is a lack of communication skills among designers.

- Designers need to be comfortable with public error and wanderings.
- Educators and students seems to be on their own.¹⁷

The Academic Dean (interviewee prefers to be anonymous) is aware that the design curriculum of the school is stylish-based and lacks a Design Thinking¹⁸ approach:

“[for example] in the industrial design [curriculum] gender, class and ethnic considerations seem to be missing.”¹⁹

It seems to be lacking locally System Thinking-minded²⁰ design schools that would allow a leap forward both pedagogically and business wise. The Dean stated:

“In public agencies there is no system creation, so we as an institution cannot pursue opportunities [...] I do not see it in our curriculum yet [...] But 2016 is our institutional assessment for accreditation, this is a criteria to consider.”

In that sense, opportunities in the educational workplace are needed to match the enthusiasm of their educators.

“[We need to educate focusing on] the economic exchange,” stated Program Director García to his current curricular revision, “a solid foundation from design as technique, manufacturing to marketing. Our [industrial] department is lacking many of these areas [...] but we don't have the time in the curriculum, we have to synthesize.”²¹

What could be done in the future

The possible and preferable future for Puerto Rico's design education could be:

1. School could approach both administrative and programmatic development policy operation within a systematic model that is student and faculty centered.
2. At the same time, educators can develop design research and evidence-based projects.
3. Despise the current work instability, schools could still establish programs to support adjunct and short term educators in their pedagogical framework.

How schools are addressing these issues provides an opportunity for organizing a public

participatory discussion that advance comprehensive understanding. Especially the interrelationship between academia and the design industry, as both are experiencing challenging times globally. I wonder if there are similar stories in other design schools from Latin America and the Caribbean.

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The Case Studies

Two Graphic Designers, three from Architecture and one Student Counselor were chosen to present their case studies. Links have been included for all videos and audio discussed in this paper (in Spanish except Dr. Hilton's). Audience consisted mostly of practitioners. Educational design-policy decisions-makers were missing.

- The author explained her [motivation](#) to organize the event. How in her design studio, [Rubberband Design Studio, LLP](#), noticed that emerging designers were ill-prepared for design led research and user-centered projects. Five types of knowledge are briefly discussed and the need of a more Critical, Dispositional, Transdisciplinary knowledge²² in design education. [Hotel Excelsior typography project](#) was presented as a case study.
- Dr. Hilton spoke about [innovation and radical resilience](#) (new opportunities from the perspective of design). He discussed levels of social impact: literacy (providing the awareness), perceptions (change it in order to create insight) and behaviors (the change needed for innovation). How to improve transformational confidence so people embrace the unknown.
- Alberto Rigau addressed his [teaching model](#) (Project-Based Learning)²³ in visual communication courses at [public art and design school](#).
- Yazmin Crespo talked about an [international collective architectural workshop](#) that address community participation and the designer as an advocate.
- Darwin Marrero talked about the [role](#) of the [public architectural school](#) and city planning. He presented two cases studies that had the intention to tackle ill-define solutions based on political clientilism.²⁴
- Fernando Guzmán proposed a [resiliency guide](#) for public elementary school. This is an example on how non-designers are appropriating design approaches.
- Humberto Cavallin addressed transdisciplinary, inter/cross-cultural and co-location issues in teaching architecture students by using [virtual classrooms](#).
- Mara Robledo recounted the [metadesign internship](#) concerning a historical project.

1. [Beta Local](#), a nonprofit cultural organization informed by (Austrian educator) Ivan Illich's ideas.
2. [Dr. Kevin Hilton](#), industrial designer and educator from United Kingdom.
3. O'Neill, MDM (2014). [Views and Reflections on Design Education from a Local Perspective](#). In: Storif.
4. Dubberly, H. (2010). [Relationship between designer and audience](#).
5. Yee, J., Jefferies, E., Tan, L. (2013). *Design Transitions: Inspiring Stories*. Global Viewpoints. How Design

is Changing. BIS Publishers.

6. Fabricant, R. (2014). [*The Rapidly Disappearing Business of Design*](#).
7. Anon (2010). [*Learning Through Design*](#).
8. The 7 criterias for the discussion were: What educational approaches work best?; How do different student cultures work together? (e.g. business, health, and graphic design study cultures); What are the opportunities in the educator's workplace context?; Are faculties formed from different disciplines co-creating a new model of design education?; Are colleagues approaches craft or research oriented?; How does a design program's location within a community create broader opportunities for a more defined and empathy learning experience?
9. Mead, K. (2014) [*BLS: Jobs down, wages inch up in PR in 1Q*](#).
10. Hernández Acosta, J. (2013). [*Perfil de la economía creativa en Puerto Rico*](#) (pp.73-74).
11. The author was able to access statistics thru various sources:
 - Escuela Internacional de Diseño has 29 educators by short-term contract, 4 part-time, and 7 with a contract between 1 to 5 years. Of the latest, they are required either to publish, research or develop a design project. Mateo, A. (2015). *Re: Preguntas*, [Email to mmo@rubberbandpr.com] (Personal communication, February 23, 2015, 12:32 PM).
 - Escuela de Arquitectura, Universidad Politécnica, confirmed that the majority is adjunct or temporary and that they do not required publication. Rivera, D. (2015). *Re: Preguntas*, [Email to mmo@rubberbandpr.com] (Personal communication, February 23, 2015, 12:40 PM).
 - Escuela de Arquitectura, Universidad de Puerto Rico, in 2013 has 16 full time and 35 by temporary contract. Disdier, O. (2015). *Re: pregunta perfil de profesores*, [Email to mmo@rubberbandpr.com] (Personal communication, February 24, 2015, 12:08 PM). For tenure track in UPR is only needed evidence of practice, after achieving the top rank, is not required projects, research o publishing. Jimenez, M. (2015). *Re: pregunta de perfil de profesores para articulo*, [Email to mmo@rubberbandpr.com] (Personal communication, February 25, 2015, 5:14 PM).
 - Escuela de Arquitectura, Pontificia Universidad Católica de Puerto Rico, it seems there is not permanent position although the school seems to be enthusiastic about research. This could not be confirmed by the time of the writing of this paper. Escuela de Artes Plásticas de Puerto Rico has a small portion of permanent position, but data from the Designs department could not be confirmed.
12. C.O. (2014). *Inquiry Interview* 0:24:30, [Interview] (Personal communication, September 16, 2014).
13. "To protect the students from the real frustration, maybe, one is taking away the tools that would help them later on to reflect." Oquendo, J., (2014). 0:20:28 In: [*Primer diálogo*](#), Soundcloud.
14. "There is an academic structure that is not strengthening our needs [...] How this two sphere converge? The traditional and emergent educational approach that are more in tune with the contemporary practice." Bauzá, A., (2014). 0:14:50 In: [*Primer diálogo*](#), Soundcloud.
15. Figueroa, H. (2014). 0:05:16 In: [*Segundo diálogo*](#), Soundcloud.
16. Vázquez, L., Álvarez., J., López, A.(2014). 0:0:39 In: [*Segundo diálogo*](#), Soundcloud.
17. "I am [educator] part time [...] my presence ends up relegated from the curricular sequence [...] where there is more time to develop, instead I am isolated from curricular conversations, as I continue to teach one class a semester." Rigau, A., (2014). 0: 20: 42 In: [*Primer diálogo*](#), Soundcloud.
18. Tim Brown, president and CEO defines it as: "a human-centered approach to innovation that draws from the designer's toolkit to integrate the needs of people, the possibilities of technology, and the requirements for business success." [*IDEO | A Design and Innovation Consulting Firm*](#).

19. P., P. (2014). *Inquiry Interview* 0:04:20, [Interview] (Personal communication, September 5, 2014).
20. BEE Environmental Communication (2014). [A System Story](#).
21. García, V. (2014). *Inquiry Interview* 0:23:15, [Interview] (Personal communication, September 26, 2014).
22. Scott, D., Brown, A., Lunt, I. and Thorne L. (2004) *Professional Doctorates. Integrating Professional and Academic Knowledge*. Maidenhead: SRHE & OU.
23. Buck Institute for Education (n/a). href="http://bie.org/about/what_pbl" target="_blank">What is Project Based Learning (PBL)?
24. Exchange of goods or services for political support or gain.

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