CHUN-WO PAT/TEACHING PHILOSOPHY

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Teaching Philosophy

Overview

My philosophy in teaching design has been an evolving process. Since most of the design classes in Baruch/Parsons are studio-based and project-oriented, the learning experience, therefore, largely depends on the interaction between students and faculty. One of my roles in this process is to actively engage the students, facilitate constructive dialogue, and encourage them to think critically and be willing to accept criticism. I ask the students to articulate their thoughts and be ready to respond to challenging questions. They should never rely too heavily on intuition, or taking it for granted that design should speak for itself.

Designers should be clear thinkers, constantly seeking to find new means to explain visual ideas—in the belief that more ideas can be generated during the process. I want my students to be generous with their ideas. It is unfortunate in many cases good ideas are lost in poor presentations. I believe that, quite often, visual ideas that seem inexpressible (in words) will sometimes find ways to reach their audiences as long as designers understand their own work. This training come through practice.

During the final presentations, I always asked my students to be objective and avoid personal attachment to their work. They should reverse their roles to become their audiences and try to understand how a design signal is being sent and received. My opening line for the final presentation always goes like this: when you put up your work, you are no longer just the designer.

Micro View: Form Over Content

On successfully completing of my classes, students have acquire both formal training and an understanding of design aesthetics. They should have achieved competence in design and have learned the basic principles to guide their design decisions. Design is both a creative and an intellectual activity. Students should first learn the concept of "seeing," training the eyes to be more sensitive about the nuances and textures of our visual surroundings (figure and ground, proportion, color); then, the concept of "making"—providing tools (drawing, typography, grid systems, data visualization) to convey thoughts. After that, the concept of "thinking" (through research) should be incorporated in the total design process. This triadic approach integrates seamlessly to all design projects.

Macro View: Content Over Form

I think design should bring forth the awareness of social, political, cultural and ecological issues, challenging perception, and modifying our way of thinking. Design is action-oriented, a collective activity. When designers "see" a problem, they will respond with an "action" that can inspire solutions. I expect my students to be socially responsible, culturally literate, enabling design to voice their concerns. Design should give meaning to life so that we can discover the beauty around us. I want my students to enjoy learning as a never-ending process and to be passionate about it.

Cross View: East-West Synthesis

As a cross-cultural designer/educator, I always encourage my students to incorporate their cultural backgrounds into their work. My experience working at Parsons/Baruch with international students has increased my interest in developing new approaches. My ongoing scholarship in the development and evolution of language, aesthetics, history and culture has facilitated meaningful connections with them. This connection is made in the context of new form of communication resulting from technology and globalization.

If we trace the history of written language—from numbers to pictographs to ideographs to phonetics, we find a similar pattern in computer language—binary code to pictures to icons and alphabetical words. Creating "icons" as an "ideographic" way of thinking excites me as a cross-cultural designer, inspiring me to search for a new language to think, and to communicate, in a global context that can perhaps transcend linguistic barriers. This ideographic approach—as a synthesis between East and West, alphabets and non-alphabets— has established a fresh direction to study art and typography. It goes beyond the boundary in traditional definitions of a firmly situated European model, thus opens up a new kind of learning experience.

A Paradigm Shift

Over the years, I observed interesting design trends that indicate new directions. Students were constantly in the process of redefining the function and meaning of design, presenting works that mirrors today's world. Their works were culturally diverse, multi-disciplinary and touched upon socio-political issues. They challenged cultural misconceptions and stereo-types; confronted ecological issues; reflected upon literary classics; revealed the beauty of nature and the origins of language. Works concerning medical issues are particularly striking: aging, suicide, memory loss, depression, cancer, AIDS (student portfolio available upon request or visit chunwopat.com). They seem to reflect the inner sense of fear, making the audience "feel" the healing power of design.

All these explorations of visual ideas are telling us that the world we live in now is complicated. It is difficult to comprehend its true meaning. Design, therefore, may shed light on a bright future, teaching us to be more connected—physically as well as spiritually—to one another, to our living environment and to future generations. Design can provide us the underlying principles to potentially "see" solutions that are active and organic.

A Vision of Design

As design evolves into a new era, it has becoming increasingly open, collaborative, demo-cratic and widespread. New functions and meanings are being generated and defined by each new generation. With the fascination of new technology, design education has been layered with new complexities—a real challenge we continue to face in our time. If, accord-ing to some media theories, new (technology) media is defined as "the existence of forms without intention, or bodies without souls", we should guide our students "through the looking-glass" (of the computer screen) to study design history, learning from the legacy of our predecessors. We should also help them to examine reality with critical eyes in order to shape our image-driven culture.

Over a span of nearly two decades of my teaching career, I have evolved to become a better teacher. The process of teaching design and the joy of learning from teaching my students have always been the most rewarding experience of all. It is this process of constant learn-ing that opens up to new knowledge—a driving force of my commitment in design educa-tion throughout the years.