

Following is a transcript of a conversation between students and tutors from the London College of Communication and Central Saint Martins: Agostino Carrea (Year 3, CSM); Naomi Edmondson (Year 1, LCC); Marializa Kambi (Year 1, LCC); Yvan Martinez (lead tutor, CSM; associate lecturer, LCC); Esa Matinvesi (Year 3, CSM) and Joshua Trees (acting route/subject leader, CSM; lead tutor, LCC).

The conversation took place on 28 May 2012 with the intention of continuing the dialogues started at Redesigning (Graphic) Design Education, a workshop hosted by The University of Derby on 14 March 2012.

RGDE was framed as a 7-hour design project: to redesign (graphic) design education for the 21st century.

Working in teams comprised of students and tutors from UK institutions, participants were asked to create proposals/models for a new kind of design education. Four leading provocateurs (Adrian Shaughnessy, John Thackara, Colin Davies and Rebecca Wright) delivered 'provocations' at strategic points throughout to help prompt expansive and creative approaches. The day culminated with teams presenting their ideas to the provocateurs.

<http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/events/detail/2012/seminars/disciplines/DW129>

<http://www.rgde.co.uk>

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JT: Our team ran out of time; then we literally patched together a proposal.

EM: Some people probably could have given the subject more thought beforehand.

AC: It was nice to exchange ideas with people outside of college and crits, but in terms of a workshop, RGDE didn't really work for our team beyond being a nice conversation.

JT: How was your team?

YM: Aggressive.

MK: More of a debate.

YM: The opinions of some students weren't too critical, though. The team facilitator was really trying to include them in the dialogue, but I think the tutors' personal agendas got in the way.

NE: Perhaps if it were simply one provocation that each team was challenged to 'solve' in a day rather than a range.

MK: Or if it were a symposium of two to three days, letting everything happen gradually.

YM: I think tanks people gather for a period of time, say in the mountains, and hang out, drink, eat, etcetera and then people start talking. After the ice has been broken, connections and common points of interest can be established. And that's a good thing. What hooked me about RGDE was the opportunity to hear perspectives on education from other schools.

EM: And that's what I really got out of it. There's so many different schools from around the UK and local needs vary. For example, if students in Derby were educated in the same way that students in London get educated, they might not get employed. [laughs] But that doesn't mean they're actually doing it the right way, or that we're doing it the right way. Not everything works for everybody.

YM: I was disappointed that RGDE wasn't more focused on curriculum design, but the discussion did confirm my interest in the relationship between education

and the ever-changing role of the designer, and how universities or colleges can prepare students to react or survive nowadays. There's not just one kind of designer.

JT: And the fact that not enough curricula treat students as individuals.

YM: Design education is not a one-size-fits-all t-shirt. [laughs]

NE: At the moment, design involves collaboration across many different disciplines. So, maybe instead of thinking about it as 'What is the profile of the designer?', think of it as 'What is the profile of design?' Rather than trying to get it to fit the people, try to get it to reflect the practices.

YM: At many US design schools, industry determines the kind of students that are 'produced'. And here in the UK, I see this increasing obsession of being industry driven, which is worrying unless industry becomes more open to investigating rather than dictating what design is, what it can become or what it means. Design is constantly changing, we all know that. It's cross-disciplinary and interdisciplinary as Naomi pointed out. So, the question remains: how do we create a curriculum that is flexible enough to prepare students to develop frameworks that they can apply to any practice?

MK: It would be nice if students could sample the disciplines that we might encounter. Sort of a mini-foundation that would familiarise us with what we might face in the future. Typography, photography, screen printing ...

AC: Are those the fundamentals though? I think that is something courses already do. I thought what you meant was that design is cross-disciplinary in that it crosses science, business, the massive spectrum, not just the disciplines of design.

YM: That's why I'm concerned with how tutors can give you a framework that's flexible enough to work wherever you go. Central Saint Martins seems to be more research and process driven, would that be fair to say?

EM: It's up to the student to explore those areas if they're interested. You might just do one thing and that's your thing.

NE: That's what you do individually, but what does the course give you?

EM: According to the learning outcomes, it's about understanding your position within design. You can go into CSM and be like, 'This is what I do. This is what I'll be looking at. This is where I want it to go'. But it doesn't mean that the course specifies what design is.

YM: You have to define it yourself.

EM: Exactly.

YM: And in your experience is that how it actually is? Because one thing is how it's written on paper, and the other is how it's delivered.

EM: Well, there are tutors that are more open and expect us to stand behind our work with reasons why we did it, and then there are tutors that are like, 'There's no typography in this portfolio; this isn't design'. I can only imagine the kind of conversations the tutors have during assessment. [laughs]

JT: It's true. We do argue about core competencies. Tutors are forever asking, 'What's the profile of the student we want?' and 'What are the core competencies they need to have?' I get a bit uneasy with the words 'need', 'ought', and 'should'. That's when it starts to sound one-size-fits-all and I think that we 'need' to be able to work with a diverse spectrum of students that practice in very different ways, and yet the marking process doesn't always allow for that.

EM: Yeah, because marking means comparing this person's work with that person's work, ignoring personal development.

JT: Yes, when marking, one tutor might say, 'What service is this providing? Graphic design should always provide a service'. To which another tutor might reply, 'But wait, what about research-based design which is more about investigation and trying to open up other spaces for graphic design. Why can't a designer be doing that kind of work?' It's difficult and I think that the frequency of these conversations is revealing that both students and tutors are outgrowing our curricula and the way that we mark.

EM: At RGDE, most of our conversations revolved around an outside factor – the institution, management, governmental funding – which made me realise that a one-day conference needs to pull in the type of people who have the highest probability of making a difference.

AC: Yes, there are loads of factors that we can't control. It might be too late to redesign design education at this stage of education, when people are ready for industry. It should happen earlier. People should learn at a younger age what design can do. A curriculum can only do so much. It's a two-way street. The student has to come down the other way as well. We have to want to cooperate; we have to come in and do the work. There is never going to be a perfect solution because it relies on too many other things. Sorry if I've put a cynical downer on everything ...

JT: Not at all, two of you are completing your education while the other two are just beginning. It's nice to see the different vantage points – exiting and entering.

YM: If we're realistic, the amount of students studying graphic design has skyrocketed over the last ten ten years. And schools now love international students because they pay double or triple the tuition. I, too, don't wish to be 'Debbie Downer', but education is a business. That's why it's important to own your learning. Education is what you make of it.

NE: Yet, at RGDE, when they asked, 'What is graphic design?' nobody could really answer it. That one fundamental question, no one could answer. I think that if we're taught more design thinking skills – you know, real techniques and methods – that would make us more aware of what design can be and can do.

YM: That's what I mean by 'framework' – skills of thinking, criticality, research, etcetera. That way, students can get on with doing what they do best.

JT: I think it's also important that there's a studio culture in place that supports such frameworks. I get frustrated when tutors get frustrated with students for not performing in the ways that tutors expect, yet there's no studio culture in place that introduces students to those vocabularies or those ways of thinking in the first place.

At both schools – LCC and CSM – there is a culture of critique. Both talk rigorously about work. But we don't always talk about design at large.

I used to co-run the lecture series at LCC, and we would have seminars afterwards where we would debate the ideas presented. I miss that.

YM: OK let's make this more effective. I don't want this to become like RDGE, trying to solve everything in an hour. What ideas do we have to bring to the table? We're interested in hearing about your educational experiences. Two of you are exiting higher education, and the other two are entering.

EM: I've gone from closed to openness. I wasn't happy with the textbook definition of design, yet I was still like, 'This is what graphic design is and this is what it's about'. And now I'm of the state of mind that design is about responding. I don't want to define it. I'm quite comfortable being in that sort of 'non-space'. If somebody wants to call it graphic design, then it's

graphic design.

AC: I think I'm in the same position as Esa. I feel more open to interpretation. When I started my course, I didn't know anything about graphic design. Didn't really care about the essentials, if you like. Then, I got scared and thought that I needed to define graphic design and learn the rules, and realised halfway through that it doesn't really matter.

EM: But I think it's important that you now understand how the general public sees graphic design, because if you don't know how it's being seen, how can you go against it? You do need to define it for yourself ...

AC: In order to undefine it. In terms of industry though, I don't worry about that anymore. If anything, I think that people are interested in employing me as a person, someone they can work with.

YM: But do you think the rest of the people you study with have those concerns?

AC: About industry? Yes. It gets really competitive.

EM: We are led to think that we need to be ready packaged, coming off the assembly line knowing everything.

AC: That's what I meant when I said I got scared. As in, the need to be ready in two years time. And then I decided to do what I want, to do what I need. Because things are always going to change and you're never ever going to stop learning.

EM: I once interviewed for a summer job where they asked if I'd ever driven this particular model of tractor. It just so happens that when I was probably six years old there was construction going on at my parents' summer cottage and someone sat me on one of those tractors. So I said, 'Yes, I've driven it'. And was hired. At the end of the summer I confessed the truth which they weren't too happy about. But I reminded them that they didn't ask me to specify how well I could drive that tractor, just that I had driven it. [laughs] I think the same goes for design. That's what professionals do. They sell a job and then go, 'How the fuck are we going to make this happen?' As long as you know the basics, you can figure out the rest on the Internet. [laughs]

YM: But how can we expect to understand design better when our major educational concerns are determined by industry? A few outspoken delegates at RGDE were pushing the importance of embedding industry within education in order to get jobs. I appreciate the concern, especially now that students are going to have to pay back incredible debts, and therefore universities feel the pressure to report statistics of students who get hired after graduating.

JT: Marializa recently asked me, 'When are we going to start doing industry projects?' Was that question coming from you or from somewhere else?

MK: In my mind, design has two aspects: design for the sake of design, and design for the sake of life and industry. For the existential and for everyday needs. So, yes, my question comes from a practical need to survive.

YM: When you say industry projects, what do you mean?

MK: Working with real companies and gaining experience of situations that college would never be able to give me.

YM: But you would only get that if you did an internship, and even that's debatable. How do live briefs work in the UK?

EM: Generally, like a competition.

YM: So does the tutor guide the brief or does the industry partner?

JT: In theory, a tutor is involved to ensure that the students are learning and not being exploited.

YM: So then how are students acquiring 'real life' experience? I respect that each project involves a real client and has a direct application, but I'm unclear as to what kind of experience Marializa wants to acquire?

MK: One that would make me responsive to a company later on. I'm not familiar yet with how live briefs work, but I was guessing that it would bring me a step closer to what I might actually do after I graduate, if I have a job as a graphic designer.

JT: It might give you a more realistic idea of timeframe. Too often school projects are either ridiculously short or ridiculously long. Live briefs can serve as a way of developing responsiveness in relation to real deadlines and real consequences. If you prepare something wrong and then send it to print ...

YM: You're fired.

EM: Have you ever noticed that Central Saint Martins makes lots of publications, yet the students are not involved in making them? I recently found out why. In the past, students were involved but because they weren't acting responsibly, the college decided: no more student-led projects. So I guess you could say it's our own fault that these opportunities are taken away. At RCA there's still ARC magazine made in-house by students, and at the University of Arts in Helsinki where I come from, they produce an arts publication that wins awards every year and is designed collaboratively by a small team of students. So, I think that when it's imposed, as in 'We have Sony coming in to give a brief', it might sound fancy to say but actually what the students get out of it is probably less than what the college itself could offer in terms of work experience.

YM: If you want to acquire that kind of experience, I suggest doing it on your own. Get involved in projects that you consider real. And I'm not talking about designing your grandmother's business cards. Actually, I take that back. You can learn a lot about print that way – the hard way. Esa raised an important point about responsibilities. Education can be very 'Nanny State' as they say, babying the students when we shouldn't and not guiding them when we should, resulting in dependent and irresponsible students. So the question is: how much room for change is there for design curricula within the larger system of higher education?

EM: Last week we had a guest speaker in college who runs an agency that is pushing animation to new levels. He showed us artistic films that are not commercially viable. So I'm seeing a need for new channels of funding for design. Maybe it's similar to art funding or maybe it's something else. The idea that money only comes from clients isn't going to be relevant in the future because there are so many people who simply don't do that old model of design anymore.

YM: About five years ago, the trend in the United States was to hire fine artists as art directors rather than graphic designers. And I was like, WTF, y'know? I also have a background in fine art, but why fine artists? Because [US] designers have been trained to be tools, whereas fine artists are trained to generate and adapt ideas. Fine artists may not always have the technical skills but they ...

NE: Are more likely to have an alternative way of thinking.

YM: Yes. Much like pure science careers, fine artists are taught to develop conceptual frameworks.

MK: So maybe clients and industry need to synchronize with education, because nowadays graphic designers can actually deliver just as much, if not more, than artists. Maybe industry needs to learn that we are the whole package.

YM: Yes, but it has to work as a feedback machine. Too often the industry is prescribing what the students should be like. And even though institutions can be said to be lagging behind what's happening in the real world, there's also incredible research going on in undergraduate courses that could be beneficial to industry.

JT: Together, industry and education could imagine and initiate different practices and cultures. There's an emerging area of praxis called 'studio schools'. At Stockport College there's one called Lost in the Forest Institute. Students are given studio space to start their own practices while in school. You might say that the Werkplaats Typografie in The Netherlands was an early model of this. Their students work on practical assignments for external clients.

EM: Yes, [Werkplaats] students bring in their own projects or freelance work, and the tutor assists them with that.

JT: So it definitely can and does work. It's just a matter of whether or not it's appropriate to the school at hand. At the moment, [UK] schools are in a panic of being distinctive from one another. Given that education is a business, it's understandable that the heat is on to develop a 'unique selling point'.

YM: USP! [laughs]

JT: Which is fine, but I think a USP needs to come from deep down. Each institution needs to ask itself, 'What do we want to promote a culture of?' Not all schools have to be cultivating the same approaches.

EM: When I saw the Bauhaus exhibition at The Barbican, as I walked along the timeline, I was surprised how far from Utopia that was, and how much the curriculum changed depending on which people came in and said, 'Yeah, but now we want to do this'. Makes me wonder how possible it is to become an ideal thing?

NE: Were the changes because of the staff or the students?

EM: Probably both. But how can we sell something that is more open and flexible, where we don't actually define what we are? I think RCA is kind of trying to do that. They seem really open to students defining what the course is about, but how do you sell that? Well, they can sell it with the name. [laughs]

YM: RCA is in its own league.

EM: Yes, it works for them, but how does it work for a course with one hundred and eighty students?

YM: Exactly.

JT: Regardless how it's sold, if a school truly wants their student body to define their own practices – radically different practices varying from pure commerce to pure research – they'll find a way. In the past, education has tried to deal with numbers and diversity by creating discrete 'pathways' of study, with mixed results. The negative side being overspecialisation and the positive side being a sense of community.

EM: That's the nature of business. If you have something special and it works, other people start adopting it. When I was applying to schools, what stood out about CSM was their contextual promise. But now when I read prospectuses, most colleges offer the same thing. [laughs]

JT: The marketing language has become monocultural. Everybody offers conceptual thinking and idea generation. [laughs]

NE: But how much of that actually gets delivered?

JT: I don't know, you tell me. As a tutor, I only see it from one side, one project at a time. Students have a more holistic experience.

AC: That's what I meant by a two-way street. At the beginning of my degree I was on the treadmill until I stopped and said, 'Hang on a minute, I'm not getting the education that I want'. At the end, they asked us to situate our practices. But I think you have to start situating your practice straight away.

EM: Looking at what's going on and asking yourself, 'What could I do?' from the beginning.

NE: So far in my first year at LCC, we've done one idea generation workshop during the first week of school. And I remember thinking, 'Wow! This is similar to books I've read on the subject, this is really useful'. But aside from that, most conceptual thinking skills I've taught myself outside of college.

YM: But during a critique of your work, don't you think you're building conceptual thinking skills as you attempt to articulate your work? To me, that's a fundamental thing that should be taught. Not only for designers, but anyone who wants to makes sense of what they're doing, or convince others of what they're trying to do or want to do, like Esa and his tractor. I'm not talking about how good you are at bullshitting, it's about understanding where you're really coming from or trying to go.

NE: Are you talking about backing up our ideas with research?

YM: Yes, partly, but more importantly, analysing how and why that research is relevant, and if not, how could it have been done differently.

AC: It's like Yvan says, you need to be able to say, 'This is what I've been thinking and this is what I've done', so that you get the kind of critique you want. Otherwise, people are just going to say whatever comes to mind. You need to put your work in a certain position.

YM: True, but I think it's unfair of me to expect that if we don't teach those skills. That's why I always ask questions that suss out what the student is trying to do so that we can give them feedback according to their intentions or framework of inquiry.

JT: Education is an ongoing conversation. If we view it as a formula, right when you think you've got it right, a new year group enters with completely different points of view. So even though the curriculum itself may have been flawless for the year group before, it fails for another year group.

EM: Sometimes I think that having a tutor with Tourette's would be really great. The unpredictability would force you to think. You're designing a book and then suddenly out of the blue you're told that you can't design it, you have to write about it instead. And so you're forced to react. Sometimes I think that a bit more disturbance would make us think more. For example, one time I accidentally signed up for the wrong brief and had no choice but to do it since everything else was fully booked. That brief changed the way I think about design the most because I was doing something completely different than the traditional stuff I was doing before.

JT: I think some of the most interesting graphic design is coming from design schools or courses that treat their students not as students, but as designers. Perhaps I'm romanticizing, but I think the Werkplaats exemplifies a spirit of 'We're all designers here, we're all in this together'. Knowledge is being delivered and shared by everybody, not just the tutors.

YM: Or the Gerrit Rietveld Academie, where the spirit is 'Do whatever you want'. Their graphic design department is extremely engaged with culture in The Netherlands. Their students don't care if they're going to get hired or not.

It's not about that. It's about learning and experimenting. And Dutch culture is famous for supporting that. I don't know, generally speaking, I find Continental European design education to be more valuable than American education because it enables students to be more independent and investigative. I find American education to be too prescriptive. Hopefully, the same doesn't happen in the UK.

JT: Well, it depends on the school, but yes, on the whole there tends to be more portfolio schools than process schools in the United States.

YM: It also depends on the tutors.

EM: In UK education there's often strict criteria. You need to show this, and this and this. Your outcome has to fit the criteria. Sometimes this inspires learning because it makes a student freeze and actually think, 'Hold on, what options do I have in this situation?'

YM: Sure, but that's why I think a curriculum should be flexible enough that you and your tutor can negotiate learning outcomes together instead of a list of tick boxes. To be fair, I do understand that in first year it is sometimes necessary to have explicit outcomes because beginners appreciate that. But at a certain point you should be able to negotiate what you're learning.

AC: But the real outcome isn't necessarily the work that you're producing, it's the mark. At the end of three years, you end up with a mark. That's the outcome of your education. That always stifled me. Here I was thinking I could see my personal development and was happy with it and then – BAM! – didn't get the measurement I thought I deserved.

Esa and I are students from completely different backgrounds. Chalk and cheese. I think we've progressed in very different ways, but then how do you measure that? Who's to say one of us is more successful than the other?

Earlier when I said it gets competitive, I meant in who got what mark, not with each other's work. The mark is what is respected.

YM: My education was pass/fail, so we didn't have these issues over marking. Pass/fail puts the value of the work on the conversation about what you're learning.

EM: The conversational aspect is very interesting. It's the feedback that pushes the work forward, not the mark. Josh was telling me how he thinks it would be great to let the students watch and listen as tutors discussed their work and how it's being viewed.

MK: That would be so constructive.

NE: I think it could work in the opposite direction as well. If we had more conversation amongst the class before things are marked, that might help the tutors.

YM: But would the student be allowed to say anything while their work is being discussed, or are they just a witness? Is it a discussion? Do they get a chance to talk?

JT: Ideally, yes. I recently read that mathematics programmes conduct a 'conceptual interview' to gauge a student's depth of understanding.

YM: That's interesting because I studied mathematics, and my learning was assessed through demonstration.

JT: Must be a new method, but the idea of a conceptual interview made me think about the problem of assessing art and design. Are we assessing the work or the ability to evidence learning? Or what I call 'fake learning'. [laughs] You know what I'm talking about. When a student fakes a sketchbook for assessment

purposes, 'Ooooh look how mad he is! He's done 50 iterations'. It's obvious that the evidence has been fabricated.

YM: Either because sketchbooks are not relevant to that student's process, or because there was a lack of process. Or they were doing what someone else told them to do.

NE: That's what I meant earlier when I said 'discussion', not only with a tutor, but more formal critiques with the whole group. Last year I sat in on a crit that was amazing, the tutor went piece by piece asking questions – 'Do you think it's finished?' and so on. And the participants had to think about it and respond with why or why not. It got everybody involved.

YM: That brings up the problem of student to tutor ratio. In some cases there's fifty students, two tutors and five hours. There's simply not enough time to talk at length about each student's work. But you're right, the crit environment you're describing can really help you articulate your work.

EM: To build a narrative around your work. That's often missing. People explain a lot, but they don't focus on the main points, so the crit time is eaten up by explanation. It can be useful to challenge yourself with questions like, 'Can I summarise my work in one sentence?' or 'Is the information I'm sharing relevant to my process?'

JT: How do we plant such opportunities into a curriculum at key points to stimulate the kind of studio culture that is desired? It all goes back to what kind of studio culture each course wants to support. We can't get upset when students aren't able to articulate their work, or aren't able to follow directions, or whatever it is that we want them to do, without there being a collective and constant value for it. And I'm not suggesting that all tutors teach the same. However, we can give the students different and personalised ways of talking about the work that they're doing, or different approaches to interfacing with the work of others.

EM: I understand which tutors understand my work and which ones don't, but I'm happy that there's a conflict because that means things move forward. If I were on a course where everybody understood my work, I would probably get too comfortable. 'I'm so great. Everybody gets me'. And then I go into the real world and people are like, 'What the fuck are you doing?' [laughs] I love it when my context tutors fight, they almost can't be in the same room together. I learn so much from that.

NE: Shows that it's all interpretation.

EM: During one of those massive year group briefings, my tutor Rathna [Ramanathan] said, "Don't expect us all to agree on things. We are different people with different views." That allows students to be different people with different views as well.

JT: Diversity of feedback is a valuable thing. First year students commonly get frustrated with contradictory feedback – 'But this tutor told me this. And that tutor told me the opposite!' – but I think that's good because it situates you between different poles and you must decide for yourself. Like, 'I don't really know if this is the right direction to take, but I'm going to try it and see what happens'. You might fail, but it's nice to have had a smörgåsbord of perspectives. Until you're exposed to different people practicing in different ways, how can you know what you might do?

EM: We didn't really redesign graphic design education did we? [laughs]