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# How, What and Who Should We Teach? (Hot Debate)

## Hazel Clark

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Friedman begins by commenting that most design education around the globe is now offered from within universities; the freestanding art and design school having virtually disappeared. In North America, he states, the 'transition of design education to university study' was 'a consequence of the new needs and demands of the nascent knowledge economy'. This is not strictly true; there are in North America around 30 member colleges of AICAD (the Association of Independent Colleges of Art and Design). Even if what Friedman describes has been the case in some instances (it would have been enlightening to know exactly where he means); some, call them cynics if you will, may argue to the contrary.

I would challenge Friedman's assertion that it was the 'new needs and demands of the nascent knowledge economy' that was universally responsible for placing design education within universities. What occurred often was, as in Thatcherite Britain of the 1980s for example, much more economically-driven 'marriages of convenience' than the outcome of well-reasoned philosophical argument. The result is that while across the

globe design education exists for the main within the university, it still has to fight its corner to establish its own knowledge bases and intelligences (it is difficult and inaccurate to refer even to design in the singular), contrary to what Friedman's thesis would suggest; and therein lies a problem.

Design education still finds itself at the centre of the 'conflict of the faculties' within the university, and most especially 'the difficulty of linking the design curriculum to the larger university curriculum'. What prevails is a tension, at best, or conflict, at worst, between professional or applied knowledge and 'the larger body of knowledge represented by the university'. For the educator, at the simplest level this boils down to the question – what should we teach? But as Friedman indicates, the question is far from simple. It alludes not only to how we teach design in a university, but also raises issues of the nature of professional education for the 21c, and to our increasingly international and diverse student bodies. How much can or should contemporary design education be vested in professional education, and moreover should design education only be for intending design professionals?

Design in the university must, I would agree, contribute to the 'new knowledge economy' of the 21c described by Friedman. By doing so design not only gains intellectual credibility and respect, but also can provide knowledge that contributes to a wider university community of students and peers. Knowing about design, as forms of intellectual and creative processes, as practices, as products (broadly defined), its responsibilities, its discourse/s (where they exist) and about how and why it contributes to the world, can be as important to 'educating citizens' as to 'training specialists'. But, and it's a big but, as an international community of design educators, we are working within different constraints and opportunities, that is, we are not all starting from the same place.

A few days after reading Friedman's paper, I received a copy of another document concerned with design education. *Shaping The Future: Design for Hong Kong, A Strategic Review of Design Education and Practice*, July 2003 is a report, authored chiefly by John Heskett, on behalf of 'The Design Task Force'. The latter was a group of fourteen local and international design educators and professionals, invited to advise the President of the government funded Hong Kong Polytechnic University 'in planning the future of our design programmes and research focus'. Established early in 2002, the Task Force members visited design schools and companies in Asia, Europe and the United States (its membership being drawn from each region) to collect views 'from industry and business leaders as well as local policy makers'.<sup>1</sup>

The recommendations of the Task Force were focused mainly on the PolyU's School of Design and its specialisations in industrial/product design, visual communication, environmental design and multimedia design. They included the need for 'a strongly defined

research programme' to underpin teaching; 'the provision of skills... necessary for professional practice'; sustaining relationships with the business community, all with the main focus of the School of Design being 'a matrix uniting design, technology and business'.<sup>2</sup>

Coming, for me, directly on the heels of Friedman's paper, the Task Force report seemed archaic, reactionary even, vested in business and manufacturing, more appropriate to the early twentieth century, or even the nineteenth, than looking forward into the century in which we live. While it identified the importance of research, the recommendations indicated that any new knowledge would be applied. But this is less surprising when one looks at its terms of reference:

To have an overall review of the present and future needs of Hong Kong in design by taking into account international and Mainland developments.

To advise the President of The Hong Kong Polytechnic University [PolyU] on how the PolyU can position itself and develop its design programmes so as to produce graduates who match the future development of Hong Kong and the PolyU.

To advise on strategies of marketing programmes and graduates, outreaching to local and overseas industries, international networking and strategic alliance with international renowned institutions.<sup>3</sup>

Where we might describe Friedman as looking 'outward' and longer term, the Design Task Force was definitely looking 'inward', at the specific requirements of Hong Kong, seen particularly in relation to the vast manufacturing capacity of the Pearl River Delta (PRD) in Southern China. Design, for the Task Force, was 'understood as a crucial tool for the future of enterprise in Hong Kong and its region'; considered 'as a *professional business activity*'.<sup>4</sup> [my emphasis] While the report recognises that design can and should create new knowledge in the university, that knowledge is defined and also limited by the requirement that it is *applied*.

Although it is true that the majority of the design graduates from the PolyU will work in Hong Kong or in the Mainland, that fact alone should not limit their potential for thinking design 'outside the box'. The very fact that the PRD has such an enormous capacity for the global production of the likes of plastic goods, including children's toys, provides that region with a huge responsibility. Yes, let the design student in a specific region focus on design in relation to business, but not simply as a given. The student must know what that means, and have been educated to develop the intellectual facility either to accept or to challenge the premise. The mantra of the British Design Council of the 1980s 'Good Design is Good

Business' still echoes in our ears. But choices do exist and it is our obligation as educators to provide students with access to the appropriate knowledge and critical thinking skills that will enable them to make those choices. What Friedman's model offers is the opportunity for design to define itself as a field with its own knowledge/s that facilitate, not only thinking *about* design and *through* design, but *of* design as a way of knowing, thinking and doing.

Friedman is of course correct in stating that 'good universities' must constantly seek to develop 'better and more effective curricula' for sharing knowledge. But the rationale for, and nature of, that knowledge must be clearly identified. Design education must address the 'changing needs of both the profession and the discipline' (although I again question the use of the singular). However, it must also address the changes in our student body. My students are not atypical in that they come from across the globe; a classroom today contains a vast array of regional and cultural diversity. So we have the question of how much we in New York, (and here I speak as a non-American) can and should be providing, 'an American education', as I have heard some colleagues argue, (articulated to represent the democratic values of the United States). Or, more fundamentally, what is the nature of the knowledge that we impart to students, any students in any scholarly discipline or area? Friedman rightly identifies that potential at least: 'The increasing clear focus on the role of knowledge in every field brings about a richer and deeper understanding of what it is that professionals do.'

Many of my students will be practicing far away from the United States in countries and regions with distinct and specific cultures, needs and values. Surely, it is up to design educators not merely to generate knowledge through research, but also to ensure that the knowledge addresses fundamental values? Perhaps this sounds a little old-fashioned? But it is too easy to forget that designers and other design professionals can have an enormous impact on the shape and nature of the material world. We, the educators, need to instil knowledge that engenders moral and ethical responsibility. Knowing what design *is* and what design *does* and *can* do is of considerable importance to the education of design professionals who will operate globally either in explicit or implicit roles and functions.

Some of my students will never become designers, and that is their choice. This should not be seen as a failure. Currently in my university we are considering not only the place of the design school, but also the possibilities of the knowledge/s we generate and teach as contributing to the liberal arts education of all students. Design education can contribute, in its own right, to the intelligence of the university, and this is where its existence within that institution offers many, largely unrealised opportunities. There

is a place in the university for education through, about and of design (via research related to its practices, processes, products and discourses) as well as *in* design. Within the university, this alone is of huge potential significance. I take the liberty of ending with a re-phrasing of Friedman's last sentence: *systemic analysis that sets design education in a university for the knowledge economy can form the effective education of the global citizen for the 21c.*

### Notes

1. Poon Chung-kwong, President, The Hong Kong Polytechnic University, Foreword, *Shaping The Future: Design for Hong Kong, A Strategic Review of Design Education and Practice*, July 2003.
2. Recommendations as Guidelines for Action, *ibid* 76.
3. *Ibid* 9.
4. *Ibid* 15.