Design for social impact, practitioner and teacher

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This article is based on a talk I delivered in March 2016 to a group of design students in the School of Design and Architecture at Tecnológico de Monterrey in Querétaro. This talk was a call to action for all students who are interested in design for social change. It encouraged them to delve into their personal motivations and values, and self-imposed limitations. Giving them some examples of how designers can change the world in a myriad of ways. The world needs compassionate, creative and very smart designers, taking the places of the old guard. The future is in their hands.

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Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it's the only thing that ever has[1].

Ever since I found this quote from Margaret Mead, I have done my best to put it in front of all design students I work with. Because every thoughtful and committed design student across the world needs to believe that they are capable of something extraordinary.

I moved to Mexico in January 2016 to work with design students interested in using their capabilities for social good. I care about design education, not just because I had one, but because I see both its possibilities and limitations. Students everywhere have a power to change the world in unprecedented ways. Specifically those students deeply connected with their own creative potential, able to re-imagine and re-interpret and then create a better future. The intelligent optimists, as Central St Martins, a London Art and Design College, so aptly describe it in their recent student exhibition:

"The Intelligent Optimist has never been needed more than in the current era of political and social despondency. We are all looking for alternative visions, but not naively hopeful ones. In their various combinations of wit, rigour, lateral thinking, sensuousness, ingenuity, social engagement and all round intelligence,

1 Margaret Mead, Continuities in Cultural Evolution (1964)

these Central Saint Martins graduates provide a brilliant riposte to the novelist Howard Jacobson's provocation that he 'has never met an intelligent optimist'" Central Saint Martins (2016).

But often students need support in the transition between a school education - where established knowledge is acquired - and a more open design education, where knowledge is to be defined only by them, more fluid, changing, understood through the experiences they create.

This article is based on the stories I shared during a recent talk to Design Students at Tec de Monterey in Querétaro. It is based on what I was learning from them, and what I have learnt throughout my education and professional practice. It starts with me writing the word design, over and over again.

Design design.
You'll notice when you say, or write, the same word over and over and over again, it becomes increasingly nonsensical. Ridiculous. The word 'design' has always been problematic for me: It's a verb, is describes an action of some sort, 'that building had been designed': It's a noun, it describes an object 'a piece of design': It could be part of an adjective 'beautifully designed' 'badly designed' 'well designed'. We design chairs, houses, car engines, systems and services. We design our outfit's everyday, our dinners every night, how we arrange things inside our homes or how we travel around our cities. Design is everywhere. Everyone is designing all the time. It is tangible and intangible. Universally understood and universally misunderstood.

While I worked with the Design Council before arriving in Mexico, we would talk a lot about the 'design community'. We were there to represent, champion and support the design community in the UK. But I have no evidence that such a community exists. The definition of a community is 'a group of people living in the same place or having a particular charac-teristic in common'. And I don't believe that all designers have something in common. My

degree is in visual communication - graphic design – but to me, good design will mean something very different to my peers. Good design to me is about people, participation, positive impact, the union between desires and needs, joy and function. We will look for and appreciate different qualities in the practice of design. And what I would choose to put inside a design museum would be radically different from other designers.
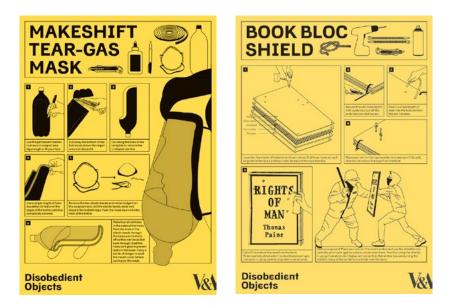

Image 1. Disobedient objects. Victoria & Albert Museum, Disobedient Objects Exhibition, 2015 http://www.vam.ac.uk/content/exhibitions/disobedient-objects/

If design is not one definition, and designers are not one community, what does it mean to study to be a designer?

Knowing yourself

Our values and motivations guide us everyday, often without conscious thought. And when we find ourselves working or operating in ways that are outside of - or apposed to - our values system, it can feel awful. We feel stuck, uncomfortable, uneasy, full of doubt. We should listen to these feelings, they are there to guide us.

Even through our job title as 'designers' might be the same, we are not all designing with the same purpose, or with the same intent. Designers have many different motivations. And while this sounds like commonsense, I wish I had been given more support at university to

investigate this for myself. It is important - I think - to use your education as a time to better understand yourself. In order to then develop the skills and experience relevant to your own values system.

Some questions I ask the design students I am working with: *are you learning about design practice into order to work within the existing marketplace? To create work for a market who wants it. Or are you someone who needs to colour outside the lines? Are you better suited to work that sees you building a new market place? Meeting the needs of an unknown and complex future. Are you keen to work towards a defined job title, something that makes sense to your friends or family? Or are you happier somewhere between multiple disciplines? Pondering what the job titles of the future will be. Are you motivated by personal achievement, or collective change? Do you want to be on the stage, or back stage? What is your relationship to collectivism, risk, status, success, humor, reputation, simplicity, generosity, power, mastery, intelligence, wealth, originality, obedience, bravery, silence, organisation, justice, longevity, optimism, creativity?*
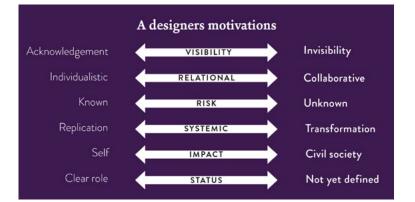

Image 2. Motivations. Ella Britton

I call myself a designer, because it's easier that way. I haven't found a better word yet. But to me, design is not a job title. It's an attitude, a philosophy, and a set of unique personal and social skills. It's the courage to try things, break things, mend things. And challenge the status quo. To believe in the power of confidant creative brains, collaboration and optimism. It is inherently optimistic, playful, delightful, people-centered. And it is about taking action. Making things happen. Creating change.

Designers should have an understanding what really needs to be made, and work collectively to transform the world we live. For the better.

"Imagination is more important than knowledge. For knowledge is limited to all we now know and understand, while imagination embraces the entire world, and all there ever will be to know and understand."
Albert Einstein

When I was at school, I liked art. I don't remember my design education. I think it was called CDT; craft design technology. And I think it had something to do with making a toy that could be wheeled along the floor. I liked art because it was in a room where I could make my own decisions. I could question things. I was learning about how I think and how I can link my brain and my hands together to create something unique. The homework was open and experimental. You were judged on your thinking and enquiry, not on whether something was right or wrong. I liked it because I could express ideas. Political ones, social ones, personal ones, simple ones, complicated ones. I could create something that might in some way inform or influence things.

Of course, if I am honest, I was using a lot of oil pastels, and depicting a lot of oranges in bowls. But still, there was something in that art room that excited me.

And as school progressed, I became more aware of the relationship other teachers had to creative subjects. Their attitude was, as if to choose the creative subjects was to choose the

path of least resistance. Our academic achievements were celebrated in maths, sciences, history. Our hobbies were in the arts. There was a genuine worry amongst some of my teachers that if I went down 'the creative route' I would be wasting my academic skills, and probably, of course, living an impoverished life eating soup out of a can.

And I don't think this is an issue unique to the 1990's. Nor is it an issue unique to the UK. This is a world-wide problem within education, as described by Ken Robinson in his Ted Talk, 'do schools kill creativity' (Robinson, 2006).

When I was 15 I was made to take a careers advice test, on a computer the size of a small car. I wanted to be a theatre designer at this stage I remember, and I was pretty excited about this idea. But clearly my careers advisor had other plans for me. I had to answer a series of questions on this computer about myself, my skills, experiences, and after a little whirring noise out popped to answer to all my future questions. I was to be a guide dog trainer. A guide dog trainer.

And in all seriousness, I am quite frightened of dogs.

Imagine, just imagine, if we changed the question we ask young people. What if, from childhood, our schools and parents were asking us a different question? What if we were asked: *What is it you would like to create? To change? To make happen? What are the problems in our world you want some part in solving? What influence do you want to have?*

What if we were encouraged to look to our future through a different lens?

I saw a video recently of Barack Obama addressing this year's interns at the White House. And this is what he said:

> Worry less about what you want to be, and think more about what you want to do. Because this town is full of people who want to be a congressman,

or want to be a senator or want to be a president. And if that's your focus, if that's your moral compass, then you're consistently going to be making decisions solely on the basis of how do I get, for me, what I want. If you think in terms of what do I want to do? I want to solve climate change. Or I want to employ disadvantaged youth. Or I want to fix a broken healthcare system, then even if you don't get to the place you wanted to be or the office you wanted, during that entire time you're going to be working on stuff that's real. And getting stuff done. And you'll be able to wake up in the morning and say, 'Well, ok, I didn't end up being a congressman but I ended up running this not-for-profit and I'm still responsible for getting this done because I pressured a congressman to do it (The White House 2016.02.09).

Worry less about what you want to be. Worry more about what you want to do.

I am spending a lot of time with design students here in Mexico, who are battling with the crisis of what they are going to be. Anxious about where the right job is for them, in what company, not sure if they want to be industrial designers, product designers, or furniture designers. Not sure if they want to be designers at all. Worrying if their technical drawings are good enough, or their 3D rendering skills, or their model making. Or if what they are learning at University is what they want to do with their lives. And I can relate to some of that. I have a graphic design degree, and very quickly I knew I didn't want to be a graphic designer. And this is difficult to rectify sometimes, because you don't know what the other options are, and you are being taught through the lens of a specific professional practice.

My advice to them, and to anyone who this relates to, forget about being a product designer, or an architect, or a engineer, or an artist, or a politician. In my experience, job titles are becoming less and less relevant anyway. Spend this time at University, investigating what you want to create. To change. To make happen. Look into the deeper content within your work. Let your values and purpose guide you. Build a dynamic and unique portfolio, full of stories, problems you overcame, people you met and learnt from,

failures you experienced, telling everyone that sees it what you are capable of, what you care about, and who you are.

Designing from inside the gaps, at the edges, across the boundaries

I learn a lot from designers who are working inside and outside of different specialisms and practices. Collaborating in open and dynamic ways. There is often something different in their work, a sort of perspective that maybe people with a singular practice struggle to see. They are turning their career into a journey. A journey between and across territories, not just upwards from where they started.

For example:

Francis Bitoni[2], an architect based in New York exploring the job of 3D printing technology in textiles, fashion and products.

Image 3. Bitonti. Francis Bitonti, The Bristle Dress, a 3D printed dress you can print at home, 2014
Image courtesy of Design Milk.com http://design-milk.com/francis-bitontis-3d-printed-dress-can-print-home/

Wayne Hemmingway[3] from UK, started out as a shoe designer, now designing affordable social housing, festivals, household products and wallpaper.

Image 4. Hemmingway. Hemingway Design, The Dreamland Amusement Park, 2015 http://www.greenwayqs.com/project/dreamland-margate/

Theaster Gates[4], a ceramic artist working in Chicago exploring place making, object making, performance and sustainable neighborhood development.

Image 5. Gates. Theaster Gates, TED talk, 2015
https://www.ted.com/talks
theaster_gates_how_to_revive_a_neighborhood_with_imagination_
beauty_and_art

3 houseofhemingway.co.uk/hemingway-design/

4 theastergates.com/

And, even more exciting perhaps, the rise of creative collectives making change through open dynamic collaborations:

Laboratorio para la Ciudad (Laboratory for the City)[5] Mexico City's experimental office for civic innovation and urban creativity, the first city government department of its kind in Latin America. The Lab is a space for rethinking, reimagining, and reinventing the way citizens and government can work together towards a more open, more livable and more imaginative city.

Image 6. Lab. Laboratorio para la Ciudad, Mexico City
http://labcd.mx/

Yomken[6] a crowd-sourced social innovation platform giving social enterprises the support they need. Linking them with students, engineers, designers, researchers and other sources of knowledge and skills, to help them solve the many challenges they face.
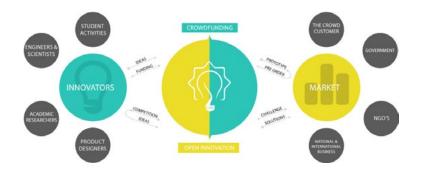
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5 labcd.mx/

6 *Yomken.com*

Image 7. Yomken. Yomken.com. http://www.yomken.com/about

Impact Hub Movement[7], a global innovation lab offering entrepreneurs, designers, innovators the resources and collaboration opportunities they need to increase the impact of your work.

Image 8. Impact Hub. Impact Hub Oaxaca, 2014

7 www.impacthub.net/

Makervesity[8], an open maker workspace in London providing affordable space, tools and facilities to creative businesses and individuals, as well as opportunities for collaborations, projects, investment and funding.

Image 9. makervesity. http://makerversity.org/

It feels to me like the future of design practice is more collective than boundaried. More open than supercilious. More socially, politically, environmentally responsive. Less internalised. So we all need to be adjusting how we teach, how we learn, how we work, and how we collaborate.

Here are three case studies from my own experiences that have taught me the most.

Don't wait until you know what you are doing, just start

When I worked at *thinkpublic* in the UK, I remember being given my first project to lead. With a local public health trust and a community[9]. The trust were investing in a new health center and we were tasked with running a design research process with the community to

8 makerversity.org/

9 youcankingston.com/

better understand their needs and perceptions of this change. With the intention of using this research to influence their brief for the new health center.

I was 24 years old and inexperienced. And one of our project partners told me I was naïve, too naïve for the job. I remember receiving this feedback. And the feeling has stayed with me. I was painting walls, hanging out in people's houses, trying to understand who people were, why they lived there and what they cared about. I was not an academic, there was no hypothesis. I was interested in people, and I was very hard working, I was in the community a lot, evenings, weekends. I cared. And these were the capabilities I thought design research required. But of course, in one sense she was right. I was naïve. I had never done this before. I wasn't qualified. But I was definitely up for the challenge. I believed then, and I believe now, that inexperience, naivety and fearlessness can be the ingredients we need to solve the complicated challenges we don't know how to solve. As we grow older, we learn to fear things. And in my experience fear and anxiety kill creative thought. I want to see more young minds being given leadership positions. It was essential for me to learn in that way, and to be trusted. Of course you fail sometimes, you feel like an idiot, but we all have a responsibility to help each other through this, to support and mentor others who are learning. The nervousness of 'not being up to the challenge' is what stops a lot of great

people doing great work. Relish your naivety, learn from criticism, ask lots of questions, and just start. And age is nothing in creativity. Age is irrelevant. How open and engaged and agile your imagination is. That's the measure of success.

Open yourself up, you are human being before you are a designer

Another project I worked on in the early days of *thinkpublic* was with the Alzheimer's Society in the UK[10]. We were working with them to design a new health service that would increase the emotional and practical support given to a person with dementia after a diagnosis. Reducing the risk of crisis intervention in the months or years following a diagnose. I loved this project. For about 6 months in 2009 my colleague and I would visit two different Alzheimer's Society branches, twice a week, to work with people on the design and build of this new service. One week we would be prototyping the touch-points of the service, the next week we'd look at the communications, identity, language, content for the staff-training course. We wanted to make the process as collaborative as possible, and make the most of their knowledge and expertise.

Image 11. Dementia. thinkpublic & Ella Britton, 2010

10 thinkpublic.com/ideas/case-study-alzheimer100

There was a lady in one of the branches who reminded me of my Grandma Peggy, she was the same size and shape and her hands felt the same. It was comforting to me. I worked with her a lot. But her dementia was developing quite quickly and she found it difficult to remember who we were or what we were doing every week. One week I was co-designing the brand identity and visual language for the printed materials. These materials would be given to people during their meetings with health professionals. They had to be clear, professional, but sensitive. This lady had something really specific she wanted to say about the visual language, but she was struggling to explain it, and struggling to find the words. She was finding it really frustrating so I told her of course not to worry, and that maybe next week she would be able to tell me. Expecting, as every week, for this work and my identity to have slipped from her memory.

The following week, I walked back into their room. The smell of tea and biscuits guided me in, as it always did. And there she sat, as she always was. She looked at me straight away, *"Ella, I remembered, and all week I have been waiting for you, I need to tell you that because of my cataracts I find it hard to read anything with a pale background, and text in yellow is very hard for me to focus on".* I couldn't believe it, not only did she remember my name, she remembered to point of our presence, and also the very role we had asked her to play. With the details we needed. It was a significant moment. And no one in the room could believe it.

Ever since I have been really careful with how I work with people. And am trying to help my students gain the same sorts of experiences. People are not 'users', they are not 'customers' or 'consumers'. They are people. Collaborators. People who know more about an issue or challenge than I do. People who have had different life experiences, and have different ideas and needs. I need to listen to them. Learn from them. Create the conditions for them to really be heard. To me, being a good designer is as much about being an open and relational human being, as it is about technical competencies.

What is your role?

Before I moved to Mexico I was leading the Knee High Design Challenge[11] for 3 years with the Design Council, Guys and St Thomas' Charity and two local authorities in London. The programme set out to find, fund and support people with new ideas for raising the health and wellbeing of children under five years old. In 2010 there was report published by Michael Marmot, called 'Fair Society Healthier Lives'[12]. It detailed the damaging long-term effects of inequality between people, specifically in the early years of life. This report was really influential to us, as we designed an open-innovation programme that would invite new forms of collaborations, new types of innovators, and new ideas in an effort to look at possible ways to tackle this national crisis. Together, we agreed on four main principles:

Image 12. Knee High. Design Council UK & Fieldwork Facility

Firstly- we needed new ways of looking at public health problems. If we keep asking ourselves the same questions, we will never find new answers. It's time to reframe the challenges we face every day, look at them from a different perspective and identify new opportunities. We need families, children, and practitioners to be at the heart of early years services.

11 designcouncil.org.uk/what-we-do/knee-high-design-challenge

12 Professor Sir Michael Marmot, Fair Society Healthy Lives, (2010)

Secondly - the real experts are the people dealing with the everyday realities of bringing up children. It's time to bring meaningful collaboration to the public sector where people with the lived experiences are central in the making, testing and delivery of new approaches.

Thirdly - We need more space to experiment and try new approaches. The public sector is under increasing pressure to deliver within ever tighter constraints. It is hard to find the resources and the support to try something new when you don't know if it will work.

And finally - We need to bring people together to investigate, invent and experiment. It is through these collaborations that we will find the opportunities for change. We believe that creativity and design, when used well, have a significant role to play. No single solution will create universal change. We need a range of imaginative, diverse and ambitious opportunities that are responsive to families' differing needs and aspirations. This calls for prevention not reaction; choice not prescription; networks not silos; and aspiration not stigmatisation.

After months of in-depth research with families and other experts, we created a series of design briefs that aimed to inspired and inform some bold new ideas. We looked specifically at parental mental health, family isolation and access to play. We then created a programme of support for all the people who applied with ideas. The applicants were not designers. They were people from lots of different backgrounds, professional and personal, all united by creative talent and a passion for tackling health inequalities for young children.

My job was to create the conditions that supported people to develop their ideas. To create really lasting and demonstrable change for children and their families. I was designing a process, a space for learning, sharing, the tools for people to understand the design process. The solutions were somewhere else, my job was to find them and support them. Not create them.

There are so many roles a designer can take. And I want students to explore this. How are the personal, social, intellectual, practical skills you are learning useful for the world? You don't need to get the job you thought you would get when you started your degree. Everything can change. The job you will have might not exist yet.

Design for the world, not for yourself

I am being introduced here in Mexico as a 'social designer'. But social design means nothing to me anymore. It suggests something of the 'other'. Donation and charity. A hobby, volunteering. It suggests that it is 'additional' to other types of design. Something 'worthy' and 'nice to have'. But this is inaccurate, and damaging for our students to hear. I am interested in good design. Great design. Design that invites people to participate. Design that makes meaningful change. That strives to answer some of the complex and challenging questions no one has found an answer to yet.

All design, and design processes should have an understanding of its social responsibility. Whether you are thinking about the lives of the people you are designing for, the materials you work with, the business model you are developing, or the impact of a system re-design. Design that doesn't matter to the world, doesn't matter.

I wrote this article for thoughtful and committed design students. I used to be one, and I understand the stresses and strains and uncertainties of trying to grasp what the role is and what the point is. I moved to Mexico to try and help design students who were interested in doing good work. In conclusion, I have one final thing to say.

Like the artisans who form an essential part of Mexican creative and cultural identity. Put a piece of your soul into everything you create.

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