Where is Design in the K12 Curriculum? (And Why Isn't it Taught in Art Education Programs?)

Article by Ruth Lozner January 01, 2013

Much has been said about school reform, revitalizing the economy and meeting the emerging needs of the new millennium. Advocates from many subject areas have weighed in on what students should know or be able to do as part of the Common Core standards. Some progress seems to have been made in math and language arts. However, there is one additional curriculum reform concept that has been successfully instituted and tested in several U.S. charter schools and many other countries but has been largely absent in conversations about K12 education reform and, therefore, has been omitted from the recommendations to policymakers: design education.

What is design education? Design education, which is considered "an applied art," teaches problem-solving as the application of creativity—it's about functionality, usability, feasibility and desirability. Design education teaches relevance, ideation and aesthetics. It considers human factors such as psychology, sociology and ethnography. It teaches research methods, visualization and presentation skills, critical analysis, collaboration and team building. It teaches creative cognitive skills as well as productive hand skills. In short, it not only encourages students to be imaginative, it also teaches them how to harness that inventiveness and put it to practical use. Most importantly, it teaches methodologies for many of the recommended transformative academic and life skills of the twenty-first century.

All of this begs the question, if design education can accomplish all of those things, why has it been overlooked?

Perhaps one reason that design is ignored is its ubiquity. Everyone experiences design every minute of every day. Design makes our lives more efficient, informed, comfortable, productive, beautiful, enjoyable, sustainable…and possible. Behind every single product, built environment and system—behind the very letterforms you are reading—stands the process of innovation that was employed and the designers who designed it. Seen this way, design becomes immensely important as the carrier of culture, commerce and progress. And it is design education that gets us there.

"The first step in winning the future is encouraging American innovation," said President Obama in his 2011 State of the Union address. "But if we want to win the future…then we also have to win the race to educate our kids." Certainly it is obvious to the business community that creativity and innovation drive the global marketplace. It is the U.S. education community that needs to embrace curricula that teaches strategic creative skills starting with early learners.

It should come as no surprise that China has become highly engaged in the modern design education movement. The Chinese government sees innovation and design as a national priority for creating a financially secure society, observes Lorraine Justice, former Dean of the School of Design at Hong Kong Polytechnic University. Since 2006, there has been a substantial overhaul of some secondary schools to feed into the more than 400 higher education design programs in China that are awarding degrees to an estimated 10,000 designers each year.

In his budget speech of March 2011, UK Chancellor George Osborne, following a parallel statement from China, announced that, "We want the

words 'made in Britain, created in Britain, designed in Britain and invented in Britain' to drive our nation forward." As far back as 1989, the UK National Curriculum Standards mandated design (and technology) as a compulsory subject area for all students aged 5 to 14. The project-based multidisciplinary approach of the design methodology was also a requirement across all subject areas.

In the UK, design is widely discussed as a critical component in innovation and the fundamental linkage in STEM, functioning as the "silent D" in this acronym. And while the student outcomes are uneven due in part to a lack of updated teacher training, many British design leaders have attributed their career trajectory and success to the introduction of design early in their education.

In May of 2012, after 18 months of comprehensive research, meetings and site visits, the President's Committee on the Arts and the Humanities issued a report entitled "Reinvesting in Arts Education: Winning America's Future Through Creative Schools." For a report that claimed to have analyzed the challenges and opportunities that have emerged over the last decade, the authors chose to use a narrow and outmoded definition of visual arts. They did so at the expense of omitting a huge and critical piece of visual arts education and thereby missed a real opportunity for expanding the definition to include design education.

Design methodologies add to the value of visual arts curricula by teaching the practical and purposeful application of creative thinking—the very definition of innovation. Design as a distinct K12 subject area can produce multiple benefits, including initiating a career path in one of several design-related fields (i.e., architecture, industrial design, graphic design), fostering more forward thinkers in every field, encouraging more responsible business leaders and entrepreneurs, producing more resourceful and empathetic

citizens and creating more thoughtful consumers.

In our decentralized, state-based system of education, I see at least four potential strategies for the inclusion of design in K12 schools:

- Expand the definition of visual arts education, which currently stands as the traditional fine arts and crafts, to include design thinking and skills
- Integrate design methodologies into the STEM disciplines
- Revitalize industrial education and technology education by including design thinking and principles
- Create a freestanding design subject area and curriculum

Of course, if any one of these strategies is adopted, a different approach to art teacher training would be required. This is an absolutely crucial piece in advancing any subject area to respond to the enormous challenges faced by the next generation. If, as a discipline, the visual arts wishes to maintain its relevance and remain an essential domain for teaching creativity, I see it as a cultural imperative that the future curriculum embrace design education.

Ed. note: This article originally appeared on the author's blog, International Design Education News.

About the Author:

***Ruth Lozner** is currently Professor Emeritaof Design, University of Maryland, College Park; previously, at the Parsons School of Design and the*

University of the Arts, where she was Chair of the Illustration Department. She is also a Fellow at the Royal Society of Arts, UK.

Her assemblages and paintings have been shown in galleries and museums. Her illustration work has appeared in numerous publications including the New York Times, The Washington Post, The Atlantic Magazine.

Throughout her career, ***Ruth Lozner*** *has lectured extensively at various venues (College Art Association Conferences, American Institute of Graphic Artists' Design Educators Conference, University and College Designers Association Conferences, Maryland Art Education Association Conference, UMD Innovation in Teaching Conferences (and at several art college and universities). She has been elected into and is now co-chair of the Academy of Excellence of Teaching and Learning at UMD, an organization that encourages and supports innovative pedagogical practices. Currently, she serves on the Education Committee for the Smithsonian National Design Museum, Cooper-Hewitt. She has served on the National Board of the Graphic Artists Guild and is an active member of AIGA and National Art Education Association.*