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## Bridging the gap: A guide to help design students become design professionals

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*BRIDGING THE GAP: A GUIDE TO HELP*  
DESIGN STUDENTS BECOME DESIGN PROFESSIONALS

A Thesis Submitted  
in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Designation  
University Honors

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University of Northern Iowa  
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Entitled: Bridging the Gap: A Guide to Help Design Students Become Design Professionals

has been approved as meeting the thesis or project requirement for the Designation

University Honors

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## **A. Explanation of Project and Reasons for Choosing It**

Throughout the last four years as a graphic design student, I have become increasingly aware of a disconnect that exists between design education and the design profession. As a senior set to graduate in May of 2021, I have been spending a lot of time researching the types of jobs that exist within the design world. Throughout the job search I have also had conversations with many professionals about their experience entering the work world and the type of design they are doing. A big part of these conversations has been what to expect when entering the field and how to best prepare for success.

Through these conversations, it has become apparent that a learning curve exists when beginning a job in the design profession due to the current framework of traditional design education. In my experience, modern ways of thinking about design and current design trends are not as incorporated into design education as they should be. As a student, most of my work has been focused simply on the project guidelines and designing something that looks good. This results in designs that fall more into the category of fine art and less into the category of design as a problem-solving tool.

Graphic design is such a rapidly growing profession. The problem is that design education is not evolving alongside the profession at the rate it needs to be to fully set up students for success. This creates a disconnect between what you are taught as a graphic design student and how professional designers think and work through their projects.

The design principles and foundational skills that are a part of design education, and have been for many years, are undoubtedly an essential part of becoming a successful designer. The technical side of traditional design education is foundational and will always be vital to the success of a design. That being said, it is the thought behind the design process and the new types and usages of design that are left out.

When assigned four projects over the course of sixteen weeks, for multiple classes, the truth is there is not time to fully digest a project and spend time thinking about each decision you are making and why. Unfortunately, this is the reality for many design students, and I have found this to be true throughout my time as a design student. With lots of projects and quick turnarounds I often found myself going through the motions and not taking time to think about the decisions I was making and what kind of impact my design would have on people who interact with it.

In talking with many professional designers in the last year, I have noticed how much time they spend talking about their process, research, and planning. All of this comes before the visualization of the actual design. Design is truly becoming more human-centric and is used as a tool to solve problems. This means that many things must be considered beyond color, typography, and composition. Traditional design education gives students the tools they need to know how to create visually successful designs. However, students also need to understand how to use those technical skills and apply them to a design that serves a greater purpose beyond just being something nice to look at.

It is because of all of these realizations that I wanted to provide a resource to other design students, like myself, to learn more ways of thinking about design in the context of serving a greater purpose. Throughout the course of this project, I gathered information from lots of different sources and summarized all of my findings into one digestible list for design students. I hope that this project reaches students in the earlier stages of their education so that they can

apply these principles and ways of thinking to their class projects and begin practicing these skills to make them more prepared to become a design professional. If anything, I want others to be aware of the significant difference in the ways of approaching how to do a project for class and designing for a client.

## **B. The Steps Taken to Complete the Project**

Though this is a creative project, it required a lot of reading, research, and conversations with others to arrive at a final product. I started this project by reading lots of essays about graphic design. These essays mainly came from a series of books titled *Looking Closer: Critical Writings on Graphic Design*, more specifically the first, fourth, and fifth editions. Prior to being introduced to these books I had done very little academic reading on graphic design. I have several books about graphic design skills such as typography and grid structure but nothing like these critical writings on graphic design. It was through reading these essays that I decided I wanted to learn more about design thinking and why I had never been exposed to essays of these sorts as a part of my design education.

### **Design Education**

I became interested in the history of design education, so I began doing research to understand how it has evolved over time and how it needs to continue to evolve. I can speak on behalf of my own experience as a design student and the type of training and education I received throughout my four years of schooling, but I needed a better grasp on where it all started, how it got to where it is today, and how it can improve moving forward.

I began my research on design education by looking into the Bauhaus movement which was transformative in the twentieth century. With an increase in industrialization and manufacturing, people worried about the disconnect between function and craft. They worried that creating functional designs would make craftsmanship and fine art obsolete. Practical design, such as furniture design and interior design, started to have the same prestige as fine art skills such as painting and sculpture. The main objective of this movement was to reunite functional design with fine art, and it was successful.

Walter Gropius established the Bauhaus with a manifesto, in 1919, which was the first architectural manifesto. This was unique at the time because all other manifestos were being written for fine art movements. In an interview, Magdalena Doste, a well renowned Bauhaus researcher, discussed the main points in the Bauhaus Manifesto.

Gropius' first principle that she talks about is "the ultimate goal of art is building" (Doste). I see a parallel here with design in the fact that the ultimate goal of design is to solve a problem. What Gropius said 100 years ago is relevant to the design profession today. All you have to do is substitute building and architecture with graphic design. The second major principle that Gropius mentioned in his manifesto is that artists, more specifically painters, sculptors, and architects, must turn to the crafts. He states that craft is essential to the success of the art.

I believe traditional design education should undergo a similar transformation to focus on uniting designing for art and using design as a tool for problem solving. If you put this into a twenty-first century graphic design context, Gropius would be stating that visual designers must be able to work with developers in order to create finished products that both look good and function well. If some of the basic ideologies from the Bauhaus movement were adapted and

implemented into design education in the twenty-first century, it would be a big step in the right direction to closing the gap between education and the profession.

Traditional design education today focuses a lot on technical aspects of design. It would be inaccurate for me to say that design theory, which can be defined as theoretical approaches to help understand the roles and applications of design principles and design practice, is completely absent from design education. Design theory helps explain how things work and why they work. However, much of the design theory that is a part of typical design curriculum is about the visual appearance and what makes a design work visually. For example, one of the foundational design theories taught in early portions of design education is the principles of design. The principles of design, which include things such as proximity, repetition, alignment, and balance, help provide a framework for designing compositions. Traditional design education does a good job of covering lots of technical design principles and theory, but what about the mental processes, usages, and ways of thinking about design?

Even art history is taught in a way that focuses primarily on the visual product and the meaning behind a piece of art, but oftentimes lacks the context and purpose behind the project. What was the artist's reason for making a particular painting or sculpture? How did they arrive at the finished product? In their essay "Good History/Bad History," Tibor Kalman, J. Abbott Miller, and Karrie Jacobs point out that "most design history is not written, it's shown. There is a lot to look at, but not much to think about" (Jacobs et al.). This is an interesting point when thinking about it in the context of design education. It is another example of the focus being on the visuals and finished product instead of the process to get there. I'm not referring to the mediums used to create the artwork, rather I'm referring to the artists' thoughts behind their actions and how they were making decisions to fulfill the overall purpose of the finished product.

I have experienced, in my opinion, a very traditional approach to design education over the last four years of school. I greatly value my education and believe that it has helped me build a strong foundation. However, there are some schools and design programs that are ahead of the times and already changing their design curriculum to keep up with the design profession. One of those schools is the Stanford D.School. The D.School focuses on the problem solving side of design and putting design to work. Students across all different disciplines can participate. Programs like this have the potential to elevate design education to a point that eliminates the gap between education and practice. The Stanford D.School talks about the impact that they can have on college education. They acknowledge that their "university—like most—was designed around a model of education that has remained fairly constant for hundreds of years" (Stanford D.School). They acknowledge that this is a problem, and the D.School curriculum is their solution.

The Stanford D.School promotes the idea of design as a problem solving tool through collaboration with others. Design can bring people of all different disciplines together to solve complex, real world problems. This approach facilitates an environment that allows students to grow their problem-solving skills and think differently.

This approach and other ways of practicing design in the context of solving a problem are not represented in design education in a magnitude that is necessary to send students into the workforce fully prepared to tackle their first project. Through conversations with professionals, looking at types of graphic design jobs that are out there right now, and readings about the future of design I became aware of the reality that there was a lot I was not taught as a design student that will be essential when I join the profession.

## **Design Thinking**

One thing I continuously noticed was how different doing a project for a class was than the process that professionals talk about going through when designing a project for a client. The major separation stems from the fact that there is a difference in designing for art and designing for problem solving. Oftentimes in a design class you are making a design to check off the boxes on an assignment description. However, the reality is that design is about much more than creating something that is pretty to look at. In the essay “First Thing’s First, A Brief History” Rick Poyner talks about the fact that “experiencing design has become so natural we don’t even realize it” (Poyner). Design is everywhere and has become a part of everyday life. That is why it is so important that designers know how to think about what they are doing when they are designing and consider how that design will impact people.

Design practice in the world right now is much more human-centered and about problem solving. Especially with the growth of the field of UX/UI design, designers are tasked with creating functional designs catered to the user. Visual appearance is a key part, but to create a successful design, it needs to go beyond that.

To create a design that is both visually sound and functional requires a much more extensive process than many students go through to fulfill assignment requirements in college. When talking with professionals I started to understand all the steps that go into working on a project for a client. You have to do field research to understand the problem and the people you are designing for. You have to think about what kind of tasks users will need to be able to complete. It requires putting yourself in the shoes of the viewer or user and understanding how non-designers will interact with the finished product. Sketching, designing, and prototyping don’t happen until later in the overall design process. Once you think you are finished with design, you probably aren’t. You have to do user testing and may have to make changes based on reactions from the users. This is a lot more than one goes through to complete a class assignment.

Another disconnection between design education and the design profession is that the types of design are changing. Technology is always developing and advancing, and design must keep up with those changes. Ideally, education would be able to keep up with the changes, but it usually does not evolve fast enough to keep up.

User experience and user interface design is rising to the forefront of the profession and it is no surprise that print design is becoming more obsolete. Over the course of the last three months, I have had the opportunity to hear from several design professionals. Every single one of them emphasized the importance of UX/UI design. When asked if they ever worked on print design projects, their answer was rarely, if ever. That is not to say that print design will disappear completely or that it is not a useful skill to master. However, if design professionals are spending most of their time designing for the digital world, why assign design students primarily print based projects? I’ve also realized through talking to alumni who graduated 15 years or more ago from the same program, did some of the exact same projects when they were in school. As I’ve mentioned, there are some foundational skills that will always be necessary to have but those skills should be taught in ways that reflect the changes in technology as well. I can’t speak for all design students, but this has been my experience and realization.

## **Manifestos**

After gathering all of this information, I needed to decide the best way to present my findings in a way that would be effective and digestible for design students. I knew it had to be

concise because, as previously mentioned, design students tend to be short on time. I knew my goal was to help reframe the way designers think which made me think about how people have swayed others to change their ways of thinking throughout history. This made me think about the many references to manifestos that I came across while researching. Throughout my reading and research, I came across graphic design specific manifestos such as “First Things First Manifesto 2000,” “An Incomplete Manifesto For Growth,” and “The Vow of Chastity.” I also read about fine art manifestos, such as the Cubist and Dada Manifestos, and the Bauhaus manifesto discussed earlier. Each of these were concise and effective. My goal is not to start a huge, monumental movement, like many other art manifestos, but I felt presenting my thoughts in this format would be the perfect way to wrap up my findings in a concise way that compels people to listen to what I have to say.

Before I began writing my manifesto, I continued to do some research on the history, function, and format of manifestos. Jessica Helfand’s essay, “Me, The Underdesigned,” helped me see the whole picture when she discussed manifestos and the role they have played throughout history. She talks about how manifestos have been around, both in the art world and beyond the art world, for centuries with the purpose of calling out injustices, outlining certain truths, opposing authority, and bringing back faith in society.

These writings have differed from others in the way that they are public declarations that come with changes in thought or principles. They are often straight to the point. Helfand also talks about how to effectively write a manifesto. Some of the suggestions she provided include breaking ideas down, writing short sentences, adding breaks and punctuation, and writing to persuade the reader. These tips helped me to format and articulate my manifesto.

### **C. Description of Final Work**

The final work I produced is a manifesto titled “Bridging the Gap: A Guide to Help Design Students Become Design Professionals.” This manifesto consists of a list of 14 things for design students entering the workforce to be aware of and acknowledge in order to be prepared to make the transition from student to successful professional. The purpose of this manifesto is to provide a centralized list of design principles that are relevant to designers of present day. This project will serve as a resource that accounts for some of the gaps that exist between design education and design as a profession in the real world. It will help make design students aware of the learning curve they may experience and hopefully encourage them to take an extra step to set themselves up for success as a design professional.

This manifesto is not a set of strict guidelines that perfectly lay out how to be a designer or how to construct the perfect composition nor is it an extension on the universal design principles. The reality is that using design to solve problems is not a clean or linear process. “Bridging the Gap: A Guide to Help Design Students Become Design Professionals” is a tool to help design students learn how to think about design in a way that will help prepare them for success in the design profession.

My manifesto is not just a numbered list on a blank piece of paper. I created an additional format that is more dynamic. It is becoming increasingly important that design is engaging and interactive which is why I went beyond simply having a typed list of principles for designers to read through. A project emphasizing the importance of keeping up with the latest trends should be presented accordingly.



The final list comes after reflecting on all the things I touched on earlier including essays on design theory and how designers should think, conversations with and lectures from design professionals about the type of work they are currently doing, research on design education, and my personal experience being a design student for the last four years.

#### **D. Assessment of the Importance of the Creative/Performative Activity with an Indication of the Activity's Unique Contribution to Existing Creative/Performative Works**

It is essential that designers are aware of the changes and trends happening in their profession so that they can best approach projects. A rapidly evolving and growing profession requires designers to constantly be educating themselves. Until traditional design education can keep up with the changes within the design field, it will be on students to keep up with what is going on in the design profession and take extra initiative to set themselves up for success. In this profession, you have to have the drive to keep learning. This project will help students recognize that there is always going to be a lot for them to learn and inspire them to take action to do so.

For this particular creative project, a manifesto is the best solution to begin to solve the problem of there being a disconnect between design as an art and design as a tool. Manifestos throughout history have provided an outlet for one to express their opinion in hopes of getting people to change the way they think about things. It is my hope that this manifesto brings this issue to light and inspires design students, and designers, to think about the current design education system and how things can change to be more in line with the evolving profession.

I think there is a way for design education to evolve with the profession without losing the value of the traditional foundations that are necessary to all designers. Foundational skills are essential, but the contexts in which they are used will change over time. For example, all designers must be skilled in typography. Traditionally, typography has been taught in relation to printed materials such as books and magazines. Designers are taught things such as what fonts work well and what font sizes are appropriate, and some of that knowledge can be carried over to the digital world. However, considering that print media is declining, and our world is becoming more digital, doesn't it make more sense that foundational skills, such as typography, are taught in terms of website design or online publications? It is my hope that this project will make people ask these types of questions, so they can find ways to educate themselves alongside the evolving profession and inspire change in the way that it is traditionally taught.

I also think it is important that designers are made aware of not only the disconnect between design education and the design profession but also why it exists. The reason that the gap exists is because of the rate in which the design profession is constantly evolving. If future designers know that this is the case, they can make an extra effort to be on the lookout for what is next and set themselves up for long term success.

#### **E. Value of My Experience**

This experience has sparked an interest in design theory and design thinking that I did not have a year ago. I had not known anything different or beyond what I was being taught in my classes. The way design history was taught was not overly exciting to me because it felt dated. Taking the initiative to seek out resources on my own has opened my eyes to so many different ways of thinking about design. I want to keep learning more about the profession and the types of things I can be doing once my time as a student comes to an end.

I have had some very insightful conversations with design professionals, fellow design students, and others who are not a part of the design world at all but who are interested in gaining insight into how designers think as a result of this project. Having these conversations gets me excited about my career path, and I love getting to educate other designers and non-designers about the way designers think. As previously mentioned, design is all around us. I have found that over the course of doing this project I look at things differently and appreciate designs that I can tell were carefully considered with the user in mind.

Learning about all of these things has helped me to grow as a designer as well. It has changed the way that I tackle projects and think about the design process. I feel much more prepared for and familiar with the ways in which design professionals go about solving problems for their clients which makes me excited and hopeful as I look forward to the next stage of my life of becoming a designer.

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# **Bridging the Gap: A Guide to Help Design Students Become Design Professionals**

Interactive Manifesto: [Bridging the Gap](#)

## 1. BE INTENTIONAL

Be intentional with your design choices and use of space. Don't waste space or resources.

## 2. CONTROL THE INFORMATION OVERLOAD

We live in a world full of information and designers play a huge role in organizing and controlling that information. Design is used as a tool to help people determine what is important. Being intentional comes into play here as well. Each design decision should be made in context of the content. This is where hierarchy, a foundational skill learned as a design student, becomes extremely important.

## 3. TAKE INITIATIVE

Take initiative to educate yourself beyond the classroom and never stop educating yourself. Your education should keep up with the pace of the profession. Without knowing other people's styles and theories you can't develop your own.

## 4. RESEARCH

Along with education comes research. Research should always be the first step in the design process. Know the parameters for the project such as deadlines and budget. Understand who and what the design is for and who will be interacting with it.

## 5. PREDICT THE FUTURE

It seems like a lot to ask of a designer to predict the future but keeping up with the trends and thinking ahead to what is next is a key to success. Right now, the future is digital and interactive. Keeping up with the rise of UX/UI design is increasingly important as well as finding new ways to keep users engaged.

## 6. YOU HAVE TO KNOW THE RULES TO BREAK THE RULES

As a designer, you must know the basic principles of design. This is where receiving a design education is vital. Without knowing the basic design principles, you can't justify making moves that break the rules for a greater purpose.

## 7. DON'T OVER DO IT

That being said, there are many cases in which breaking the rules is unnecessary and hinders the functionality of the design. Sometimes designers try to show off by being overly inventive and unconventional. However, when there are certain design patterns that work well universally designers should not take the liberty to totally reinvent the wheel.

## 8. CREATE A SPACE FOR OTHERS TO CREATE

One of the big reasons not to break the rules is because design is increasingly about user experience, and human centered design is becoming the prominent way of thinking about design. Your design should set others up to create their own experiences.

## 9. DESIGN FOR NON-DESIGNERS

Design has become such an integral part of society and peoples' everyday lives. The average person should understand and appreciate your design. There are few cases in which design should fall into the category of "fine art." People should not have to work to decipher what something means.

## 10. LOOK AT THE BIGGER PICTURE

As a student you are tasked with solving a problem and creating a result for your own self. This can result in design as art versus design as a functional tool, which is the direction that design is taking. The world of design is not its own separate entity, everything is interconnected, and it is no longer purely about the visual appearance.

## 11. THINK

Some things will come naturally due to experience but not everything. When looking at design work and making design decisions, think about what makes this piece work, how will viewers react, what is the design trying to accomplish.

## 12. FIND A BALANCE

After all this talk of designing for other people, it is still important to realize that it is possible to express yourself as a designer while also pleasing your client, customer, or the user. You can only do so once you understand, and put into practice, the concepts listed in this manifesto.

## 13. DEFEND YOUR WORK

The second step in finding balance as a designer, following educating yourself, is being able to confidently defend your work. Successful designers are able to talk about their process and design choices confidently, which can convince a client or customer to get on board with your design.

## 14. TRUST THE PROCESS

A successful design process is the key to a successful design. It may feel long, repetitive, or unnecessary, but you have to trust the process in order to reach the perfect solution.