Studies: Class Politics

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Should politics find their way into the classroom? PRINT *posed this question to two educators. Here are their responses.*

Does politics have a place in the graphic design classroom? Of course. Most subjects do. Health care statistics, automobile performance, color availability for key fobs, social beliefs, personal motivations for making various choices—all are valid for discussion. Politics belong in the classroom. It's the teacher's politics that don't.

I doubt that many people would object to politics in the graphic design classroom, if graphic design is clearly still the subject and politics is just another example of how design works—For example, here's how a corporation, a political party, or an advocacy group wants to depict the situation, or here's the result they're after; here's how people receive or understand or relate to the situation; here's what happens; and here's the role of graphic design in making that happen. That seems not only acceptable, but also integral to teaching someone how to become a graphic designer.

Many people argue that graphic design education needs to deal with the role of design in society and that the discipline will only progress if designers understand their roles in the world and their potential to effect change. Political understanding is needed for real design understanding. If so, that should be included in the curriculum and taught by people with specific expertise in the subject. Graphic design professors are hired for their knowledge of graphic design (or at least we hope they are). They would rightly object to business professors teaching design, or economics professors teaching politics even though these areas are also clearly related.

In her 2002 thesis, "Decoding Visual Language Elements in News Content," designer Kate Brigham notes that while some people take the position that "messages can be skewed and manipulated by their creators, or by designers later on in the process, [which] implies that such practices are always intentional,"

Brigham suggests that "those creating visual messages are as susceptible to the subconscious processes of perception as are viewers. As a result, such manipulations might actually be unintentional responses that are emotionally driven, or otherwise affected by inherent perceptual processes that are as poorly understood by the creators of messages as they are by most viewers."

She's right. Understanding messages and their implications is central to graphic design and graphic design education. But there should be a distinction between making students aware of the effects of their work and trying to get them to make "approved" or "correct" choices. When the professor's politics become the "right" answer, the graphic design classroom has been hijacked. No matter how sincere or well-meaning the instructor, political lectures will result in frustration for students who thought they would study graphic design. And their frustration is justified.

It is the duty of teachers to make the connections between various subjects, to help students understand why all of their classes aren't discontinuous fragments. Design affects political history; anthropology sheds light on design; religious theory is applicable to design. . . . Getting that across is an important job of any teacher, as is the encouragement of broad and integrative thinking on the part of students. When a teacher favors specific beliefs, he or she has ceased teaching and started proselytizing. When the line is crossed from connecting other subjects to design to teaching them in place of design, students are alienated, or they get the message that graphic design is unworthy of their full attention.

Perhaps worst of all, the school will be in the position of having political science taught by someone with no qualifications in the field. If an educational program has been well planned, substituting political theory under the guise of its being graphic design undoes the hard work of curriculum planning.

One does not have to hold broader education in contempt to object to time reserved for graphic design being misspent. Stanley Fish, hardly a force of conservatism by any description, put it this way: "After nearly five decades in academia, and five and a half years as a dean at a public university, I exit with a three-part piece of wisdom for those who work in higher education: Do your job; don't try to do someone else's job, as you are unlikely to be qualified; and don't let anyone else do your job. In other words, don't confuse your academic obligations with the obligation to save the world."