

# Communities of Practice in Design Research

**Abstract** Based on observed changes in design focus largely due to the widespread availability of technology, design research and its role in education and practice need to be newly situated. Design itself is taking on new challenges. Former requirements for legitimate teaching of design are called into question along with the vague classification and understanding of research generally, or in relation to design specifically. Research, theory, and practice are interrelated design elements; they are not isolated; together they can form the basis for developing more useful and specific communities of practice. Related research traditions or domains of interest provide scaffolding, critique, and clear communication for such communities. Design research, as an integral part of design education at all levels, requires its own curricular scaffolding. As more collaborative work is undertaken, designers need to understand other disciplinary approaches to research; their internal presumptions, accepted processes, assessments of validity, and limitations.

## Keywords

Design research  
Research education  
Integrating research and practice  
Collaboration

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Writing from at least twenty-four years of experience working with students in master and Ph.D. programs to develop their thesis and original research in three significantly different higher education environments and serving as editor for a scholarly design journal, *Visible Language*, for twenty-six years, I share with you what I have thought about and learned in this context. This is necessarily my own perspective based on experience and reflection. If what follows causes you to object, reconsider or think more deeply about your own position relative to research, the paper will have succeeded. The context for communities of practice in design research encompasses several tightly interrelated aspects such as changes in design practice, issues in design education, lack of research definition, need to build research into curricular structures, and problems with research communication. Each aspect is taken in turn in this paper leading to the development of communities of practice in design research.

1 Bas van Abel et al., *Open Design Now, Why Design Cannot Remain Exclusive* (Amsterdam, NL: Bis, 2011).

2 van Abel et al., *Open Design Now*, 17.

## Design Changes

Design is changing and much of the change is due to technology that puts at novice's fingertips powerful programs that assist in creation. Authorship, photography, music, image making, media exploration, design in two and three dimensions and more are now possibilities for the novice. Professional value is undercut by these developments, because what designers can contribute is poorly understood. We have seen fundamental changes via technology in communication, prototyping, planning, design process, and other professional activities, to say nothing of more quotidian aspects of life like banking, shopping, healthcare, and information access in general. The vast body of available images and information diminish the special technical skills that designers have mastered, to say nothing of their esthetic sensibility. Now seemingly anyone can be a designer. To explore this change see *Open Design Now*,<sup>1</sup> a book that proposes that everyone is a potential designer. This book comes from the Dutch who are known for pushing on traditions and limitations, and also known for pursuing design for the social good. The book contains articles and case studies that look at the possibilities offered by open access to technology and what this can mean to creation and production. This is not design as usual. It celebrates what technology has put on offer and runs counter to the idea that our technological devices are the ultimate in planned obsolescence, but instead are vehicles supporting creativity for all. "Open design is rooted in information and communication technology, giving us all the instruments to become the one-man factory, the world player operating from a small back room."<sup>2</sup> This puts the book into perspective. This is not some dream; it shows how technology permeates not only everyday life, but also challenges the designer's creative life and future, to say nothing of the economics of design as a livelihood.

Two examples serve to bring the open design idea to the forefront. First, it is now possible to self-publish a book because the technology is available through several sources like Amazon's CreateSpace. This sidesteps the publishing industry and uses existing software for production and the Internet for exposure, promotion, and sales. The author must supply or buy editorial or design services, and yes, some dreadful stuff will be published, but also some good. Second, libraries are changing from repositories of only physical books to purveyors of ebooks. They are reconsidering what it means to be literate, this literacy goes beyond reading, writing, and numeracy to technical literacy and making things – the commons-based peer production mentioned in *Open Design Now*. A three-dimensional printer supports custom designed, one-off productions for those who want to be their own designer or the designer who wants to rapidly

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