

Design Research at the Crossroads of Education and Practice

Abstract This paper takes an experiential perspective in describing the current situation in design education and design practice as seen through the eyes of someone on the ground at the crosshairs between research and design in education and practice. The current situation is marked by the fact that practice leads education in the integration of research with design. The integration is going well. The biggest challenges are the incompatibilities between how design research is done in practice and how research takes place at the university. With the rise of sponsored projects in academia, the need for integration becomes imperative. The North American Design Research Organization (NADRO) aims to serve that need. The paper will conclude with actions that the newly formed NADRO can take to explore and cultivate the new design space between research and design in education and practice.

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Inspiration

This article was inspired by my participation as a Steering Committee Member for the newly formed North American Design Research Organization (NADRO). NADRO was introduced in the inaugural issue of *Dialectic: A Scholarly Journal of Thought Leadership, Education and Practice in the Discipline of Visual Communication Design* by John Zimmerman, Carlos Teixeira, Erik Stolterman, and Jodi Forlizzi, who describe NADRO's aims as

- "Creating a viable, resilient community for design researchers and educators..."
- Mentoring universities to create PhD programs...
- Facilitating research opportunities...
- Bridging design research, education, and practice..."¹

"Bridging design research, education, and practice" is something that I know a lot about. I have been working as a design researcher in both worlds – education and practice – simultaneously for 35 years. I was educated to be an academic researcher, with a PhD in Experimental and Quantitative Psychology. But instead of working in an academic environment I took the challenge to become an "experiment" at a design firm. The aim of this experiment was to explore what would happen when a social scientist collaborated with practicing designers. While working in industry, I also taught design research to design students at a large university. The experiment has been going on for a long time. My experiences at the intersection of education and practice – rather than the academic literature – inform the thoughts contained in this article.

I will start by describing what I see as the current context of design research in education and practice. After that, I will share some memories from working in these two worlds at the same time. Finally, I will suggest that design researchers should explore how to cultivate the new space for design research that is emerging at the crossroads between education and practice.

The Current Context

Today, there is growing interest in the intersection between design education and design practice. As the challenges we face as a society become larger and more complex, we can see the benefits of integrating research with design and connecting education with practice. However, achieving the intersections between education and practice is not easy. There are vast cultural differences between these worlds, and these differences impede progress. Though research and design are now becoming integrated at the front end of the design process, such integration is more evident in practice than it is in education.

Some people talk about the lack of integration in terms of *gaps*. For example, a gap appears when discoveries by researchers at universities fail to be utilized by designers. And a gap also appears when the unmet needs of designers fail to be investigated by the researchers. Such gaps prevent the discovery of research results that can be used to improve the human condition.

There is also a gap between the education designers receive and the roles designers play in practice. Practitioners complain that designers are not trained to be immediately useful in the real world. Educators may not be aware of the changes going on in the real world of practice or they may not feel it is important to address the ever-changing needs of practice. In fact, practice is leading the changes that are taking place, and design graduates are now working in fields for which they are not adequately prepared. The consequence of this lack of integration between education and practice in design is that designers and design researchers do not always

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