

# *Conditions influencing the development of design expertise: As identified in interior design student accounts*



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*This study examines conditions impacting early design expertise development, as identified in student accounts of design education experiences. Thirty-eight interior design students participated in interviews. A constant comparative approach was applied to identify key themes. Findings indicate interviewees perceived conditions influencing their efforts at expertise development in the areas of interpersonal relationships; personal knowledge, skills, and attributes; pedagogical culture; and resources. While this study does not purport to identify conditions influencing design expertise development for all students, it does suggest such development cannot be assumed to concern only cognitive and other personal development factors. A proposed model, derived from findings, is illustrated and directions for future research are explored.*

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**A**s professional practice in fields such as architecture and interior design is increasingly regulated by licensure requirements, and as an accredited disciplinary degree becomes more often a prerequisite for licensure examinations, formal design education plays a greater role than ever before in shaping how fledgling designers develop design expertise and determining who will have the opportunity to gain such expertise. Famous designers such as Frank Lloyd Wright and Ray and Charles Eames are just a few examples of individuals who never completed formal design education, and yet had tremendous impacts on twentieth-century design. Persons with similar biographies could not practice as freely in many twenty-first-century design professions.

This observation is not made to suggest that licensure should not be required for professional design practice, nor that a design-related degree should not be prerequisite to licensure. Instead, it is offered as a basis from which to argue that as we constrain the range of sanctioned pathways available to individuals seeking to develop design expertise and professional status, we should recognize that the experiences students have in formal design programs (sometimes to the exclusion of other types of experiences) may increasingly shape the development and future expression of design expertise.

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In light of this reality, the work reported here seeks to contribute to design expertise literature by examining conditions students perceive to have been either conducive to, or counter-productive to, their success in formal design education.

It is anticipated that examining factors which impinge upon the early development of design expertise as fostered in formal design education experiences has implications in two complementary arenas. First, in the arena of scholarship of teaching and learning, the identification and understanding of challenges faced by students may better equip teachers and curriculum designers to develop experiences that will be of greatest benefit. Second, in the arena of disciplinary self-study, the examination of perspectives held by students coming into a field may provide insights into disciplinary characteristics that have been forgotten or never recognized by individuals who have been socialized into the discipline (Siegel & Stolterman, 2008), as well as clues to future expressions of design expertise. These educational experiences are likely to influence the nature of future expertise as it is collectively expressed within a given discipline to an ever greater extent as shared professional degrees become compulsory for professional practice. Identifying key factors which shape the early development of design expertise, in real time, may help us forecast and pre-emptively evaluate key issues which will characterize the futures of design disciplines.

## *1 Review of literature*

Examining conditions which contribute to the development of early design expertise in the context of formal design education can be informed by two inter-related bodies of literature: (1) that which seeks to identify qualities of design expertise, and (2) that which examines the contexts and conditions under which such expertise is developed. Findings in these two bodies of literature can be further contextualized by a brief exploration of the more general scholarship concerning the nature and acquisition of expertise across disciplines.

### *1.1 Qualities of design expertise*

Research in recent decades has helped shape our understandings of the nature of design expertise. In his widely-cited 1990 article, Cross (Cross, 1990) concluded that expert designers: apply imagination, tolerate ambiguity, adopt solution-oriented approaches, employ abductive thinking, and use non-verbal modeling approaches as they work to develop novel solutions to practical, but often ill-defined problems (paraphrased, pp. 130, 132). Overviews published since this paper (including Cross, 2004; Lawson & Dorst, 2009) have largely reinforced many of Cross's earlier statements — especially with respect to designers' tendencies to treat problems as ill-defined, pose potential solutions before conducting exhaustive analysis, selectively attend to aspects of the problem (problem framing), and tolerate ambiguity.

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