Let’s Do Right by Design by Helping Everyone Else Do Design Right

By Chris Pacione

Rather than debating “design thinking,” let’s concentrate on making design available and usable for the greatest number of people, and the greater good of everyone. It won’t put professional designers out of business—quite the opposite.

During a recent client meeting, I said something I believe deeply and share often: “Everyone designs.” Immediately, a young designer in the group challenged me. “That is not true,” she said. “Everyone does not design, and it’s an insult to me—a professional designer—to insinuate that ‘everyone is a designer.’ Not everyone has the expertise and experience to do what I and my team do.”

I wasn’t taken aback by her remarks. This wasn’t the first time I had encountered this perspective, and it’s understandable among those of us who have formal training in design and years of experience as professional designers. That young designer was simply voicing her frustration with the idea that anyone could assume design competency or take on the title “designer” after a few workshops. She has earned a professional standing that took years of education and application. And she is not alone. Many professional designers and design educators feel this way. They believe the growing popularity of “design thinking” cheapens the value of design and trivializes their profession.

However, this perspective strikes me as both shortsighted and counterproductive, especially as more and more organizations—desperate to innovate—embrace design and attempt to integrate it into their wider work culture. It’s shortsighted because it shortchanges the true power and intent of design. It is counterproductive because it reflects a worldview rooted in an outdated, twentieth-century belief that design is a profession for a special few only, and that it should stay that way.

A few words of disclosure here. The company I lead, LUMA Institute, was founded to share the power of design with anyone who wants to work this way. “Everyone designs” is one of our core beliefs. Even so, we are quite realistic about design’s limitations, and we know it is not a silver bullet that will magically end every struggle with innovation. LUMA’s aim is not to make everyone we serve into professional designers; instead, we are trying to help them become design-literate so they are confident and creative problem-solvers.
I firmly believe, as IDEO’s Tim Brown said years ago, that “design is too important to be left to designers.” Instead of suppressing the groundswell of interest in design, we as design professionals and educators should embrace it by scaling the practice of design in the broadest possible sense. Instead of getting stuck in debates about what “design thinking” is, and whether or not it’s “bullshit,” and who is (or is not) a “real designer,” all of us should be fierce advocates for universal design literacy. Why? Because the demand for good design far outstrips the current number of design professionals. There are just not enough of us to go around. By universal design literacy, I don’t mean simply teaching everyone what design is, and I don’t mean minting millions of design professionals. I mean helping everyone acquire basic skills in observation, synthesis, and creation that they can use on a daily basis to reason and solve problems with design, and do it well. And yes, I mean everyone.

The reality is that everyone already designs, whether we choose to acknowledge it or not. No one needs our permission. Humans have always lived in a world teeming with millions of tangible and intangible things calling for change, and we are hardwired to pursue ways to bring about that change. As Nobel Laureate Herb Simon correctly said, “Everyone designs who devises courses of action aimed at changing existing situations into preferred ones.” As such, products are designed. Services are designed. Policies are designed. Laws and strategies are designed. Business models, negotiations, and curricula are designed. Forms of governance and tactical defense systems are designed. Everything manmade is designed. When something fails, it fails because it is not useful, usable, or desirable for the people or the situation it was designed to serve. And in a world littered with poor design, and in desperate need of continuous improvement, we as design professionals and design educators have an opportunity—a duty, even—to expand design from the profession that it is now, into the liberal art it also needs to become, and to help as many people as we can hone their natural, God–given impulses to “change existing situations into preferred ones.”

However, the professional design community also stands to gain by sharing its knowledge with the masses. Here are three benefits of teaching design, in addition to (or as part of) your design day job.

1. **You’ll increase demand for professional design services, including yours.**

Designers are famous (or infamous, depending on your perspective), for complaining that nobody understands what they do, and that they don’t get seats at the strategic table. Teaching a workshop or coaching a small team in the ways and means of good design is not only an excellent way to demystify design for your internal or external clients, but may also be the best commercial you could ever want about you and the value you bring. In an interview I conducted years ago with Alan Cooper, whose company has been running design workshops since 2002, he said this: “Teaching design turned out to be good for our reputation, and this ultimately helped our business. The product managers, software engineers and interaction designers we taught would return to their organizations from our design boot camps with some basic tools to tackle internal design problems. But when they realized they needed help with some larger challenges, they would bring us in as consultants. In retrospect, this surprised us.”

When you incorporate design training, facilitation, and coaching into your work with others, you’ll not only broaden their understanding of what design is and how they can apply it to a myriad of situations calling for change, but also deepen their appreciation for what is required to do it well and the value good design adds to business. You won’t cannibalize your revenues or diminish the need for your services; on the contrary, you’ll create more demand for your expertise and spark new revenue streams. By teaching your design skills to others, you’ll transform your enterprise from an agency, one that designs for your clients, into an accelerator, one that designs with your clients and amplifies their ability to apply design to all kinds of challenges. And in this market, that means tremendous value.
You’ll help preserve the integrity of design, and weed out the charlatans.

As design gains more traction within organizations that are desperate to innovate, the number of individuals and organizations offering design training has exploded to meet that demand. Some of these offerings are excellent, built on true design principles and practices. But many are not and, sadly, lack truth, rigor, and substance. When your clients or your colleagues begin to ask about a design-centric way of working, you owe it to them and yourself to lead those initiatives—or at the very least partner with an organization you trust, so they can learn authentic design from experts who know what they are talking about and what they are doing.

A friend of mine whose 50-person, in-house design team serves as a central design resource for a Fortune 500 company, was recently surprised and dismayed to learn that one of the company’s business units had hired an outside provider he’d never heard of to teach that team “design thinking.” When he confronted that unit’s leader, she responded, “Oh, you guys do this stuff, too?” I can appreciate how the politics and complexity of large organizations can make it difficult for a design leader to take on added responsibility for design training initiatives, especially when the design team is expected to focus exclusively on the development of new products and services. But by not doing so, you risk allowing novices masquerading as experts, or firms exploiting the hype around design thinking, to propagate less-than-authentic approaches to design—approaches that may well marginalize your team and create misunderstanding of your team’s true value to the business.

You’ll provide another way for people to find meaning in their work.

Almost every organization looks for ways to find deep meaning in its work. In most cases, that meaning comes from delivering highly valuable services to the clients, customers, or constituents they serve. However, many organizations also find meaning through community service, such as packing cartons at the local food bank or donating their time and resources to a worthy cause. Autodesk, one of LUMA’s long-time clients, is teaching human-centered design to its global workforce. Not only are they using these new skills to improve their products and business processes, but some of them are also passing this knowledge on to local schools and the underserved in their communities and around the world. Last year, Autodesk’s ProBono Program collaborated with partners in Rwanda to host an innovation lab. Working with locals, the team used design methods to tackle difficult problems related to the basics of existence—water, health, shelter, food, and energy. These communities are now equipped with simple but powerful design skills they can use to continue changing existing situations into preferred ones.

Let’s do this right.

Yes, everyone designs. But that does not mean they are aware of it, or that they can do it well. This is our moment. Just as a small sliver of steel, once magnetized, will forever point north, so too an individual is forever reoriented when he or she discovers the true intent and power of design.

Imagine a world in which billions of people have basic design skills, so they can frame problems, deeply understand people and situations, pull insights from a sea of data, generate unconventional ideas, sketch, build prototypes, test assumptions, and iterate quickly. Imagine a world in which everyone is as good at reasoning with design as you are, and possesses the confidence and capability to take on all kinds of opportunities calling for change.

We have an enormous opportunity before us. Let’s be “true north” for design by teaching its fundamental principles and practices to everyone. My prediction is that in doing so, we will all benefit.