Is There a Doctor of Design in the House? An Interview with Meredith Davis

Written by Steven Heller
Published on June 19, 2007.

Filed in Voice: Journal of Design in Off the cuff.

Recently, on the AIGA Design Educator community forum, an exchange about terminal degrees in design prompted much discussion about the importance of—and misconceptions about—the MFA.

Professor Meredith Davis, who chairs one of the country's few PhD programs in design at North Carolina State University, has much to say on the master's role and the efficacy of advanced degrees. We caught up with Davis, a 2005 AIGA Medalist, to discuss the present and future of doctorates in design, the importance of research and the nexus of practice and scholarship.

Heller: You wrote: "As director of a PhD program, I think we're a long way from the PhD being the terminal degree in design, and I worry about discussions that suggest that the development of the PhD may 'disqualify' current holders of terminal master's degrees for college teaching." But if the PhD is not "terminal," then what does it offer the recipient?

Davis: As I explained in a recent posting on the AIGA listserv, the MFA is a "*terminal* professional degree." That is a quasi-legal definition, adhered to by universities and accrediting agencies, and its intent is to qualify holders of the degree with the essential competencies to teach in professionally oriented university or college design programs and to work eventually at the highest levels of practice.

Heller: It seems to me that the advanced degree offers two virtues. First, for the academic, it is another level of credibility. And secondly, for the achiever, it is a measure of much more intense study or research and time invested. Since MFA design thesis projects run a fairly broad gamut from, say, designing a typeface family to determining means of on-demand book printing in third world countries, isn't the MFA experience enough? Why go attain a PhD?

Davis: The "typeface to printing on-demand" gamut is from A to M, not A to Z, in my experience. In explaining this, I would refer to a model by Jess McMullin that describes a continuum of design maturity. At the most rudimentary end of the continuum is *styling*, which McMullin describes as "the gateway to hip and cool." Moving along the continuum is *form and function*, which seeks to "make things work better"; this is the work of most baccalaureate programs

in design. The third stage is *problem solving*, which "defines new opportunities within existing problems." I would say most master's programs operate at this stage of the continuum, especially those populated by students who graduated from nonprofessional bachelor's programs (BA, BS and BFA) and change-of-career candidates.

At the most advanced stage of McMullin's continuum is *framing*, in which the "challenges and boundaries for design are redefined" and in which work moves from "executing to shaping strategy." It is this stage of practice that the top tier of master's programs address in preparing their graduates; such academic programs are matched by professional offices that have the same goal to move design into new areas of influence and to transform the nature of practice. An example would be Shelley Evenson's work at Carnegie Mellon to develop the practice of "service design," mirrored by the professional work of Hugh Dubberly. Or the design planning and methods work at the Institute of Design at Illinois Institute of Technology, which meets the needs of Chicago strategy firms like the Doblin Group.

Heller: So you're saying there are more challenges at this level?

Davis: For the most part, design challenges at this level of practice are complex; they require information from many disciplines that must be reconciled in terms of design action. And they often demand knowledge that does not yet exist.

A recent master's project by Amber Howard at NC State University illustrates this approach. Howard determined that there is great potential in digital technology that allows us to "anticipate" changes in our physical well-being. "Anticipation" is different from "predicting"—as in the weather—or "expecting"—as in waiting for a birthday you know will come. The relationship between the visual representation of data and the human sensing of change is not an area with which design has much experience.

Heller: In your estimation, what is the deficiency of a master's degree?

Davis: I'm not sure I would call it a "deficiency." Master's study of this kind addresses a particular perspective or role to be played in some larger design effort. The master's student is capable of framing a design investigation such as Howard's, and is able to identify the issues and speculate about the types of objects or strategies that may be useful. But the content of a two-year master's curriculum is not constructed to develop her ability to conduct empirically valid and reliable research—not designed to support fully the actual product development by industry or to inform with any degree of certainty the future action of other designers who have similar concerns. There is no true accountability in speculative master's work, other than to consider design solutions that are informed by current knowledge and reasonable in their assumptions about people and technology.

On the other hand, there are people for whom "really knowing" is important and clients and audiences or users for whom it is essential. Doctoral students enjoy the search and are committed to the generalizability of the information, to its value in many situations beyond their own projects.

One of the characteristics that distinguish a profession from a trade is a segment of practice devoted exclusively to research. Design is now developing such practices, and there are students for whom this kind of work is very appealing.

Heller: Agreed, but a PhD is a very long, involved process. Is it necessary to make this the highest level of professional/academic achievement? And if so, why?

Davis: The work of these doctoral students is important to the health of the research culture and to future conceptions of design as a discipline of study and a field of practice. A 2005 *Metropolis* survey of 1,051 designers, design faculty, and students in all design disciplines found that as much as 90 percent of design research findings are inaccessible to students and faculty, even in their own institutions. There are no design-sensitive research databases or search engines (enter "branding" in the typical library search and you get books on cattle) and most of the research generated by private practice is proprietary. Therefore, the development of research practice is slower and accomplishes less than it could to increase the value of design in the world. Universities, on the other hand, exist expressly to generate and disseminate knowledge. The work of doctoral students is accessible through library catalogs and usually results in publications for the field.

As design continues to lose territory to other fields that now claim our traditional expertise—computer science programs, for example, now offer study in information design—it is critical that we bring more to interdisciplinary teams than styling or meeting facilitation. Research by these other fields is notoriously naïve with respect to visual and meaning-making issues. We have very real work to do and what we decide is worth doing will define the future of our discipline.

Heller: What does the PhD concept mean for those who have presumed a master's is their highest degree?

Davis: The PhD is not another step in acquiring increasingly "professional" qualifications. It is a very different path to the development of specific kinds of knowledge that don't currently exist. Just as the MBA is the terminal degree for professional study in business, the MFA or its equivalent is currently for people who want to practice or teach design. There are a few professional doctorates (Doctor of Architecture, for example), but they don't have much of a foothold in the field and their intent is not research. Many of the European doctoral programs also follow the practice-based model.

In the United States, however, the Doctor of Philosophy is for those students who see themselves as researchers, as knowledge generators, not as advanced practitioners or better prepared teachers of problem solving in professional programs. This is why I argued on the listserv that fear mongering about the demise of the MFA is not productive; it arbitrarily pits research against professional development at a time when the field needs both.

And I believe it will be this new generation of doctoral students who will ramp up the level of expectations in master's programs, who will create the clear distinctions between undergraduate and graduate studies that don't currently exist in most schools. They will bring new dimensions to the framing and criticism of student projects

and will be as comfortable in seminars and lecture classes as they will be in studios. This will be especially important in research universities, where they will also have active research careers that shape what students learn and how design relates to other academic disciplines.

Heller: You have talked about emerging research. And indeed research has become a buzzword among designers. What is this research? Is it theoretical, practical or what?

Davis: To use an analogy, there is chemistry and there is the work of being a chemist. When we study how molecules are organized or hypothesize about the nature of an unknown element, we employ different kinds of information and skills than those necessary to conduct an experiment or to synthesize a known compound. There is information about the *discipline* of chemistry and it is distinct from information about the practice of being a chemist. We can conduct research in either area, but the types of knowledge and the methods for discovering them are very different. And they have different kinds of value to the field and to others.

The 2005 *Metropolis* survey found that 81 percent of design practitioners say their offices engage in research, and 65 percent of university department chairs say it is necessary and required of their faculty. But when asked what they mean by research, answers ranged from choosing color swatches to acquiring deep understanding of users. When queried about the most important topics for research attention by the field, sustainability ranked at the top of the list, but systems theory was among lowest valued areas of investigation. It is nonsensical to think that we can make any progress on issues of sustainability without understanding the nature of complex systems and how they behave. So clearly, there is confusion within the field about what constitutes research and what is worthy of our efforts.

Heller: In other academic areas, research (combined with publishing) is key to promotion. Should this be the case in design studies? Shouldn't practice amount for the lion's share of credential?

Davis: This picture of research is complicated by the necessity of art and design faculty to achieve tenure and promotion within their institutions. We have sold university and college administrations, justifiably, on a set of performances that range from freelance practice to art exhibitions, to self-published writing, to the funded development of new knowledge. But in doing so, unfortunately, we've diluted the meaning of "research" by applying it to an array of laudable, but very diverse activities, most of which have few benchmarks comparable in rigor to those of the sciences and humanities.

In the interest of job security, this sloppy definition of research equates the design of a moderately creative solution to a company's capability brochure with empirical research strategies for gauging the role of emotion in user interactions with technology—a blog entry on the internet with an article in a refereed journal. I believe our cavalier use of the term "research," and the lack of meaningful criteria for its evaluation, suppress the development of new

knowledge in design and the advancement of faculty skills in scholarly work. If it is OK to hang something in an unjuried university exhibition and call it research, then why go through the laborious processes of securing funding, conducting tedious investigations, and writing for refereed journals and book publications? Given the high teaching loads of design faculty, the former is the easier route, but it doesn't contribute to the field in ways that are likely to transform practice.

Heller: In your PhD program, what are the rigors and requisites—and what is the expected outcome?

Davis: Most people don't go through this for status or privilege; there are much easier ways to gain those things than to immerse yourself in doctoral study for three-plus years.

The admissions process varies among the four schools that offer PhDs in industrial and graphic design, but most are modeled on practices in other fields with longer histories of doctoral study. Our applicants take the Graduate Record Exam, submit transcripts of previous college work, and provide background information and recommendations that confirm predispositions for academic study. We usually require a previous design degree, but we also consider students whose work in other fields has been design-oriented. There is significant design-related work done in other fields that makes it difficult to exclude non-design degrees; interaction design work, for example, may be found in a number of disciplines.

What differs from the application processes in other fields is the portfolio requirement. And unlike the portfolio review for admissions to master's study in design, we look for evidence that the applicant has a clear idea of research interests and recognizes the distinction between professional studio-based study and doctoral research in design. This may be evident through writing samples, critical analyses of recent readings, or the depth or breadth of previous research experiences beyond required study.

In addition, one of our 14 doctoral faculty must step forward and agree to mentor the student. Doctoral study is less about the courses taken than about the research relationship with a faculty adviser. If there is no interest expressed by a faculty member in the student and/or the research topic, there is no basis on which to build that relationship. Many of our students also work under research assistantships that pair them with faculty in the faculty's work. They're paid for this work, but there still needs to be some affinity between the student and the investigation. So some very qualified students may not be admitted because their topic is inconsistent with the expertise or availability of faculty.

Heller: What does it mean to be committed to the Ph.D. process?

Davis: Once admitted to the NC State PhD program in design, the student undertakes two years of coursework and at least one year of dissertation work. The required coursework common to all students includes courses in research paradigms and research methods, as well as a second course requirement in methods more specifically re-

lated to the student's investigation. Students undertaking quantitative studies also take a course in statistics, while students in history and criticism study philosophy.

Students have milestone reviews that assess their ability to frame research problems and to conduct independent work as they progress through the program. There are some students who are successful in faculty-driven course-work, but who just are not suited to the rigor and uncertainty of independent research; these milestones confirm that the student can sustain research activity upon graduation and without faculty guidance.

We also believe the ability to make presentations at research conferences and to write for professional journals is essential. We have a budget that supports student presentations and we track their publishing records very closely through an annual reporting process. In many cases, the student co-publishes with the faculty as a start of this dissemination effort.

Heller: Who are today's PhD candidates? Are they practitioners, scholars or something else?

Davis: Ours is an interdisciplinary program, so we compete for students with about 20 architecture programs and three industrial/graphic design programs nationally. We've graduated 15 students since the program's inception in 1999 (most of the early admissions were students with backgrounds in architecture and landscape architecture), and we have another 15 in the pipeline. About half of them are international students, whose countries often require the PhD for university teaching positions. Many return to teaching in their home countries, but several have gone on to establish their own research practices.

The American students are more varied. They range from a fifty-something full professor to students who come directly from their master's studies. Of the five students beginning the program next fall, three are graphic designers with established professional careers in high-profile design offices or their own practices. One is well published in the design press, but all are good writers. A fourth student has worked in universal design and will do her research assistantship in our Center on that topic. The fifth student is interested in sustainable architecture and has a history of television journalism on the subject, in addition to her master's study in interior architecture.

Heller: What is the future of the PhD in design in this country?

Davis: This is an enterprise that requires very particular faculty resources and a supportive institution that understands the challenges of launching a new degree program that has few precedents nationally. I think programs will be most likely to find homes in research universities where there are the commitments and infrastructure in place to foster this kind of work.

Heller: Do you foresee this as a growth degree or simply a marginal pursuit for the truly committed?

Davis: I hope this work won't be marginal, and inquiries make me optimistic that the audience for design research is growing. I truly believe it is the future of the field. What students in the current programs do over the next decade will be the test. If the outcomes of their studies are of value to the field, programs will prove that the effort is worth doing.

About the Author. Steven Heller, co-chair of MFA "Designer As Author" at School of Visual Arts, is the author of *Merz to Emigre and Beyond: Avant Garde Magazine Design of the Twentieth Century* (Phaidon Press), *The Education of a Comics Artist* co-edited with Michael Dooley (Allworth Press), *The Education of a Graphic Designer*, Second Edition and *The Education of an Art Director* (with Veronique Vienne) (Allworth Press).