

not  
white

*diversity in beginning design education*



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## Not White (in the Usual Way): A Learning Laboratory for Diversity in Beginning Design Education

This paper will present a set of “ability criteria” common to a diverse collection of disciplines comprising a design college and which serve as a framework for its core program of beginning design education. It will elaborate on how the criteria have been utilized to develop the experimental course “Design Studies 102X: Learning Lab.” As the key component of the newly defined curriculum, this course crosses the disciplinary boundaries of six departments to provide a global perspective of design and create a richer educational experience for incoming students. Its foundation rests on a commitment to the question of how particular identity or difference, whether disciplinary habit, cultural construct or global concern can be accepted as a universal condition.

During the 2001-02 academic year, the faculty of the College of Design at Iowa State University envisioned, debated, then approved of a change that would effect each of its six departments in a profound way: the departments of Architecture, Art and Design, Community and Regional Planning, Graphic Design, Interior Design, and Landscape Architecture would consolidate their beginning design education programs into one core unit. All incoming students, regardless of their anticipated major, would emerge from the same first-year program of study conceived to equip and make possible their liberty to apply to either of the six degree tracks. A firm belief was held that despite the obvious disciplinary differences there existed a series of commonalities at work in all the disciplines, and on such commonalities should the core program be founded.

A development team was formed consisting of one assistant professor (Arch.), three lecturers (Arch., Art/Design, LA/CRP), and two undergraduate research assistants (Arch., LA). Through initial debate, the idea emerged that the course should exist as an autonomous entity in the College, not a ‘watered-down-to-the-lowest-common-denominator’ version of either of the professional programs, or clumsy, ill-formed hybrid. No part of the course (except what was planned as the final project) would focus on specific disciplinary knowledge or skills. Instead, the course would aspire to the goals of the college’s envisioning plan, which is to say it would be centered on “making” in the broadest sense of the word. Furthermore, and perhaps avoiding what amounts to a failure of similar initiatives, *Learning Lab* would not be composed of bits and pieces from existing courses.

Contrary to expectations in the College, the developers concluded that *Learning Lab*, would not be about “inter-disciplinarity,” per se, because beginning students have no discipline expertise or knowledge to offer. Nor would it consider incoming students as tabula rasa, a problem that leads to a teacher-centered paradigm. Instead, the challenge of the course would be to link incoming students to a contemporary concern in which the broad and diverse community of design was currently engaged and which they could appreciate, all the while remaining “learner-centered.” That concern was the “everyday.” In all areas of design, there has been a growing interest in the commonplace, the un-monumental themes and routines of daily life. The developers determined that all students had their own version of this category of experience and, serving as a microcosm of the larger culture, their particularity would prove to be good ground on which to make a successful transition into design education. Thus, the course would be an extra-disciplinary, project-based learning studio exploring how design intersects with everyday life. As such, it would recognize as the threshold for beginning design education the particular knowledge already recorded by the

abstract  
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Mitchell Squire is currently Assistant Professor of Architecture and Associate Chair for Academic Affairs in the Department of Architecture at Iowa State University. Since 1997 he has taught design studios at all levels of the Bachelor of Architecture professional degree program and has served as level coordinator for the third and fifth year studios. In 2001 he taught at the University of Minnesota as *Cass Gilbert Visiting Professor of Architecture*, and has since been a visiting critic at the University of Minnesota, the University of Michigan, and the University of Arkansas. He serves as Representative for Design on the Department’s curriculum committee and was recently appointed to the College’s Envisioning Foundations Task Force, charged with the development of a new “Beginning Design” program to integrate beginning design across all departments of the College. His articles include topics such as the Slave Ship ‘Brookes’ and Henry ‘Box’ Brown, and investigations of the relationship between architecture, race and culture. His most recent work, “cultureWARE: implements of desire, or, EAT THIS” deals with the relationship between architecture and haute cuisine.



Figure 1: "LabRats!" poster. Showing students holding examples of the "matrix" project.

lived experiences of incoming students. Within this framework, the important work of design education can begin straightaway while remaining learner-centered and while anticipating particularity as the norm.

*Learning Lab* draws from everyday material culture, the lived experiences of everyday people, and the information and media systems within the everyday public domain, producing work that stimulates discussion and debate, engage the imagination, and provide an overall enhancement of beginning education in the College of Design. The course is structured around a series of current design initiatives from around the world: The Netherlands, Italy, the United States of America, Great Britain and Japan. These "not white (in the usual way)" initiatives serve as precedents for the work performed. These initiatives have been selected to foster an appreciation of design's global interest to engage if not transform everyday life. Through critical thinking and project-based methods of invention and design, students engage (1) aesthetic and pragmatic conditions that influence the design of our everyday lives, (2) current trends in design and formal invention relative to everyday material culture, and (3) methods, strategies and resources used by designers to strengthen conceptual and critical thinking. Beginning students are assigned projects to work on in teams or as individuals, through which they begin developing the set of common abilities linking the various disciplines of the College, and which will enable them to engage the broad spectrum of design in a variety of modes and contexts.

## paper

### Introduction

Its authors defined it an "extra-disciplinary, project-based learning environment." What was meant by "extra-disciplinary" was that no part of the experimental course, Design Studies 102X: *Strangely Familiar by Design*, would focus on the specific disciplinary knowledge and skills that frame the existing beginning design courses of the six departments comprising the College. Instead, the course aspired to the goals of the recent Envisioning Plan, a landmark initiative within the College to rethink beginning design education, which is to say the course would center on "making" in the broadest sense of the word. Furthermore, as stated in the envisioning document, no course planned for implementation should be composed of bits and pieces from existing courses. To that end, the authors of the Learning Lab sought to align the course with what seemed to be absent in the College, that is, with current design initiatives focusing on everyday aspects of material culture. This would be their strategic way of constructing a threshold allowing beginning design students a smooth transition for into design culture.

The underlying premise used by the authors was a commitment to the question of how particular identity or difference, whether that is a disciplinary habit, cultural construct or global concern could be accepted as the universal condition for which one could design. The projects gathered were to manifest consideration of design across multiple scales and enfolding an array of concerns relating to the formulation of connections between identity, domestic routine and material culture. This very difficult rendering of the course was attempting to understand design as *the* articulation of variety of particular interests. Projects would then need to tease out greater degrees of contingency within the everyday material world instead of the normal rigidity to which we've grown accustomed. In essence, instead of being the universal condition to which everyone must subscribe, "whiteness" becomes that on which everyone can in-scribe or de-scribe their particular identity. Stated differently, "whiteness" becomes "not white (in the usual way)."

### Demonstrative Learning: Abilities are the Outcomes

Students of the *Learning Lab*, as the course was coined, were assured they already knew the world of the everyday and that it was perhaps all too familiar: a world where they stored various items; prepared, cooked and ate food; dressed and undressed the body; inhabit designed spaces; live as people. The course would try to engage parts of this world as though they were strange, looking with eyes that were more critical. Students would make images, objects, texts and spaces, in groups and as individuals, en route to developing a set of common abilities which link the various disciplines of the College. Those abilities are as follows:

- translating ideas or viewed subjects into two-dimensional images and/or three-dimensional constructions, purposely employing visual and material processes and media, [*begin to master the design process on a fundamental level*]
- investigating the external world and the world of thoughts, ideas and imagination, [*begin to think and inquire critically about the world*]
- analyzing and appraising a variety of design works, references and resources, [*begin to conduct design research*]
- collaborating on design teams, [*begin to interact respectfully*]
- appreciating craftsmanship [*begin developing a basic competency in combining technique and materials effectively and beautifully*]
- communicating about design clearly, willingly and convincingly, [*begin exercising basic literacy in oral, visual and written presentations*]
- evaluating and assessing their own work against that of peers and also what has preceded it historically, [*begin striving toward innovation*]



Figure 2: Selections from *Do Shirt* Project.

These abilities were considered demonstrative. The work emerging from them was the only evidence of what the beginning design student had learned, come to know or was able to do. Through carefully designed projects, students would develop an understanding of the content of a course—which is how design can be understood as a creative act that adds value to our everyday lives—*while* achieving necessary abilities. These anticipated outcomes would prove a beginning student capable of engaging design in a variety of modes and contexts. As such, with these abilities beginning to be acquired through the first year curriculum, a broad foundation is laid allowing for achievement regardless of a student’s eventual chosen discipline.

### Criticality: the Key to Diversity in Beginning Design

The “x” suffix in the course number indicates, obviously, that the course was “experimental.” However, because the second ability outcome (“investigating the external world of thoughts, ideas and the imagination”) presented what seemed to be the most difficult to achieve, pointing to a more critical engagement by the design student, the authors thought it should also stand for two additional things. First, it would stand for “extraordinary making”. The kind of making that has power to magnify if not change conditions of the everyday as well as be beautiful and useful. The course would do this by being structured around current design initiatives that seek to transform otherwise ordinary objects and spaces through a number of different tactics, some of which were:

- surprise displacement (making the familiar strange),
  - scale transposition (making the small large and the large small)
  - unexpected objectification (elevating the commonplace to a status typically reserved for the ceremonial and the commemorative); or
  - highlighting artificiality (altering the course of “nature”).
- (Blauvelt, 2003)

Second, the “x” would stand for critical design, as in “x marks the spot.” Critical design is design that asks carefully crafted questions and makes us think. Often challenging and provocative, this form of design aims to push the cultural and aesthetic potential of design to its limit. Here’s a short list of the kind of critical design objects students were asked to make or explore in the Learning Lab:

- polemical objects: objects that force us to reconsider our relationship to products and that dictate new rituals of use and expectations of performance.
  - multifunctional objects: objects that change both shape and use, thereby blurring the traditionally fixed relationship between so-called “form and function”.
  - value fiction objects: objects that have technologies that are realistic but the social and cultural values are often fictional. The aim of these objects is to encourage viewers to ask themselves why the values embodied in the proposal seem ‘fictional’ or ‘unreal.’ Value fiction projects asks for the development of alternative and often gently provocative artifacts which set out to encourage people through humor, insight, surprise and wonder.
- (Dunne and Raby, 2001)

### The Shape of the Semester

Project 1: *Do Shirt* [about a multi-functional object] (See Figure 2.)

The semester began with a project that utilized a critically designed product from the Netherlands, an oversized white tee shirt called a ‘do shirt’. It was 10 times too big, but claimed to be 10 times more useful. Students were given a tee and asked, as the creators had invited, to propose a use for such a strangely familiar thing. There were three distinct phases to this project. For the first phase, students were to photograph the proposed use in a straightforward way that would capture the essence of the use. The ingenuity of the proposal would demonstrate how they had embraced the product to discern critical aspects relative to their everyday lives. The second phase required that each student take an image from a different group and alter the “content” of the image through techniques of montage and collage. The third phase required that students write a 500-word essay explaining the methods, strategies and resources used by the makers of the do shirt to strengthen the critical position of an everyday object of apparel.



Figure 3: *Terra!* phase one work in progress.

Recognizing the broad familiarity and the almost universal role that objects of apparel play in the construction of identity, it is not difficult to see how the entire effort behind the do shirt was an attempt to elicit societal change through a brand name. Seldom is a brand started without a product in hand. Yet the publicity firm KesselsKramer of Amsterdam decided to create one. They called it 'do.' They developed a 'do' mentality, publicized it world wide then left it to be supported by products at a much later date. In fact, 'do' does not have any products or services of their own, but works with anyone who has an idea that fits the philosophy. That way, 'do' could be an ever-changing brand that would depend on what the public would do. As part of their anti-complacency position, the brand intended to foster social responsibility, concern for the planet, ideas for change, and a willingness to take action. (<http://www.dosurf.com/>)

What seemed to be a lighthearted, almost laughable venture turns out to be a rather serious and radical attempt to push design toward political action: for, in this project, we had at our disposal the work of a design enterprise that examines how problems inherent in our culture can be addressed through acts of design. This was the perfect project to initiate beginning students into the culture of design as well as set the stage for the remaining work, projects that were equally critical in their formulation.

#### Project 2: *Terra! The Grass Arm Chair* [about a polemical object] (See Figure 3.)

The second project engages a product from Italy, a cardboard frame and a bag of grass seed entitled *Terra: The Grass Arm Chair*. This project was delivered in two phases: (1) hands-on construction of the product, and (2) the creation of a similar design that we called a 'matrix'. Like the do shirt, this project put the student in direct contact with a current design initiative. Nucleo Design Solutions is a young design firm in Torino, Italy, consisting of three women and two men. Their body of work includes graphic design, industrial design, interiors and exhibition/installation design, all emerging from questions concerning the needs of contemporary living. In the Terra! chair, they examine the potential for creating a personalized living environment. Their critique is that increasingly impersonal buildings and spaces dominate the world, and thus to counter they propose systems that do not just furnish a particular environment but allow users to learn about the environment by creating it. (<http://www.nucleo.to/>)

Given this thesis, Terra! The Grass Armchair suggests that the best way to learn about an object is to construct it. Nucleo would argue that no one has a greater degree of intimacy. So we located a site (the instructor's back yard), obtained a Terra chair and set out to see if this was true. Not only were the students asked to consider Nucleo's thesis but to imagine its implication for the design profession. Their final task was to produce a model of their own design using cardboard. Their matrix was given the "program" to allow the body to regain contact with ones definition of "nature" or "culture." It would have to be suitable for outdoor or indoor application. Nucleo's ultimate claim is that the chair can be part of any "landscape." "If you are in a desolate suburb surrounded with cement," they encourage, "make it out of cement, if you live in front of an American highway, make it out of asphalt, if you are in the north pole, use snow...." (<http://www.nucleo.to/>)

#### Interlude: *Material Witness* (about material deployment in design) (See Figure 4.)

An interlude was constructed between the first two projects and the last two as a way of capitalizing on the material flexibility proposed by the Terra! chair. It was an opportunity to increase learning outcomes in the areas of collaboration, employing material processes, and analyzing and appraising design works. This "interlude" consisted of various teams examining the material, tectonic, spatial, or scale potential of the matrix. Three of these teams engaged in full-scale construction of their matrix. A second and more extensive writing assignment was also incorporated into the "interlude."

Unlike the Interlude, the last two projects of the semester would present a drastic shift from physical making of this sort, putting students in contact with a newly defined "theory" of design and a form of urban design "research."

#### Project 3: *Placebo Project* [about a value-fiction object] (See Figure 5.)

In *Design Noir: the Secret Life of Electronic Objects*, London-based designers Anthony Dunne and Fiona Raby explore the way we interact with electronic objects. They have proposed a new design genre, "Design Noir," in which designers develop ideas for products that fulfill the more hidden desires of our everyday lives. Students were asked to create "placebo objects" constructed according to certain "value-fictions." These objects would provide for a human need left un-addressed by design and would, of necessity, be somewhat disturbing, subversive, funny or poetic. By requesting they combine and/or manipulate 'off-the-shelf' products, this project hopes for a critical form of making, "product misuse."

#### Project 4: *Pet Architecture* [about a surprising object] (See Figure 6.)

The final project, *Pet Architecture*, relies on a "guidebook" authored by Yoshiharu Tsukamoto of the Tokyo Institute of

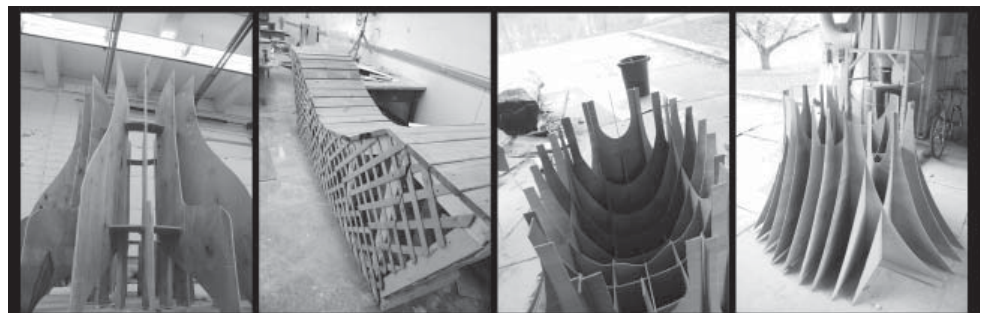


Figure 4: Interlude: Material with full-scale constructions of selected matrixes.



Figure 5: *Placebo Project: Hot/Cold Player Thermometer.*

Technology and Japanese design group Atelier Bow-Wow. This guidebook is a catalogue of 81 small buildings sited in unexpected places that are by-products of urban development. The studio project began with students participating in a “scavenger hunt” for similar architecture in the local community. It then moved on to programming, site selection and the execution of their final design project of pet architecture.

### Assessment Check

For a total 29 studio days, 5 projects, 2 papers, 1 quiz, and 1 project statement constituted the workload. But what in fact was learned? How does anyone know for sure what students gain from having done an assignment? The authors of the *Learning Lab* were not content with attributing gains where they were not certain they had actually occurred. Therefore, with a few weeks remaining in the semester, a summative questionnaire was created to determine the students’ intellectual impression of what they had learned and to compare their responses to the stated learning outcomes. The questionnaire asked students to list five to seven things they had learned or considered important to have experienced in the course. Only a sampling of their responses are included, sufficient to show both the genuine nature of their reflection and the degree to which the authors were successful or unsuccessful in creating a smooth transition into design education by the use of the ‘everyday’ as the substantive framework for the course.

#### Student #1

1. The importance of little things.
2. Your ideas mean nothing if not on paper.
3. Things don’t have to be normal to be useful.

#### Student #2

1. How to recognize design in everything.
2. Also, the proper use of certain media.

#### Student #3

1. Everything can be considered design.
2. Criticism is good.
3. Things can have more than one use, and it may be something completely out of the ordinary

#### Student #4

1. The risks and benefits of open-ended team projects.
2. Project ideas take on lives of there own as they leave our direct control.
3. The benefit of remaining flexible.

#### Student #5

1. If you don’t get it right the first time, try, try, again.

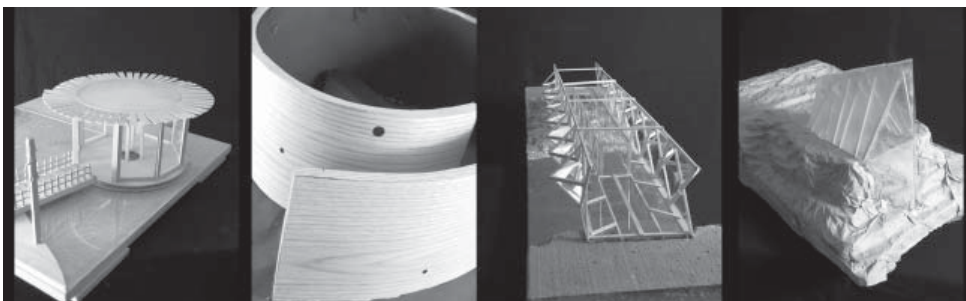


Figure 6: Selected “pets” from the *Pet Architecture* project.

Student #6

1. I have experienced [that] everyone’s different

Student #7

1. Not everything has to be totally original because chances are that someone else has done the same thing or something very similar.
2. Talk and share ideas.

Student #8

1. Form doesn’t necessarily follow function.
2. Criticism is okay and you need to learn from it.

Student #9

1. Things don’t always go your way.
2. Time is an issue.

Student #10

1. We have had to learn to put our thoughts into action by doing.

Student #11

1. Learn from other people’s work.
2. Listen to everyone’s input in a group.

Student #12

1. Being precise makes a difference when building a real thing.
2. Working with Student #6: being partners exchanging ideas and helping each other.
3. Learn more!! ALWAYS.

The complete set of 120 responses was then aligned with the seven learning outcomes by tallying the number of times they mentioned or implied the substance of those outcomes. All did not fit neatly into the predetermined categories but began to define new areas that were of equal importance. The alignment is as follows:

· translating ideas...[begin to master the design process on a fundamental level]	24
· investigating the external world...[begin to think and inquire critically about the world]	18
· analyzing and appraising references and resources...[begin to conduct design research]	19
· collaborating on design teams...[begin to interact respectfully]	10
· appreciating craftsmanship...[begin combining technique and materials effectively]	14
· communicating about design...[begin exercising basic literacy in presentation]	01
· assessing and evaluating your work...[begin valuing criticism and striving toward innovation]	10

Other areas:

· time management	07
· becoming a design student	16
· about the professor	01

**Conclusion**

The most demanding part of the course was to maintain a spirit of experimentation, inquiry and research in the design student. The best design studios are those where theories, techniques, and methods of design are constantly challenged, put into new configurations, or excavated for deeper meaning and a more positive effect. The devoted design students must see themselves, then, unafraid to take risks or to walk in the dark. During the “Interlude,” the work was frustrating, challenging, intimidating and nerve racking. Yet, it was also rewarding. It was all these things because no one knew, not even the studio instructor, what the end product ought be. This is not an admission of pedagogical irresponsibility, but reflects a way—the best way—to learn: that is, by discovery. We began this experimental course with a simple question: could we create a course for the new curriculum, whereby beginning design students could begin acquiring an initial set of abilities without being structured around discipline specificity and without having to disregard the knowledge and particular interests they bring with them? We did.

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