# Double 'Blind Spots' of the Academia and Design Industry

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## ABSTRACT

The paper intends to reveal the current working situation and the professional learning opportunity for graduates in the graphic design industry of Hong Kong.  Unlike other professionals, there is no official apprenticeship training that graphic design graduates would receive in the first three years of employment.  This study is therefore to investigate whether or how the responsibilities are shared by academics and firm owners to facilitate learning during that period.  This research is an on-going PhD research study, at this stage, this paper mainly addresses the findings of the qualitative interviews.  Though the sample sizes are not relatively big, the interviewees were carefully selected all being representative participants of their fields.  Overall, the current qualitative results have indicated that majority of the design academics and design firm owners deny their own responsibility for training the graduates and pushing it to one another.  With such evidence illustrated, a mutually irresponsible '**Blind Spot'** seems to have identified on the part of both the academia and design industry.


**Keywords: Hong Kong Graphic Design Graduates, Professional Competence, Transitional Period Training**

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Generally speaking, graphic design has been considered as a profession since the Industrial Revolution in England. Industrialization had drawn a line between fine art and graphic design (Cardoso, 2005, Drucker & MCvarish, 2009), giving birth to graphic design as a modern design profession (McCoy, 1997, Davis, 2005). Graphic design education was originated by the Bauhaus school found in Germany in 1919, which was deemed the earliest formation of design studio and graphic design practice concept (Drucker & MCvarish, 2009). Robust growth of graphic design programs was seen around the world in the last few decades, set up by various vocational schools, universities, fine art colleges offering undergraduate, postgraduates and even doctorate degrees, programs are in vast varieties each focusing on different aspect of graphic design. Some scholars commented that the design education phenomenon has certainly produced many graphic design graduates, but there could be too few being competent (McCoy, 1997, Heller, 2005).

This similar situation could also be happening in Hong Kong. The most recent official design research of Hong Kong: The Design Task Force (2003) and DesignSmart (2008), have indicated that design professional practice of all disciplines has fallen short and Hong Kong is in lack of competent designers. 'Professional' designers have not always been valued by the design owners and clients. If this phenomenon continues, 'professional graphic designers' will continue to remain as 'exotic menials' (Heskett, 2009, p.71), a term that was used to describe designers by George Nelson.

The research also pointed out that designers, design firm owners and educators have to share some degrees of responsibilities. Focusing back to the graphic design discipline, the 'bright side' of the research is that design academia will always be open for criticism, having dialogues with each other seeking for further improvement. On the contrary, the 'dark side' is that major research findings seldom address the bridging of differences between small-to-medium sized enterprises (SME) employers, and SME owners rarely look into design research. Sadly, the majority of the design population is actually working under these SME companies (Design Task Force, 2003).

The critical issue could be that, some design owners may believe the academics should have provided essential skills for graduates to move on from entry to higher level of competence, so they should not be responsible for providing training. On the contrary, the academics may believe that the design firm owners should provide on-going professional apprenticeship training for graduates to profess to a higher level of competence. Based on the above hypothesis of the phenomenon, this study is geared to focus on the professional development of graphic designer in the 'transitional period', i.e., the initial three working years in the design industry since they graduated from the design institutes. To examine this hypothesis, there are two major questions to be addressed; 'what is the learning situation in workplace for graphic design graduates in the

transitional period in Hong Kong?', or 'how are responsibilities shared by academics and design firm owners to facilitate development of competence during the transitional period?'

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

### 2.1 WHAT IS A PROFESSION?

According to the website of Cambridge dictionary, the definition of profession is that "any type of work which needs special training or a particular skill, often one which is respected because it involves a high level of education".  Schein (1972) explains the definition of professional, who is committed in a full-time occupation and expected to have lifelong career.  Professional has to serve and make decision for client based on the objective needs.  The professional is assumed to know better than the clients and equip a specialized body of knowledge and expertise after a prolonged period of professional training.  However, Eraut (1994) argues that "[T]he professions are a group of occupations the boundary of which is ill-defined.  While most powerful professions of law and medicine are commonly perceived as the 'ideal type', few others even approach their degree of influence.  Public-sector professions with significantly less power, such as teachers and nurses, were described by Etzioni (1969) as 'semi-professionals'; but this simply added one further ill-defined category." (p.1)

### 2.2 GRAPHIC DESIGN AS A PROFESSION

Davis (2005) comments on the professional development of graphic design that "graphic design arose from the 'trades' of printing and typesetting, and, until recently, its practitioners were educated in working apprenticeship or vocational programs focused almost entirely on the technical and formal issues necessary to bringing image and text to print.  Encouraged by the information age and the growth of the knowledge economy, however, the field has developed new aspects and behaviors that more fully express its more recent status as a profession." (P.67).  However, McCoy (1997) comments that graphic designer has failed to be recognized as professional.  She argued that US Government Labor Department did not a have professional category for 'graphic design', while graphic artists were under the category of 'fine artists or visual artists'.  It seemed that the US Labor Department defined graphic design as a decorative function than a professional service.  While four years' degree is the basic requirement to be recognized as a professional by the Department, graphic designer who has received four years' degree university training in US same as the years of kindergarten teaching has failed to receive a public recognized professional status.  On the other hand, McCoy (1997) explains that graphic design communities and academics should have some serious reflection about the qualities of designers that education system had produced, which could be the cause for the current view of government officials on the graphic design profession.  Swubdells, Atkinson & Sibely (2001) criticizes that the professional

standards of designers, "…compared to the standardized and institutional rigors of, for example, architecture or medicine, a hierarchy from architecture, through design, down to art, may be interpreted as a structure of 'major' to 'minor' professions.' (p.130)

## 2.3 TRANSITIONAL PROFESSIONAL TRAINING OF GRAPHIC DESIGNER COMPARED WITH THAT OF OTHER PROFESSIONALS

Under graphic design education of Hong Kong, there are two general groups of design institutes: government sub-vented and private.  Government sub-vented group includes the universities and vocational institutes. Although there are 'mandatory' and 'voluntary' student internship offered in the graphic design programs of sub-vented institutes, there will be no formal professional training or examination for graduates after leaving the institutes to further qualify themselves as 'professional designer' in Hong Kong.  The professional training will have to lay on the fate of the individual graduate and his/her employer.  We do not know whether we, as design practitioners, educators or members of design associations, have in fact long been accepting graphic design as a 'minor' profession, or that some of the leading graphic design practitioners might have all along been admitting themselves as in the profession of aesthetic production.  Yet, there is no professional competency measure framework and compulsory professional training developed in Hong Kong to enhance the graduates' knowledge and skills to battle their way up their career journey.  On the contrary, by comparing other professions in Hong Kong such as architecture, accountancy and social work, they all have unique training during the transitional period. Architectural graduates have to be engaged in two years' of supervised works in an architectural workplace before taking up the professional qualification examination (HKIA)(n.d.). Accountancy graduates have to gain three years' of practical experience working for authorized employers in order to become Certified Public Accountant (HKICPA)(n.d.); social work students and graduates have to take many hours of practicum, fieldwork placement under supervision by qualified fieldwork supervisors to become a Registered Social Worker, while professional bodies of social workers also provide Continuing Professional Development (CPD) program for social workers (SWRB) (n.d.).  Some people may argue that professionals such as architect, doctors, social workers and accountants have to deal with 'life and death' and safety issues of their clients, so by comparison, graphic designers have lighter responsibilities.  However, many design scholars consider that graphic design is contributing tremendous values towards organizations, markets, societies and economies around the world (Heller and Fink, 1996, Heskett, 2005, Frascara, 2006, Ruyssenaars & Selders, 2008).

## 2.4 THE EARLY PROFESSIONAL LEARNING AND DEVELOPMENT – TRANSITIONAL PERIOD

Eraut (1994) points out some important facts through research on learning professional. "Indeed, the first two or three years after qualifying are probably the most influential in developing the particular personalized pattern of practice of every professional acquires." (p.11).  Eraut (2007) explains that the main challenge of the transition from education to actual workplace environment involves "different types of discourse and epistemologies"(p.116).  What considered as knowledge in professional education is mainly decided by recognized theoretical frameworks, publication and research-based materials that are largely coded knowledge.  What considered as knowledge in workplace is mainly determined by what is appropriate, feasible to achieve the desired objective with budget constraint, hence the knowledge is considered largely tacit.  Boshuizen (2003) agrees that indeed there is a 'gap and mismatch' within the transitional period for graduates, but the real problem only occurs when graduates are unable to learn because the workplace does not offer a safe environment for learning or the graduates are not expected to learn in certain working condition.  Another situation is when the employers only see graduate as a well equipped professional but not a trainee.

There was a longitudinal research project that investigated the early career learning (first 3 years) of professionals (graduate engineer, nurse and accountant) at work during the apprenticeship training in 2005 reported by Eraut (2007).  The project concluded three factors that affect learning at work and discovered what established favorable condition:- 1) **Challenge**, 2) **Support,** and 3) **Confidence**.  In fact, they are in triangular relationship illustrated in Fig. 1
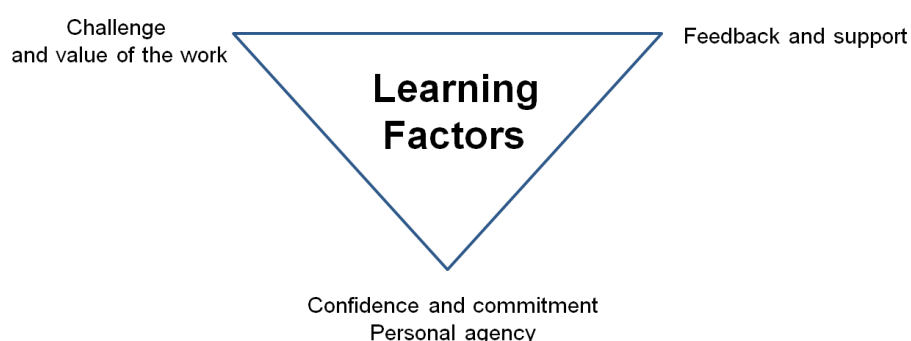


Figure 1: Learning Factors (Eraut et al., 2005)

Eraut (2007) explains that "We then noted that confidence arose from people successfully meeting challenges in their work, while the confidence to take on such challenges depended on the extent to which they felt supported in that endeavor." (p.122). In addition, feedback has tremendous

effect on person's performance, commitment of the person to the challenge is motivated by the appreciation of the colleagues towards the value of the work (Eraut, 2007).

The factors illustrated in Figure 2 related to the learning culture of the workplace. For novice professionals to progress well, the quality of work needs to be sufficiently new to challenge them without being too hard and intimidating that affect their confidence. The amount of work needs to be reasonable to allow them to have time to reflect on the new and challenging situation, provided that there are colleagues working alongside with them to form working relationships that will provide feedback and support. Inadequate feedback might cause concern to the young professionals on whether their performance would meet the employers' and their own expectation, which might eventually weaken their personal commitment to the company.
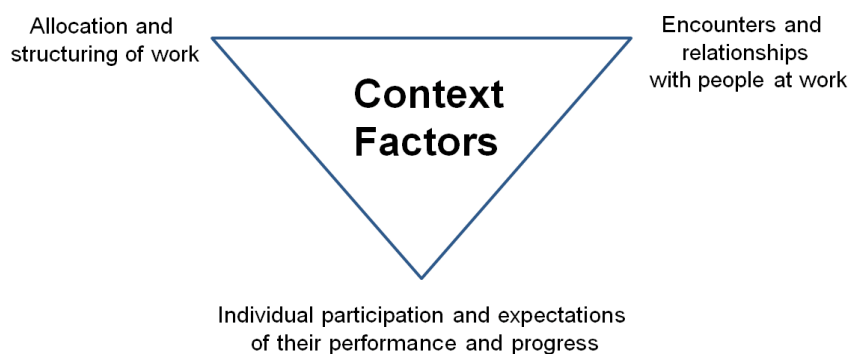
Allocation and structuring of work

Encounters and relationships with people at work

**Context Factors**

Individual participation and expectations of their performance and progress

Figure 2. Context Factors (Eraut et al., 2005)

# 3  METHODOLOGY

Main focus of this paper was to investigate the learning situation for graphic design graduates in the workplace in Hong Kong during the initial transitional period, how the responsibilities were shared by academics and design firm owners to facilitate development of competence of the graphic design graduates?  Multiple case study approaches were used, there were **two** separate cases, one case represented academic, the second case represented graphic design company owner.  The objectives of these two cases were to compare the similarities and differences in the views of the transitional period.

The academic's case consisted of 4 participants who were senior staff of the two government sub-vented bodies.  They were responsible for teaching and conducting student internship administrative works in various graphic design programs which produced graphic design graduates from Higher Diploma to Undergraduate Degree Level.  The graphic design owner case consisted of

4 participants who are SME firm owners and employing the graduates within three years working experiences graduated from the abovementioned academics' education bodies.  The first participant was an owner of design consultant firm with general graphic design services.  The second participant's firm specialized in brand design but excluded advertising. The third participant was the owner of a company with outdoor media placement background and has its own supporting advertising and graphic design team.  The fourth participant was the owner of a printing and production company.  The four participants/design companies have been serving the graphic design industry for 5 to 15 years respectively. All the owner firm participants cover every aspects of graphic design, from conversational two dimensional graphic, interactive design, advertising, branding to information design in three dimensional format.

Several sub-research questions were developed under the main research questions, eight semi-structured interviews were conducted, all interviews were taped recorded and transcribed for data analysis.  The Constant Comparative Method was used in the case study analysis with each transcript forming various *properties*, while hypotheses were used to link the properties to form *tentative categories* of each transcript.  One major Final Set of *Categories* was eventually formed by constantly comparing all tentative categories of all transcripts (Merriam, 1998).  Logical 'Pattern Matching' is the Key of the Case Study Analysis (Yin, 2009).

# 4    RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Two sets of major categories between design academics and company owners were formed to answer the two research questions.  Academic Case is illustrated in Table 1below.

| Major Categories |
| --- |
| 1.  Educators are mainly responsible at the entry level |
| 2.  Although graduates are rather incompetent in the first few years, curriculum has prepared them for longer-term development |
| 3.  Employers have not taken up the responsibility to train the graduates |
| 4.  Arduous workplace environment to nurture young graduates and further develop their competent level |
| 5.  Owners should be responsible for the training not just exploiting the graduates |

Table 1: Major Categories of Academic Case

As stated in Table 1 above, all educators interviewed have opined that their main responsibility to the graduates is limited and up to the industry entry level, however, appropriate curriculum design and teaching could inspire the graduates into a longer term development.  Employers in general and especially of the smaller sizes of SMEs have not taken up any graduate training responsibility. Instead, the educators believed most of the graduates have been exploited by the employers such as long non-negotiable working hours (around 10 -13 hours a day) with fixed salary.  Moreover, working overnight and/or occasionally on weekends has become a common norm of practice for designers and young graduates alike.

| Major Categories |
| --- |
| 1. No formal training programs within the company, just on-job training |
| 2. Very long non-negotiable working hours with fixed salary |
| 3. Hard to nurture graduates and develop competency of designers at the present working situation |
| 4. Educators should be responsible for every aspects of graphic design training |
| 5. Educators could not take up the entire responsibility, as there are possibly business knowledge at the workplace that educators do not possess |
| 6. Employers should not have any training responsibility – there is no ultimate business benefit |

Table 2: Major Categories of the Design Company Owners

In owners' categories (illustrated in Table 2 above), all owners interviewed admitted that they provide no training program to graduates in the first three years of employment. Most of them believe they have no responsibility to provide apprenticeship training to graduates (with the exception of one single owner who is himself designer, however, his concept of apprenticeship is only limited to on-job training), because it has no ultimate business benefit to them since most graduates/junior designers do not stay in the same company for more than 1 or 2 years' time. In order to sustain in business competition, there is common norm for graphic designers to work overtime and overnights for clients. 50% of the owners opined that the educators should have taught the graduates all aspects of graphic design skills applicable and sufficient for the transitional period. While one of the owners had no comment, the other one opined that educators have already provided too much care to the graduates.

Comparing the categories of both cases, in the aspect of similarities, there are common consensus on the fact that graduates need to work very long hour (around 10 -13 hours a day), sometimes work overnight and weekends, and there is no specific training provided by the employers. The present working situation is hard to train up design graduates to become all rounded competent designers. With the evidence of long working hours, it seems that graduates working within the first three years have probably joined the main design force of the design company to battle the real business environment.

In the aspect of differences, ALL educators interviewed believed that the employers should take up the apprenticeship training responsibility. In the contrary, 50% (2 owners) of the owner participants believed that the educators should be responsible for every aspect of graphic design training including and from the transitional period until the later stage of the designers' professional development. Amongst the remaining 50% of the owner participants, one believed the training responsibilities should be shared by both stakeholders, while the other one has believed educators have excessively cradled the current generation of design graduates. The latter opined that apprenticeship training should rest upon design firm owners, however, his concept of design apprenticeship mainly rests on training of toughness through on-job execution but not external or internal organized training program specifically developed for graduates.

Overall, the qualitative findings seem to illustrate a tendency of a 'blind' spot formation in both parties, as **ALL** educators point to the owners to take up the training responsibility in the

workplace,  on the other hand, although**50%** of the employers point to the educators to take up the **full** training responsibility, the remaining two owners have a more objective opinion, however, one owner still believed that the responsibility should be shared, considering the fact that there are practical design business knowledge that educators may not be exposed to.

## 5. CONCLUSION

Having analyzed the documents and websites of selected education institutes and design owners' companies in order to triangulate the findings above, a conclusion was drawn from the content analysis which indicated the stakeholders' objectives and missions are standing differently.  The education institutes are to equip the students' professional knowledge, skills and critical mind, to train them to become creative and effective graphic design communicator, and to develop their holistic awareness of cultural, social and economic and business factors that relate to graphic design.  On the contrary, design companies are set up mainly to provide marketing and business solutions to meet clients' demand within a business constraint.  Although social and cultural factors could be embedded in design projects at the workplace, they are mainly used to fulfill the business function for the clients.  The purpose of academia is to train up students to become professionals, whereas the design company's purpose is to provide design solutions for profit maximization.  The analysis has also echoed that the main challenge the graduate designers experience during their transition from an education environment to an actual workplace involves "different types of discourse and epistemologies" ( Eraut, 2007 p.116).

As pointed out by the findings of the case study, graduate designers, especially those working for smaller sizes of SME companies, have to work very long non-negotiable working hours while no training program is provided to them.  These unfavorable conditions could be the consequence of insufficient 'manpower support' to handle an 'unreasonable amount of work' at the workplace. Whether the graduate designers felt intimidated by the workload or not, their 'confidence' could be affected by a feeling of inadequacy within themselves. In addition, most stakeholders deny their own responsibility to train the graduate designers in the transitional period, hence, most graduate designers probably are finding hard to learn under a lonely unsupportive working environment. The findings reflect almost a complete opposition to the healthy working and learning environment that Boshuizen (2003) described, and that employers need to provide three essential conditions: 1) Challenge, 2) Support, and 3) Confidence for graduates to grow (Eraut, 2007), while Hong Kong design company owners seem not providing at this moment.

As mentioned earlier, this paper is an extract of an on-going PhD study of which mixed research method approaches are adopted: multiple case studies for comparison including academics, design firm owners and graduate designers, approximately 20 semi-structured interviews are being conducted.  Subsequently, survey questionnaire would be distributed to approximately 100 graduate designers within 3-year working experience of selected education bodies in order to triangulate the pervious qualitative findings of interviews.  Based on existing sample size of the qualitative data of this paper, it is not the intention to make such claim that a 'blind spot' already existed between the educators and design firms owners.  Instead, the paper aims to report the current findings of the first stage and try to hypothesize the situation during the transition at this very moment.  This paper is addressing a serious issue that requires serious and vigorous research procedures to ensure validity and reliability of the study.  In a few months' time, the completion of this study might project a more comprehensive picture of the graphic design community into which light has seldom been shed and the issue of 'transitional period' should probably deserve more serious attention from the design academics and graphic design industry.

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