

Designing a life

UC Berkeley School of Information Commencement Address

May 15, 2010

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Thank you, Anno, for inviting me along to speak today. I am honored to be here.

I am a designer and I was trained at an educational institution very different from this.

I was trained to play a very specific role as a designer of the products we surround ourselves with.

I was taught to use my skills to create products that are more attractive, easier to use, more desirable and I spent the first several years of my career doing exactly that. The only problem was that most of those products were obsolete within a few months or years and most are now occupying landfill.

But I was fortunate. I discovered that I could apply those same design skills to many kinds of problems. Problems that if solved might have greater impact on the world. This led me to do a number of things I wasn't ever trained for:

I run a business – which I was not trained to do

I work with, and in, disciplines I was not trained for

I work on problems I never dreamed of like clean water distribution in India, healthcare reform in the US, growth strategies for major companies.

I find all of this extremely challenging and very fulfilling. But perhaps the most important discovery that I think I have made through this experience is that I can apply design thinking to things beyond projects. In fact I think it is possible to design a life and I want to offer a few ideas that I hope might be useful.

The gulf between what you have learnt here and what you experience over the next thirty or so years likely will be even greater for you than it was for me.

There is not much you can do to change that.

Perhaps there is something you can do to prepare for it.

My friend Dan Pink talks about this problem in his book *The Adventures of Johnny Bunko*.

He talks about being 'mindful' as a strategy for reaching the right balance between actively affecting your future without trying to achieve a futile level of control.

I think that mindfulness is at the heart of design and hence why I think it is possible to design a life.

I am not going to paint some beautiful detailed picture of a perfect life that you might wish for.

Designers sometimes do that. We create a perfect picture of a possible future.

We hide it under a metaphorical black cloth and “da-da!” we pull off the cloth and expect the audience to swoon in wonderment.

We then expect our clients to go and perfectly execute our vision.

And while it may be possible to approach the design of a car or a house that way it certainly isn't appropriate when designing ones life.

Instead I want to tell you how I think the application of the principles of design thinking might help you create a life that is more rewarding, interesting, creative and perhaps more meaningful.

There are few things you might think about:

Don't ask what? Ask why?

We have a habit of accepting the challenges that get put in front of us – the latest school assignment, the next business project.

Designers have a habit of being awkward on this subject. They ask why is this even the right question?

They do this because they have learnt there is nothing more frustrating than pouring ones creativity into doing a great job of answering the wrong question.

So invest plenty of time in getting to the right question before you invest your creative energies in finding solutions.

Open your eyes

We spend most of our lives not noticing the important things.

I am sure there are many of us here whose partners regularly accuse us of that!

The more familiar we are with a situation the more we take it for granted and in the process miss the opportunity for insight and inspiration, never mind enjoyment.

Good design thinkers observe. Great design thinkers observe the ordinary and in that ordinariness find great insight.

Try getting into the habit of stopping once a day and look at an action or an artifact as though you are a detective at a crime scene.

Why are manhole covers round? Why do I dress this way to go to work? How do I know how far back to stand from the person in front of me in line? What would it be like to be color blind?

You will be shocked how inspirational it is to look carefully at mundane things.

Make it visual

Record your observations and ideas visually even if it is just a rough sketch or a photo on your camera phone.

Being visual allows us to look at a problem differently than if we rely only on words or numbers.

Pictures put things in context. They show what else is going on. They show the whole idea. Drawing forces you to make decisions about what you want to happen. Don't worry if you can't draw. Do it anyway.

Build on the ideas of others

Leonardo's sketch books are full not just of his own ideas but those of other inventors and engineers. He used them as the starting point for his own thinking. Picasso was famous for happily using the work of his fellow painters as genesis for his own masterpieces.

Great ideas evolve. They do not spring fully formed from the minds of geniuses. No matter what your professors might have implied about their own work!

Creativity is a social activity and you should feel no hesitancy in standing on the shoulders of others. Just remember to give them credit where it is due.

Demand options

Just as it is too easy to accept the questions that get put in front of you, so it is far too easy to accept the first solutions you come up with.

Design thinkers seek out options, multiple solutions that can compete with each other. Design is a Darwinian process and diversity always creates the strongest ideas. Don't stop until you have explored at least three ideas you would be excited by.

Balance your portfolio

One of the most satisfying things about design is that the results are tangible. Something exists at the end of the process that did not exist before.

If you choose to apply design thinking to your activities as you go forward, then remember to document the process as it unfolds.

Preserve those pictures and sketches you use to inspire and create. Keep videos, prototypes, whatever it is that shows how you think.

Assembled as a portfolio, this material will document a process of growth and record the impact of many minds. This will be invaluable not just in the prosaic drumbeat of performance reviews and job interviews but in your own reflection on your life or when you try to explain to your friends, parents (or perhaps kids) what it is you really do.

It is not hard to feel proud of your contribution when you have a record of it.

I wish you the best of fortune as you leave here and embark on the task of designing your lives.

Thank you.