going public

A NAPSTER-LIKE REVOLUTION IN GRAPHIC DESIGN PROMISES TO SPREAD DESIGN AND ITS TOOLS TO THE MASSES.

By Ellen Lupton

As an identical twin, I am often asked whether my sister and I have a “secret language,” or whether we communicate via telepathy. “No,” I usually reply. “We communicate via telephone.” Until now. Recently, my sister and I have begun to share a truly secret language: the language of graphic design. It’s a secret that, once passed to another person, has a contagious way of spreading into the general population.

During the past year, my twin and I have engaged in a design experiment, as I helped her build her own Web site and acquire the skills to maintain and design the site herself. In addition to learning to use Dreamweaver, she has produced posters, invitations, and other print projects with Photoshop and InDesign. She has been teaching these skills to other people in her circle of college professors, setting off a chain reaction of self-empowerment and self-education.

As genetic duplicates, twins have been fodder for numerous scientific studies that assess the power of genetic destiny and environmental circumstances. Julia and I had similar interests and abilities as young children, but we agreed to go our separate ways in high school. I became the “artist,” studying design at Cooper Union, while Julia became the “intellectual,” ultimately earning a Ph.D. at Yale and becoming a full professor of English at the University of California, Irvine.

As the academic super-achiever back in high school and college, Julia was my teacher, introducing me to post-structuralist theory, which I applied to my own work as an artist and designer. Now, I have become her teacher, explaining the practical tools and basic principles of design. Yet the teaching and learning flows back and forth, as Julia has shared new theories relevant to our current experiment in life and art; one of these is the notion of “social capital,” which applies to the economic value of human relationships as well as the informal systems of giving and exchange that enrich healthy societies.

This personal experiment has opened up my thinking about design education. What if, in addition to teaching college students to become “professional” designers, we looked for ways to help people use design in their daily lives? This past year, my graduate students at Maryland Institute College of Art and I developed a do-it-yourself guide to graphic design that will explain design techniques to general readers. The book is directed in particular at young people who are comfortable with technology and are eager to make their own media (T-shirts, business cards, Web sites) but don’t know how to put together all the tools, materials, and ideas that are available to them. By promoting design thinking, we hope to give ordinary people the power to publish. (My sister is contributing essays on theory and politics.)

I have been a design educator for my entire career, both as a college instructor and as a museum curator. In an art-school setting, the presumed goal of the educator is to train students to become professional designers. In the context of a museum exhibition, the presumed goal is to foster “appreciation” of design values among the general public. What if we rewrote these goals? What if museums going public

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started teaching people how to make art and design, and what if college-level design programs spread the tools and language of publishing across the whole campus?

Design is an instrument for packaging ideas and making them public. Giving people access to design tools helps them make their own knowledge and ideas tangible. This active mode of literacy folds back into the ability to read and understand what’s out there in the world. Learning to build your own Web site, or edit your own movie, or publish your own book, makes you more critical of the media you see and experience each day, and more cognizant of the skill and artistry required to create such media at the highest level.

What if, in addition to teaching college students to become “professional” designers, we looked for ways to help people use design in their daily lives?

A D.I.Y. revolution is flourishing everywhere you look, from the Martha Stewart phenomenon and Readymade magazine to the front areas of Urban Outfitters stores, which are stocked with craft kits and underground guides to thinking and making. At the MIT Media Lab, John Maeda and his research team are developing a set of simple Web-based design tools, called Treehouse Studio, that will broaden access to digital imaging software. Such an undertaking may sound modest for an institution known for its high-tech experiments. After all, sophisticated software is widely available on the commercial market. Why labor to make cruder versions of applications that have become industry standards?

The reason, of course, relates to economics and technological proficiency. Maeda explains that when his mother wanted to buy a computer, he told her she probably wouldn’t be able to use it. “Why?” she asked. Maeda replied, “It’s not the computer, it’s the software, which is too expensive to buy and too difficult to use.” Treehouse is free, easy to learn, and runs over the Web, so all users need is a browser. It aims to make design tools accessible to people around the world: curious kids, hobbyists, aspiring artists, and citizens who are economically or politically motivated to produce their own media.

Just as desktop publishing failed to obliterate the design profession in the 1980s, the do-it-yourself movement that is on the rise today will not eliminate the need for professional designers or high-end commercial software. Grassroots design resources are likely to feed, rather than suffocate, desire for more powerful tools and in-depth collaborations with practicing designers. I believe that the next great task of the graphic design discipline is to spread our ideas outward, putting the tools of communicating into the hands of people who have the need and urge to communicate. We can become front-runners in a global design Peace Corps, starting with our own families, schools, and neighborhoods. This development presages not the death of the profession but its expansion and, ultimately, its rebirth.

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