Chicago 2015: Education and design to enlighten a citizenry

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The 3rd International Conference for Design Education Researchers, “LearnXDesign2015” happened as a result of a conversation Erik Bohemia and I had in Oslo at the 2013 conference. I proposed that our organization, DESIGN-ED, partner with DRS and CUMULUS to host the future conference. The proposal was eventually accepted, and work began soon after.

The 2015 conference was hosted by the School of the Art Institute in Chicago. At the heart of the conference was a comprehensive engagement of topics across design pedagogy and research through presentations, workshops, and conversations. Delegates from 34 countries and 120 institutions attended and presented high standard scholarship on methodologies and concepts. Diverse topics were covered such as improving the world through design, exploring biomimicry, changing learning environments, strategizing teacher training, and exploring creativity.

The conference was a springboard for sharing ideas and concepts about contemporary design research and education. Contributors were invited to submit research that dealt with different facets of and approaches to design. Scholars proposed 389 abstract submissions for consideration. All submissions underwent a rigorous double blind review process, most often resulting in a re-write based on reviewers’ comments before being considered for inclusion in the conference and proceedings. Of all that was submitted, 119 research papers were selected to be presented at the conference, along with 23 workshops and 2 symposia.

Subject threads organized the schedule of presentations. The subject threads addressed the local and global
multidimensional relations and interconnections of design education and design thinking with such diverse topics as nature, society, engineering, economics, media, and ecological urbanism. Academic and vocational curriculum development was presented in many sessions in reference to design as an integrative tool through a multidisciplinary philosophy to education. The delegates were able to follow a single thread, attending sequential sessions or could mix sessions to suit. The papers covered topics for educators in elementary, secondary, or higher education settings. Each presentation lasted twenty minutes followed by ten minutes of questions and/or discussion time. The most discussed aspect during the three days was that design should be used to improve life and the world.

Figure 2. A breakup group discussion over a lunch

The first keynote was a dialogue of three individuals who represented K-16 Design Education. They conversed
with each other and the audience members about their views on specific issues in design education. In order to get full involvement of the audience in the discussion, the reMesh app was used. reMesh is a chat platform where a crowd could take part in a conversation as if they were a single person, speaking with a single voice. Delegates were instructed in how to join the chat app that allowed everyone to offer an individual message and vote on other messages from the group in order to quickly and efficiently reach consensus. A prime motivation in the opening session was to inspire a dialogue about design and the world. The ultimate goal was to prompt the ad hoc creation of small groups interested in discussing particular issues further. Scenarios were developed and shared on a communal bulletin board and documented with the help of reMesh, over the course of the conference and post-conference.

As a follow-up to the debate session, there was a pop-up workshop. Participants in the workshop created a structure to encourage further dialogue on the topics that evolved from the keynote session. The pop-up structures were placed in strategic areas for delegates to interact with throughout the remainder of the conference. People were able to post ideas for others to build on, mapping the ideas that emerged and then spin-offs that occurred to people after the debate.

In addition to the conference participants, there were 35 young students involved in participatory workshops. The Think Make Share Design SLAM culminated with teen interns working for 20 hours to conceptualize, collaborate, envision, build and install, "What's Your Underground." A Chicago Tribune writer visited and was impressed with the videography, photography, smock making and desire of the teens to use design to explore what they care about and to reassure people that the future will be optimistic. Two Live Learning Labs immersed 4th graders who reimagined their school learning environments, building prototypes and collaborating on innovative experiences to motivate learning and teens in the topic of “What does Creativity Look Like?”.

**Figure 3. 4th graders who took part in the conference activities**

A major theme of the conference centred on how our global community must change in a very fundamental way if it is to become stable. The question was asked: Why are these issues of concern for design educators worldwide?

Answers that emerged included: If we are to have a better world, the general populace has to build it, and if we are to be successful, everyone must take responsibility. Design thinking is an approach that everyone may learn in order to rethink assumptions by looking at our everyday world with a new perspective, challenging
what is possible, and reconsidering our relationship to things familiar. Design education is addressing the welfare of people and the environment, reflecting a renewed appreciation of and respect for nature. Sustainability is taught to show that it will improve our world through a less consumptive lifestyle, respect for the environment and the interdependence of life, creating safe objects for long-term use, and concentrating on communities and economic systems. There is attention being given to designing for improving the physical and emotional quality of life for everyone, referred to as universal design. Socially responsible design reflects the growing awareness of our finite resources and factors that are damaging to the environment as well as the realization that designed objects should have flexibility in order to be accessible to all. Design education brings all of this to the consciousness of students in order to show them ways to be empowered to do something constructive to help.

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LearnxDesign

The 3rd International Conference for Design Education Researchers and PreK-16 Design Educators

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Find out more at: learnxdesign2015.com
Figure 4. Four volumes of the 2015 conference proceedings

Other highlights of the conference included the South Side Chicago Bus Tour narrated by two designers, an architectural boat cruise reception, a keynote talk about art, science and design, visual note taking posters, green city/greens schools and nature play workshops, ongoing research labs and Victor Margolin’s Life-Time Achievement Award keynote speech and celebration dinner at a beautiful venue overlooking the city of Chicago.
Although I might be successful in providing the “flavor” of the 2015 Conference in this short essay, it is difficult to capture those enthusiastic conversations that followed presentations and spilled into the hallways and receptions. I cannot articulate the “community” spirit where a group of individuals explored new ideas and cultivated collaboration during and after the event. I cannot invoke those inspiring moments of sharing stories and asking questions; the chance to challenge and be challenged, and were learning together fuelled motivation.
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VandeZande, chair of Learn X Design 2015, Chicago, IL, is professor/coordinator of art/design education. Her activism assisted in the inclusion of design in the US national art education standards (2014). VandeZande has received many awards, notably Distinguished Fellow (NAEA), National Art Education Higher Educator (NAEA), and President’s Faculty Excellence (KSU). She was a featured speaker for 60 national/state events. Her books include Design Education: Creating Thinkers to Improve the World (2016) and co-authored Fashion Fundamentals (2020).