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What I Wish I'd Learnt in College: People Skills, Empathy Building and Storytelling

by Sheng-Hung Lee

In college, I trained as an industrial designer and electrical engineering, but people skills are what I've learned later in my career that have helped me become a more successful designer. Many undergraduate design curricula are project-based, with the intention of helping students learn the complete design process including research, ideation, design, prototyping, and refinement through the completion of both real and conceptual projects. In accordance with this model, I received mostly technical skill training, such as sketching, CADing, and rendering. These are indeed fundamental design skills, their results are tangible, and they are easy for teachers to evaluate. However, this particular academic schema neglects the importance of more "soft skills", which are actually essential for success in the field of design — skills such as empathy, storytelling, communication, and teamwork, which require in-person, lived experience outside of a classroom.

Empathy

My life experiences after college have allowed me to develop my ability to understand other perspectives, and share various experiences through the art of

from the perspective of parents, children, and local citizens. As I worked to redesign the front desk, I crouched down as if I were a child to return books or ask for help and realized that with the current set up, I couldn't even touch the desk surface or see the librarians. I took this moment as a lesson to design the space in a way that would enable children to have meaningful interactions and experiences with the librarians. This project helped me realize that in many cases, it is only when designers put ourselves in the shoes of our target users that we are able to fully observe and understand. Empathy allows us to cater to different user needs more precisely.

Storytelling

When I initiated the MITxPRO online course experience project, I knew that it was critical to demonstrate the value and benefit of virtual learning through the design toolkit. In this case, storytelling played a big role. The existing online learning system was well established; there was a virtual assistant to help address student concerns, and an interactive forum to allow students to post course-related questions. To identify key issues, I conducted interviews with the existing platform users to better understand their user journey. Incorporating this interview footage, I then presented my observations and proposal to the leadership team utilizing a journey map to tell the story of why the user experience should be an important consideration for course developers. Through this approach, I was able to foster a sort of conversation between project stakeholders and end users that might not have otherwise existed. I learned that storytelling skills are less about creating aesthetic narratives, but presenting authentic stories that people can resonate with.

Meaningful Design

Technical skills represent the designer's hands in the realization of ideas and concepts, whereas people skills are more like the designer's heart. While both technical skills and people skills are important for designers, the latter allow designers to better understand their audience and the unique challenges they face. Moving forwards, I think that educators and administrators should strive to frame design in a broader sense by incorporating and emphasizing these "soft skills" as part of design education. With both sets of skills in their back pocket, I believe that designers have the capability to create impactful designs that can foster meaningful social change.

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Sheng-Hung Lee is a designer, engineer, and educator. He is inspired by multiple domains of knowledge and different perspectives, and he thrives on creating new value for clients on multi-disciplinary teams. He is trained as an industrial designer and electrical engineer, and his approach to problem solving is influenced by his passion for how design and technology impact and can be integrated into society. Lee has been focusing on organizational designs and education that create meaningful systemic impacts.

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