My formal design education was rooted in the structural basics of physical design. Working through and beyond design basics encourages thoughtful and considered reactions to form, function, and self-expression. I am a strong advocate for the process of design and all of its physical manifestations. I believe that teaching design must fundamentally lay the groundwork of formal structure, offering the ultimate power to confidently manipulate scale, rhythm, hierarchy, grid applications, and a masterful use of typography. Educating young designers about the principal functions of design stimulates their success as visual problem-solvers.

As a young and naïve designer I was taught that the elements of design could be broken down into simple and isolated criteria. Within this organizational methodology, the designer could actively pick and choose the elements he wished to manipulate. This process of organization could be applied to anything – chair or poster compositions of words and pictures, a single photograph, or motion graphics consisting of text and image. By isolating elements of design it is possible to alter its impression. Only by understanding the structure of design could you impose your own thoughts and impressions on a subject.

In the early stages of design education I feel it is necessary for students to write and conduct research. A well informed designer is a better designer. By reinforcing the research process and encouraging the development of students’ critical writing skills can help the young designer become equipped to defend his or her own design decisions and respond to the work of their peers. Students must learn from one another, it is crucial to their future success as designers. Because graphic design is bound to the written word, strong language skills allow for a better understanding of hierarchy, structuring content in an appropriate and meaningful context for the intended audience.

In recent years there has been much debate about the scholastic training of young designers. One side argues that schools must prepare students with computer and production competency. Another side argues for strong portfolios that allow entrance into the field of design where competition is tough. Both of these arguments are true and equally valid. Contemporary designers must navigate through technical advancements and new media. They are exposed to an increasing array of job titles and responsibilities, including production, direction, and management. It is my view that the act of making must be taught alongside the act of thinking. Both practical and physical aspects of design must instruct young designers to actively – not passively – solve the problem, using whatever means they possess.

A comprehensive design project/brief must combine technical aspects with form, function, and aesthetics. It is not enough to produce visually rich portfolios that are devoid of a thought process. Nor is it sufficient to mimic current trends and styles, simply reproducing historic graphic design. Graphic design basics (context + content) must translate to active decision-making. Students must be taught and encouraged to confidently build and develop solutions to abstract concepts. Competent manipulation of text and image can be taught through hands-on physical exercises. Students must be taught to seamlessly convey intent through digital production methods, whether it is meant for print, web, or new media explorations involving time-based materials, animation, or sound.

As the design profession moves forward it has begun to closely resemble the film industry where collaboration is crucial. Collaborative efforts encourage a richness and depth unseen by singular identities. Collaboration can identify pre-existing strengths and encourage new skill sets to develop.

The fundamentals of design: form, content, hierarchy, scale, pattern, tone, historic reference, gesture, mark making, color, composition – all act as ingredients in a recipe. The ability to control these ingredients, and know and predict resulting combinations – often through blind experimentation or practice – creates a masterful end product. Like cooking, design development can be taught to enable young designers to create something from nothing with confidence and sensitivity.

Young artists and designers are eager to know the rules so that that can immediately break them. These rules and formal gestures of design remain present in everything we produce. Each of us – through our unique voice and visual aesthetic – has the ability to develop increasingly complex visual solutions that reflect back upon that which we first learned. As a design educator I have revisited past design challenges with new and contemporary solutions. Each time something is revisited a new solution is formed and generated.

Design solutions extend beyond mere aesthetics toward cultural development, social responsibility, and a personal voice. My teaching philosophy blends traditional design practices with theory and historical reference. Ultimately, my goal is to produce impassioned designers with a thorough and working knowledge of design systems, practical applications, and the means for critical and applied design. As educators our responsibility is to evoke and promote the total potential of graphic design and imprint this importance on students. Our duty lies to encourage future designers, enabling them to actively contribute to the graphic design diaspora. Finally, I strongly believe that we need to educate young designers to be critical and innovative thinkers, capable of creating solutions that are simultaneously familiar to the historical timeline of design, and aesthetically foreign all the same.