

Jan. 04, 2022

Ethical, enterprising & effective

New disciplines are emerging in design education as both students and professionals adjust to changing times

A BALASUBRAMANIAM

These are uncertain times. The pandemic is raging, the planet is in crisis, and the economy is badly hurt. Solving such issues need a visionary mindset for long-term strategies, and a beginner's approach for creative, immediate solutions. It requires a special kind of problem-solving talent -- designing.

Design is the chosen profession that solves people's problems, and designers are increasingly seeing their role evolve from a form-giving activity and aesthetics to a more involved and informed problem-solving activity.

All professional programmes are going through a churning, with priorities changing each passing day. Design is no different. The face of design is changing so fast that education in the field is trying to catch up with the requirements of people and the evolution of this new role.

Design education has been primarily catering to the industry and is predominantly producing specialists to create aesthetic artefacts that please customers and delight users. User-centric products and audience-centric communication are designed by professionals specifically trained in those. Common programmes include industrial designing, graphic designing, fashion designing and lifestyle accessories designing.

But now, professionals are asking themselves searching questions like whether the planet needs this -- another chair, shirt or fancy object

that pleases the eye but causes pollution. Several institutions across the world are rethinking and repurposing the contents and pedagogy of design education. New disciplines are emerging as the need of the hour.

Fashion design is moving towards sustainable fashion, where one is trained to rethink materials and production processes to see how eco-friendly a product can be. Industrial design, too, is moving towards environment-friendly products that are helping create a circular economy.

When the pandemic struck, industrial designers applied their talent to produce inexpensive oxygen generators, designed mobile medical facilities, developed products using Artificial Intelligence and the Internet of Things, and repurposed train compartments into mobile hospitals. Thus, they created functionally sound and easy-to-use products catering to people's requirements.

In the same vein, communication designers dealt with the surfeit of data by translating them into easy-to-understand graphics, and published them to generate shock and awe. Quick-fix videos were made for informing about the pandemic and spreading the idea of healthy living.

When the Internet was filled with fake news and rumours, technology-led designers found ways to block unwanted messages, showed agility and gave users a holistic experience.

How does design education



prepare aspirants for such roles? It has risen to the challenge and identified the required skill-sets and mindsets.

Product

Product design education is turning its focus from making pretty objects of desire that contribute to landfills and pollution. It now sits at the meeting point of society, culture and people. Social issues are tackled with equal ease using design-thinking. Items like battery-operated lamps for places without electricity and rollable tanks for providing drinking water to communities are just two examples of what product designers are doing to make the Earth a better place.

Interdisciplinary

Designers are now being trained to work in a variety of projects that showcase the plurality of the profession. They work with techies, managers and grassroots artisans with equal ease; float new start-up ideas and strategise; design

sustainable packaging for products and campaigns for advertising and activism with equal enthusiasm.

A new area that has evolved, interdisciplinary designing encourages a generalist approach, rather than work in specialised silos.

Interaction

Many professionals are engaged with user interface design for far too long and have been just pixel pushers. That is now changing to developing a complete experience design of interactions of people with devices; devices with devices, like IoT, and people to people. It is developing into a hot new design discipline.

Communication

The erstwhile communication designers dealt with pencils and picas, type and colour. Much of those are now available as templates and apps. This new discipline is emerging as a bridge between analogue and digital design, dealing with effective communication that includes areas like data visualisa-

tion, writing and reporting.

It also includes moving images like video and film, as much as photography. Designers are visually literate and communicate using the written word as much as the image.

To stay relevant, the new design institutes of India are reimagining the curriculum and pedagogy. It is being addressed by sensitising students in developing empathy, equipping them with tools like systems thinking and critical thinking, and giving cross-disciplinary inputs, tech-embedded courses, liberal choice of courses, blended learning and emphasis on excellence.

Students are trained to show a high-level sense of ethics in developing safe products, responsible communication and immersive user experience, and excellent end results. This may be the beginning of a new generation of designers, who will be ethical, enterprising and effective.

The writer is director, Institute of Design, JK Lakshmipat University, Jaipur