

class politics

SHOULD IDEOLOGY FIND ITS WAY INTO ACADEMICS?
TWO EDUCATORS OFFER THEIR VIEWS.

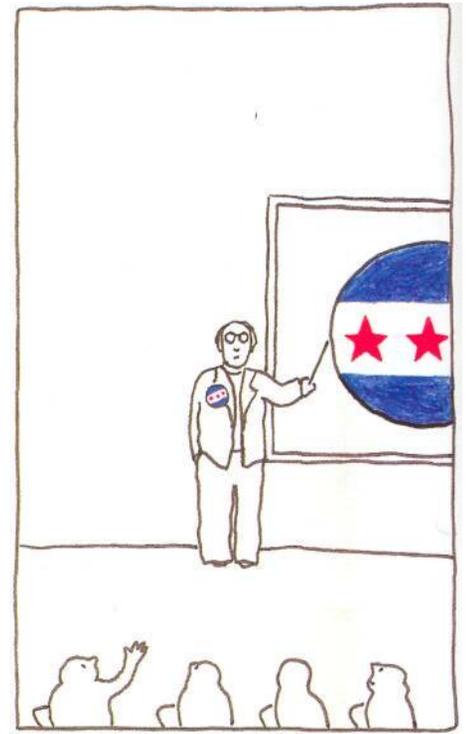
STEVEN HELLER Mixing politics and design pedagogy can be divisive, which is why some colleges and universities forbid faculty from raising political issues in class, and why some state-run schools enforce statutory provisions against doing so. For teachers like me, who feel that design is an essential component of political discourse, it's prudent to consider appropriateness in the context of coursework (i.e., no electioneering in Photoshop class) and the ramifications for students, who must never be made to feel that their ideas and beliefs will undermine their academic standing. Teachers' evaluations of students cannot be based on what the students think, but on how they translate their thinking into effective graphic design. Politics in the classroom is valid as discussion, not indoctrination—as a means to an end product—or so I've long assumed.

However, during the last election campaign, this assumption was severely tested in my weekly lecture class that includes the history of propaganda, wherein I show an array of past and present artifacts representing various sides of political conflicts, analytically filtered through my (admittedly leftist) perspective. At the outset of each class, I declare my position, stating that, while part of my lecture is an objective historical survey, the contemporary work I show is couched in imagery, language, and music that over the past few years has propagated an anti-Bush and antiwar point of view. Since the lecture is about the art and craft of persuasion, I find this demonstrative approach highly effective in explaining the material and promoting discussion. I insist that anyone who disagrees with my stance has an obligation to argue with me and to provide design alternatives.

In all the years I've been lecturing, I've heard only a few faint peeps of opposition to my presentation. Perhaps this is owing to my persuasive oratory, or perhaps it's because the majority of art school students in New York are liberal-leaning. But the far greater likelihood is that most students are reticent about arguing with an authority figure—or even with a majority of other students—on matters that can become emotionally charged and for which they may lack the necessary rhetorical skills. This year, however, the opposition, though still a minority, was much more outspoken; and while this made for energetic classroom debates, I became aware of the limits of my own tolerance for opposing viewpoints.

I always try to mediate the discussions by situating the issues and accompanying design artifacts in proper historical contexts. Moreover, I've never considered myself so rigidly dogmatic that I cannot listen to other viewpoints. But in the run-up to the 2004 election, because of the polarizing issues confronting the electorate—abortion, gay marriage, the war in Iraq, religion—I was more responsive to those who spoke vociferously on behalf of the liberal positions I support. Although free expression underpins progressive pedagogy, what I interpret as misguided wrongheadedness ultimately affects my position vis-a-vis the students, which is why introducing partisan politics into classroom discussion can have unpredictable consequences. The outcome in this case was somewhat disconcerting.

As a spontaneous evolution of the classroom debates, a group of students started their own independent journal to provide a venue for student-generated election-year



political propaganda. It was neither funded by the school nor subject to faculty oversight. Its editors offered full pages to any student who could compose a viable polemic on any side of any position. I was impressed with their proactive spirit but was skeptical about how this open-ended editorial policy would play out. Indeed, the result was a predictable mix of sophisticated and naive graphic statements—though two pieces did jolt me.

Both were visual and textual tours de force that supported right-wing agendas. One, an anti-abortion statement that managed to be assertive without being vitriolic, read: "Wanna know why people are still voting for Bush? 1,070 defending Americans killed vs. 1,800,000 defenseless Americans killed. Many consider abortion to be murder." The other polemic, composed of some 30 rows of declarative statements set in different typefaces, was an effort to counteract the stereotypes that people like me have toward those on the right: "Don't assume that hateful slogans can be shouted free of consequence." "Don't assume you know who is 'us' and who is 'them.'" "Don't assume that all political 'documentaries' are credible." Both pieces underscored the degree to which the right has learned to dominate mass communications by mastering the rhetorical tools introduced by the left in its heyday.

The teacher in me was proud of these students for making such forceful propaganda, but the partisan in me was troubled that these ideas were given yet another platform at a time when the right has already mobilized itself so successfully. The teacher in me would have given the students A's had this been an assigned project, but the partisan in me felt trumped by an end product that effectively served the opposition's objectives.

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GUNNAR SWANSON Does politics have a place in the graphic design classroom? Of course. Most subjects do. Health care statistics, auto performance, color availability for key fobs, social beliefs—all are valid subjects for discussion. Politics belong in the classroom. It's the teacher's politics that don't.

I doubt that many people would object to politics in the graphic design classroom, if graphic design is clearly still the subject and politics is just another example of how design works. For example, here's how a corporation, a political party, or an advocacy group wants to depict the situation; here's how people receive or understand or relate to the situation; here's what happens; and here's the role of graphic design in making that happen. That seems not only acceptable, but also integral to teaching someone how to become a graphic designer.

Many people argue that graphic design education needs to deal with the role of design in society and that the discipline will progress only if designers understand their role in the world and their potential to effect change. Political understanding is needed for real design understanding and should be included in the curriculum and taught by people with specific expertise in the subject. Graphic design professors are hired for their knowledge of graphic design (or at least we hope they are). They would rightly object to business professors teaching design, or economics professors teaching politics, even though these areas are also clearly related.

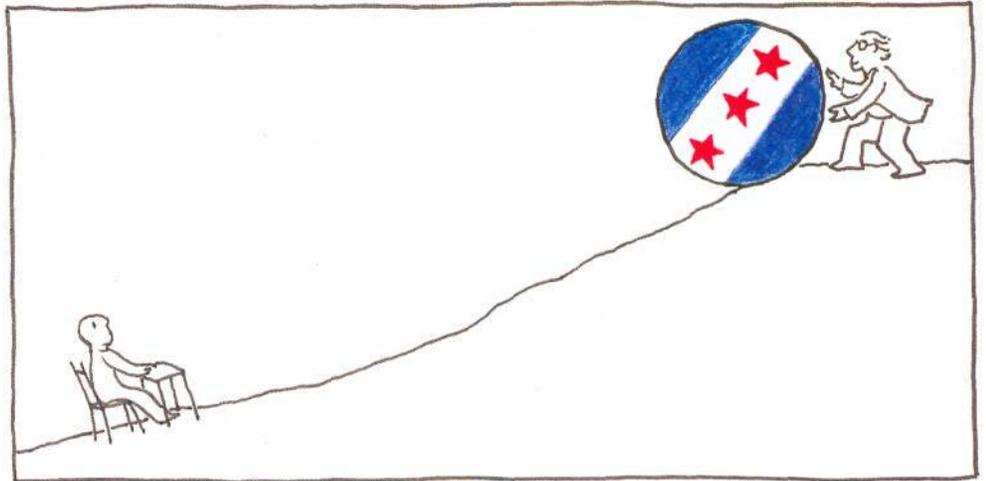
In her 2002 thesis, "Decoding Visual Language Elements in News Content," designer Kate Brigham notes that while some people take the position that "messages can be skewed and manipulated by their creators, or by designers later on in the process, [which] implies that such practices are always intentional," she maintains that "those creating visual messages are as susceptible to the subconscious processes of perception as are viewers. As a result, such manipulations might actually be unintentional responses that are emotionally driven, or otherwise affected by inherent perceptual processes that are as poorly understood by the creators of messages as they are by most viewers."

She's right. Understanding messages and their implications is central to graphic design and graphic design education. But there should be a distinction between making students aware of the effects of their work and trying to get them to make "approved" or "correct" choices. When the professor's politics become the "right" answer, the graphic

light on design; religious theory is applicable to design— Getting that across is an important job of any teacher, as is the encouragement of broad and Integrative thinking on the part of students. When a teacher favors specific beliefs, he or she has ceased teaching and started proselytizing. When the line is crossed from connecting other subjects to design to teaching them in place of design, students are alienated, or they get the message that graphic design is unworthy of their full attention.

Worst of all, the school will be in the position of having political science taught by someone with no qualifications in the field. If an educational program has been well planned, inserting political theory under the guise of its being graphic design dismantles the hard work of curriculum planning.

Stanley Fish, hardly a force of conservatism by any description, once said: "After nearly five decades in academia, and five and a half years as a dean at a public university, I exit with a three-part piece of wisdom for those



design classroom has been hijacked. No matter how sincere or well-meaning the instructor, political lectures will result in frustration for students who thought they were there to study graphic design.

It is the duty of teachers to make the connections between various subjects, to help students understand why all of their classes aren't discontinuous fragments. Design affects political history; anthropology sheds

who work in higher education: Do your job; don't try to do someone else's job, as you are unlikely to be qualified; and don't let anyone else do your job. In other words, don't confuse your academic obligations with the obligation to save the world." **P**

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