Student Attitudes

Between the 1940s and 1990s, there have been significant shifts in student attitudes toward education and teachers. Student attitudes are shaped to some degree or another by time frame and type of institution. For example, student motivation and work habits in an art school can be expected to differ from those found at a state university art department. All student attitudes changed drastically during and following the period of student activism associated with the 1960s.

It is important for teachers to be aware of, and sensitive to, student attitudes as they shape motivation and behavior. The effectiveness of an educational program can be greatly enhanced if instruction is in sync with prevailing student interests. The difficult part is knowing when to build on student interests and when to challenge them.

Student expectations of what a teacher should be are sometimes unrealistic. Too often the teacher is expected to embody all the Hollywood notions of the mentor as an orator, philosopher, eccentric but wise and nurturing person with all the answers. Teachers are human and they vary enormously in style and abilities. I have had teachers who were inarticulate, but they were effective even if unorthodox in their teaching methods. Some teachers were inspirational by their enthusiasm, others created respect through professional accomplishment and they served as valuable role models; yet others incurred respect by exhibiting an amazing knowledge of the field.

During recent years, there have been increasing numbers of students who believe they must like the teacher in order to do well. If students do not like the teacher, they are less productive at the least, and in the extreme, become rebellious, transfer, drop out or fail. They are putting more emphasis on a personal relationship with the teacher than on education. It is not important that students like teachers but it is extremely important that students respect teachers. My observation has been that teachers who attempt to cultivate students to like them will invariably end up without respect.

Graphic Design education tends to be rather informal with students and teachers on a first name basis. I would suggest that during the first year, the relationship should be more formal. The student right to informality with teachers should be earned and not automatic. It is earned by commitment and hard work. No matter how informal the working relationship, teachers should let students know that there is a line which they cannot cross. Under no circumstances should informality include teachers dating or living with students. It is entirely too destructive to other students and instructional integrity.

There are always students who conduct themselves in a positive and responsible manner, but today, there are serious problems with student attitudes which are inhibitive to learning. Too many students want teachers to give them an education even if they have to force them to learn. Students expect the impetus for learning to come from teachers rather than from themselves.
Since World War II, there has been a dramatic increase in the number of homes where both parents are working. One result of this is that student attitudes and values are shaped more by peer group pressures than by parents. As a teacher at the university level, I often found myself having to fulfill a parental role, particularly in the area of values. What was once learned at home from parents is now learned in university from teachers. These values pertain to self-discipline and commitment including perseverance, a sense of responsibility and the difference between acceptable and unacceptable behavior.

Within our society, youngsters are conditioned to feeling that they have to please parents and most adults. They do not always understand that restrictions or demands might have do with concern for their safety or well-being. When students reach the university as young adults, they are naturally resentful of having to please everyone else; they want to do what interests them and to be themselves. They do not realize that the situation has changed, and from this point on, the parental role diminishes and they have responsibility for their own conduct. What they are asked to do does not have so much to do with pleasing others as it does with shaping their future. This attitude of pleasing is most apparent when a frustrated student blurs out to the teacher, “Is this what you want?” Students are expected to do what the teacher asks, but at the same time, they have to recognize that they are doing it for their benefit, not the teacher’s.

Attitudes often spring from rebellion against doing what someone else wants. If students do not believe that assignments are pertinent to their interests, they are likely to sluff the work. To some extent, this reflects student perception of teachers shifting from authority figures to service persons. Students believe that if they pay tuition, they should be able to do what, how and when they want, and it is the teacher’s responsibility to assist them in that task. The student notion of teachers as service personnel has been strongly reinforced by administration introducing the procedure for student evaluation of teachers.

Students often believe that attending university automatically results in an education. During the seventies, one student told me, “I pay tuition and attend classes. This proves my commitment to education.” There is a student assumption that if they attend class and do every assignment they should receive a high grade. They want problems defined to a point that if they do everything they are told, they cannot fail.

It is only a few students that select a school on the basis of program and instructional quality. Most students base their application on what they can afford or what is convenient. Sometimes they apply to schools they have heard about, a teacher or friend has recommended them or someone they know attended that institution. The reasons for choosing an institution are frequently superficial to educational goals. There is an assumption by many students that a degree from one institution is just as good as one from another, and it is of small consequence which school they attend. This is a dangerous presumption in any form of professional education.

Students tend to view education as grades and a diploma rather than what they learn. Most students do not understand what education is, the educational process or their role in the process. This has to be carefully explained to them.

If teachers are aware of the importance of student attitudes, those that are most harmful can be redirected.

Productivity and motivation will improve with educational benefits becoming proportionately greater. Teachers need to deal with these problems from the first day of class and consistently throughout the program.

There are several student concerns regarding teachers that are extremely important. Students might not always like it, but they do respect honesty. Students resent arbitrary decisions or criticism justified only by teacher authority. They want, and deserve, an explanation for actions by teachers.
Perhaps more than anything else, students value *fairness*. Any action by teachers perceived as being unfair by students greatly affects attitudes toward that teacher and education. Fairness, among other things, pertains to requirements or procedures, criticism of work, and assessment of all students by the same criteria. Students expect grades to be explained and justified. Students will accept a demanding program as long as they believe it is fair and that every student is treated equally.

Students want, and respond to, perception of teachers as being sincerely interested in them as individuals. Students respect teachers who work hard and display dedication to teaching and the profession.

There can be no question about student attitudes being shaped to a great extent by how society today in America views teachers and education. From the historical point-of-view, youth is a precious resource, teachers are highly respected and education is not only valued but considered imperative to the future of that society. This view has been held by all cultures throughout history and it includes primitive societies as well as civilized nations.

Attitudes toward education in this country began to change after World War II. During the period of educational retrenchment beginning in the late 1960s, education was identified and treated as a business by politicians and industrial leaders. Teachers gave up their status as professionals for that of employees; education was sold as a service, universities, colleges and schools were managed as businesses, teachers provided services and students became customers. Under these conditions, there should be no surprise that students as customers believe they should dictate what they expect because they have paid for it. It is perfectly clear why students often view education and treat teachers as they do.

**Strategies for Shaping Student Attitudes**

The relationship between student attitudes and commitment, discipline, maturity and productivity must be understood and dealt with by teachers. This involves students shedding old values and acquiring new ones which is not an easy task. Passive students must learn to take initiative in their education. To have a successful education, students must recognize the need for interpersonal skills, setting goals, and to be objective in assessing their own capabilities. The foundation for new values is an understanding by students that education is not something given to them, but something they must obtain by aggressively availing themselves of every opportunity – teachers, libraries, peers, technical facilities and through their commitment and productivity.

Twenty years ago, I seldom took class roll as it was not necessary. More recently, it has been required to take roll at every class and also to note those students who leave early or come late. Excused absences are rare as an absence is an absence no matter what the circumstances. Three absences are allowed without penalty; four means a warning and five or more per semester affect the grade. Students who are not in attendance cannot learn, and this discipline has to be established from the beginning.

The normal method of instructing in the studio is for the teacher to move around the studio helping each student individually. About ten or fifteen years ago, I stopped using this procedure. I positioned myself in the studio and required students to come to me when they needed assistance. This pressured students to take initiative when they wanted my input. There were always students who refused to make use of my presence. These students usually fell behind in their work or did poorly. Eventually they were pushed to make contact with me in order to survive. This is the way it is going to be after they leave school, so they might as well learn it while in school.

My experience has been that any kind of research requirement in conjunction with problems fosters self-initiative. Research requires individual effort; the exposure from searching is in itself informational, broadening and sometimes motivating. Research puts students into the position of learning on their own.
Even at the introductory level, students do research in connection with projects or they are required to do written and image research on painters, architects, photographers or designers. Research assignments at any level are good strategy to develop student self-motivation.

Self-pacing students is another strategy. Students cannot duck the responsibility of learning simply through meeting a deadline. Too often, meeting deadlines become the student goal rather than problem objectives. When students realize they cannot advance until the work is at a satisfactory level, they either withdraw, fail or adopt a more positive attitude toward assignments. The practice is most important with the introductory theoretical exercises, drawing and color. At the Senior level, deadlines are set and enforced.

I do not collect student work at the completion of a problem. Students are responsible for their work until the end of the term when they present it at review. We left the last week of the term open to give students time to redo and prepare their work for reviews. Students know that if work can be improved, it is their responsibility to do so before the end of the term as poor work counts against them. Students who do not redo work that should have been redone are graded down or failed. This shifts considerable responsibility onto students, and their reaction is an accurate reflection of commitment, initiative and desire to do well.

In criticizing student work on a one-to-one basis, first ask the student what seems to be a problem or what they think can be improved. Asking before telling is to the student’s benefit. In a critique, the asking can first be directed to the person who did the work, and then to the entire class. The teacher can then summarize and add comments on whatever was overlooked. A similar approach is to point, or circle, with the finger a problem area and ask the student to see if they can identify and resolve the problem. Usually their first response is that they do not know. When prodded or it is suggested that they respond intuitively, it is amazing how often they correctly find the problem. This procedure helps students to build confidence in their own judgment.

Teachers have to beware of students who become overly dependent on them and not allow this to happen. There are students who want the teacher to define every aspect of the problem so all they have to do is follow directions. Teachers must always leave room for students to make mistakes. Students learn more from correcting mistakes and making refinements than from any other aspect of problem resolution.

Teachers who do not fail students who deserve to fail lose the respect of other students. When teachers do not have the respect of students, they have lost much of their effectiveness as a teacher. In my thirty-five years of teaching, the students who were dropped because of inadequate talent could probably be counted on the fingers of one hand. There are so many different career options in Graphic Design based on skills as well as creativity, that there is always a place for a hardworking student.

Causes for student failure are invariably some combination of being uncommitted, undisciplined or poor attitudes.

Teachers should be direct and honest as possible with students about their work and abilities. As mentioned previously, the most important aspect of honesty with students is to make clear that criticism of work is not criticism of the individual. Most of the time, teachers can be blunt in their remarks as long as they keep it professional and not personal. Albers often said that teachers must be good actors, and that there would be times when a teacher might be angry but should be supportive instead. Or, there would be occasions when a teacher might affect anger even though not angry. I do think teachers achieve more by controlling their emotions. Showing true anger often negates a learning situation when it is most needed.
Honesty with students carries over into grading. Evaluation of student work in many programs is greatly inflated. Undeserved high grades deny students any sense of achievement. Most students are not fools, and they know when they receive an undeserved grade. Students tend to be contemptuous of teachers and courses where every student receives high grades.

The basis for grading is standards, and they determine the quality of instruction. Poor teachers usually set low or no standards. Standards are based on achievement that faculty believe students should accomplish at any given level. Often standards are based on professional practice and what can be anticipated as required for professional success. Again, if faculty relate to the less significant levels of professional practice, the standards will reflect that level of achievement. In education, standards should be set at the highest levels of professional practice.

Standards are a factor in other aspects of Graphic Design education. There should be defined standards for admission of students into the program. Standards also apply to the hiring of new instructors and appointment of leadership.

My experience has been that grades at the introductory level are uniformly low, – mostly in the C range with a sprinkling of B’s and perhaps one or two As. Grades generally rise as students progress through the program. University grading systems that do not permit half-grades create agonizing situations for both teachers and students. There can be a world of difference between a C- and C+. When C-, C and C+ are all recorded as C, it is difficult for students to accept or teachers to explain.

At Arizona State University we were not permitted to use half-grades, so on our grade sheets at review we do record the pluses and minuses in order that students understand our evaluation of the work. Half-grades were approved more than eight years ago by all the required parties. They have never been implemented because the university computer/software is so out of date that inputting half-grades would cause the system to crash. It is inexcusable, even shameful, that the university has delayed this long without even setting a target date for a new system.

Students have to know that education is the first priority and conduct themselves accordingly. Especially in state universities, far too many students are working excessive hours at outside jobs and there is serious conflict between job and school. Many of these students are spreading a four year program out over five to seven years, and this is very much to their disadvantage. On our application form, we asked students if they planned to work at an outside job, and if so, how many hours. Students who were accepted into the program but indicated outside commitments in excess of twenty hours, were told they would have to make a decision, – school or job. Many students cannot handle even twenty hours of outside work, – it depends on the individual. We never accepted an outside job as an excuse for incomplete, poor work, missing class, required lectures or field trips. By making our position clear on outside jobs, students knew they could not use it as an excuse. I think it is important for Graphic Design programs to have explicit policies regarding outside commitments and to rigorously enforce them.

I found value in periodically sitting down with a class and discussing all these matters with students as candidly as possible. This helped them to better understand where teachers were coming from in terms of how classes were taught, reviews conducted and what was being required of students. My experience gave me a perspective that students did not have, and many students were interested in what and how changes had occurred. Student input was often helpful for me in better understanding their priorities.
Student Reviews

I was introduced to reviews at Yale as a graduate student. At the end of each semester, students signed up for a time-slot and presented their work from the semester to the entire faculty. Reviews were held in the office, and when the student entered with their portfolio, a photographic timer was set for fifteen minutes. When the timer went off, the review was over. The review itself consisted of critical examination of the work by all faculty, some general counseling and discussion of the work and progress. I appreciated this approach as compared to the practice of handing in work, the teacher putting a grade on it and then returning it to me. If there was any discussion, it was done through my initiative by going to the teacher for comment, but that was always after the fact.

When I set up the Graphic Design program at the Minneapolis School of Art in 1957, student reviews were incorporated into the program with some changes. Rather than bringing a portfolio, we gave the students space to hang or stack the work. A major change was to give the student their grade at the conclusion of the review. If there was any dispute or questions regarding the grade, it was best to deal with it while the work was there and all the faculty members present. The grade had to be justified by the work. If the student was dissatisfied with the evaluation, the work was reviewed again and shortcomings were pointed out to the student. This process permitted students to leave knowing the grade and not having to wait a week or two for it to come through the mail.

The Sophomore Spring review was somewhat different from that for Juniors and Seniors. The Spring review was when faculty made a decision to accept students into the upper level program. It was entirely possible that a Sophomore might have a passing grade but be denied acceptance into the program. The Sophomore year could be compared to a one-year admissions test. I believe the Sophomore Review and a policy of acceptance into upper level classes are essential to a quality program in Graphic Design.

For Juniors and Seniors, we gave them the last week of the term to redo and clean up their work for reviews. We posted sign-up sheets allowing for about fifteen to twenty minutes per student. We also allowed for a thirty-minute break in the middle of the morning and afternoon. The reviews were spread out over three to five days depending on the number of students.

The procedure that worked best for us was to have at least two rooms where three to five students could hang and lay out their work in assigned space. When faculty had worked their way through one room, they moved to the other. Students in the first room took work down while a new group put work up. This way the faculty evaluations could flow continuously.

Students were excluded from the room while the faculty examined the work as a whole, discussed the students and arrived at a general consensus about how each student should be counseled. Students were called in one at a time and the work was reviewed. The discussions were general and might include problems with attendance, productivity, outside jobs, attitudes or behavior, and faculty comments about the student work were usually blunt. In some instances, the student was asked to leave the room while faculty had further discussion. The student was called back into the room, final comments and a grade were given. We always asked the student if the grade was fair, and if the student did not agree, there was another examination of the work with the student present and the grade finalized.

Discussing student behavior or attitudes today is not always well received by students. Many think this is being too personal and has nothing to do with their schoolwork. I consider student attitudes and behavior to definitely be part of the educational process. But in dealing with these matters, I have encountered student resentment as well as hate letters about me or the program sent to university officials, charges of harassment, abuse or favoritism. However, these actions represent a minority of students. Other students have returned several years after graduation and thanked us for dealing with these problems while they were students. It is amazing what two or three years working in the field can do to student perspective!
My action in dealing with these concerns grew out of a remark by James Cross. At Arizona State University, Jim was asked to give a lecture, and at the end of his talk, he took questions from students. One of the questions was, “Now that it is some twenty-five years after your education, as you look back, what didn’t you get that would have helped your career?” I am sure everybody was thinking his answer would be something like drawing, color, typography or some similar response. His reply was, “social skills.” This remark fit in with my own observations in recent years.

I had noticed that when students graduated, it was not always the most talented students who were the first to get a job. It was those students who presented themselves well, could articulate about their work or goals and generally made a good impression. There were extremely talented students who experienced serious difficulties landing the first job because they were so deficient in social skills. Some of the more common faults we found with students were:

- Students who were extremely shy. We often counseled these students to take courses in public speaking or drama to overcome the handicap. We also encouraged them to speak out more in class or reviews.
- Students who were consistently late for class or missed appointments would probably do the same on the job. We brought this fact to the student’s attention in strong terms.
- Students who were argumentative or temperamental were likely to act the same on the job and it would be harmful to their career.
- Students who could not handle criticism of their work could be predicted to have a difficult time working with supervisors or clients.
- Students who were exceedingly slow needed to know that time is a critical factor in professional practice.
- Students who were sloppy with their work should be made aware that it would count against them in the profession.
- There were male students who had difficulty taking direction from female instructors or they had problems with female classmates that often resulted in inappropriate remarks or actions.

Sometimes egos were barriers to realistic self-evaluation. On these occasions, a favorite ploy was to ask the student to evaluate themselves in relationship to other students on a scale of one to ten with ten being high. Invariably, the student would see themselves as somewhere between 8 and 10. Faculty members would each give their rating which was generally 3 to 5. The perception gap was made clear to the student and they were cautioned that such misjudgements could have serious consequences in professional practice.

I feel strongly that all of these concerns fall within the purview of teachers, and they should be dealt with as part of the educational process.

By having students put all the work up at one time, it was easier for students to see interrelationship and carry-over from one class to another. Design connections or transfer could be pointed out to students by the faculty. Students could see the work as a whole rather than as an aggregate of separate projects with different teachers.

Students had the benefit of input from the entire faculty and grading was more objective. It was difficult for students to attribute a low grade to a personality conflict with one teacher;—they had to deal with the entire faculty. It kept the focus on work as the basis for grading. Students met the entire faculty early in the program and were familiar with them prior to being a student in their classes. This made the transition into new classes easier for students as they moved through the program.

It is extremely important to reviews that all faculty members participate. There should not be a situation where faculty dash in and out of reviews, miss some altogether or sit in but do not comment. Students are sensitive to situations where teachers do not attend or comment. This is one of the best opportunities for teachers to demonstrate their dedication to the educational process and students.
Beginning students normally suffer trepidation about reviews and are easily intimidated. However, as they move through the program, they gain confidence, and eventually they learn to defend their work. I believe that in many respects, reviews helped to condition students for handling job interviews, client dealings and design presentations after graduation.

In addition to fairness for the student, there are multiple benefits from the review process in terms of teacher development. One advantage being that every teacher knows what every other teacher is doing in class. Another is that teachers are aware of what students have done before they reach their classes. Because teachers know what students are doing in other classes, it becomes easier to reinforce one another which is to the ultimate benefit of all students. Teacher participation in reviews also leads to development of a common vocabulary of terms with consistent definitions.

Some teachers tend to grade high, others low, but in the review procedure, there is improved consistency in grading by all teachers. I know it has been true for me, and I suspect it is true for all participants, but the review process is a great learning situation. Seeing work from other classes, listening to other teacher’s comments and evaluations and seeing how they handle students were enlightening and added a great deal to my own education. Spending three or four days going through a hundred plus student’s work at the end of each semester is a formidable task and wearing, but I think the benefits for everyone are sufficient to make it worthwhile. Faculty reviews to evaluate student progress should be more extensively used than they are now.

Student Records

In every program in which I have been involved, there always has been a high rate of attrition, and this is normal within a professional education. Usually the largest number of students withdrew or were dropped in the Sophomore level; four to six as Juniors and two or three as Seniors. Overall, there would be a forty to fifty percent attrition rate over the three-year period.

At the Minneapolis School of Art, I soon encountered problems with failed students or their parents. Other than grades, justification for failing students came down to the teacher’s word against that of the student, and for me, this was an untenable situation.

My response was to develop a form which accommodated all the Graphic Design courses and teachers. Each course had a separate space for a grade and teacher comments. The student’s name, date and grade level were also recorded. At reviews, the forms were filled out, and they were kept in alphabetical sequence in a loose-leaf notebook. As the student moved through the program, the forms accumulated. The notebook moved from one teacher to the next as students moved ahead. Each new teacher could monitor the student’s progress to that point with all the previous teacher’s comments. In dealing with either students or parents regarding grades or being dropped from the program, the records were invaluable and certainly eased our previous problems with justifying faculty action.

The records were also helpful in supplying information for job references after students graduated.

Over the years, the forms were further refined. We eventually made a separate form for mid-term reviews. The mid-term procedure we most often followed was to have the students stack the work on their desk during the scheduled class-time including a sheet of paper with their name on it. The students were not present when the teacher went through the work. The instructor wrote comments and gave a tentative grade for each student. These were copied with one copy left with the student’s work and the other put into the record book.

Keeping these records did mean extra work for teachers but it kept students informed, and generally, the procedure was well worth the effort.
**Student Work Records**

At student semester reviews, faculty pulled the best of student work to make record slides. This practice is extremely important as the slides can be used for teaching aids, recruitment, lectures at other institutions or presentations in the community. We used the slides to keep administrators abreast of what was happening in the program or as credentials in soliciting funding for community or research projects. The slides were important in curricula planning as the faculty could lay out slides representing work for the entire year on a large light table. We could see where we needed to put more emphasis, inject new course content or change sequence. Student work records are an invaluable asset for any program. It is also good to keep an updated file on faculty work.

**Graphic Design Alumni Records**

At the Minneapolis School of Art and the Kansas City Art Institute, I kept alumni records and lost track of only three students over a twenty-year period. We started to keep alumni records at Arizona State University but my tenure there was too short to be effective. My experience has been that alumni records are of immense value to the ongoing program. Alumni proved to be the most effective means for placing students after graduation. Alumni were scattered over the entire country and with a phone call, you could obtain information regarding hiring in that area. Graduates working for firms that were hiring would call me to say there were jobs available. Every two years we published the list of alumni and mailed it out to them. Most would stay in contact with the program because they wanted each new listing. Graduates who wanted to work in a particular location would look in the alumni listing to find if any previous graduate was working there. If so, they could call them, make inquiry, or contact them when they arrived to look for work. Often it was a place to sleep even though a davenport while they were interviewing. As many students had found their first job through this avenue, they were always willing to help a new graduate.

In time, alumni were working in a variety of design capacities throughout the country, and frequently we brought them back to the school to talk with students. Alumni have credibility with current students that makes these visits worthwhile.

We passed out alumni forms to each Senior prior to graduation. The key question on the form was to list a phone number for parents or relative that would always know where they were located.

Even though every institution has an alumni office, it is best done within the program. It is important that any records done within the department are passed on to the institutional alumni office. They are always pleased with the assistance and are cooperative when you need something from their office. I usually had a work grant student each year who kept the records updated. The importance of keeping student work and alumni records cannot be overstated.
Graphic Design Newsletter
At Arizona State University, during 1989, we published a newsletter in conjunction with the alumni program. The newsletter was not only an added incentive for alumni to stay in contact, but it was also an excellent promotional tool both within and outside the university. We mailed copies to art departments at high schools and community colleges. We used it for recruitment and promotional purposes. On a larger scale, I think it would be excellent if all Graphic Design programs published a newsletter once a year describing and illustrating the program as a means for better knowing what is going on at all the different institutions around the country.

Cataloging Work or Design History Slide Records
I always had a number of slides which usually were kept in trays. There were student work, faculty, pedagogical and design or typographic history slides. Either I used them or other faculty members borrowed them to use in their classes. Inevitably, at the end of each term, I had a pile of slides all mixed together in a box, and it would take days to sort and put them back into order.

I finally devised a cataloging system whereby I could take home the box of mixed-up slides, and pay my eight-year old daughter, Shaun, two dollars to separate and put them away.

Loose-leaf notebooks were used for categories such as Student Records, Faculty Work, Design History, Type History, Community Projects and so on. Each book had an alphabetical designation. Each page was numbered. The windows were numbered vertically one to twenty. Corresponding numbers were written on each slide. E-10-15 would be the E book, tenth page and the bottom window on the third column from the left. If it became necessary to add a page between ten and eleven, I would mark it 10-A. This system worked extremely well for me.