

THE HEROINE'S JOURNEY: Aligning a Career Path with Personal Values

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Introduction

When freshmen enter college, they are full of dreams and aspirations. Whether they have a clear idea of what they want to study or not, there is a youthful energy filled with anticipation for the journey ahead. At this early stage in life beginning design students do not have the experience to know what the design professions are really like and they often dream of idealized jobs at big design houses while nobly aspiring to contribute to the world and make their mark. College experiences often allow for such freedom to dream, explore, and discover.

Industry reality can be very different from these fanciful visions. There may be some areas within the design field that foster these ideal experiences. However, today many designers discover that corporate jobs are largely driven by profit, politics, and other obstacles beyond their control.

In the book 'Unlocking Creativity' by Michael A. Roberto, after spending seven years researching creativity in organizations, he witnessed many impediments to creatives. He states, *"Experts reject their ideas and prefer to defend the status quo. Technical specialists exhibit closed-minded behavior when newcomers challenge the conventional wisdom or question established practices. Newcomers experience pressures for conformity."* (Roberto, 2019) Work environments that do not support new ideas and creative input are challenging for visionaries.

This paper seeks to assist educators on how best to prepare beginning design students to navigate a career path when circumstances are less than ideal and how to teach students about personal discovery to find their true purpose, passion, and values in the face of great challenges.

Co-authors Professor Brigid O'Kane from the University of Cincinnati (UC) and Sara Maloney who is a graduate from UC's Industrial Design program highlight pivotal moments in their journeys that completely redefined their career paths to align with their personal and professional values. They

achieved this through establishing new levels of self-awareness, deep personal reflection, and taking big risks.

This paper also outlines specific strategies that can be implemented into the classroom to facilitate a more holistic educational experiences for students. These tactics are paramount in creating necessary pedagogical shifts within design education.

Sara's Journey

As a young car enthusiast, Sara grew up with extensive experience racing go-karts and cars for 14-years. She entered college receiving her first degree in Graphic Design. Upon graduation she continued to search for career options and met Professor Brigid O'Kane who was teaching transportation design at the University of Cincinnati. Sara recalls the moment walking into the design studio to meet Brigid, wide eyed and full of hope. As she looked around the studio, she saw energetic sketches and models of futuristic vehicle designs. With Brigid's encouragement, she was further convinced to pursue this career path.

Because of her clear interests, Sara worked closely with Brigid and focused her studies on transportation design, received her bachelor's degree, and accepted a position at Sea Ray boats. She recalls feeling a fresh sense of excitement for this new experience that aligned with her professional goals of going to college, getting a degree, and pursuing a corporate position.

At Sea Ray, as an Industrial Designer, Sara joined a team of like-minded individuals with a passion for design. Her college experience had prepared her for this new endeavor of designing futuristic exteriors and luxurious interiors. (Fig. 1) While this path fell more in alignment with her education, she felt a desire for something more meaningful outside of designing products for luxury consumerism.



Fig. 1 Sara Maloney's interior yacht design at Sea Ray.

Sara changed her career path and moved to Orlando, Florida to work at Universal Creative as a Show Set Designer. Through this opportunity she was designing as a storyteller creating immersive experiences for people to explore and play. Designing theme park attractions allowed her to explore greater depths within design such as creating master plans, conceptual illustrations, ride vehicles, and final construction packages. (Fig. 2)



Fig. 2 Sara Maloney's Mario Kart retail key art at Universal Creative.

Things were going well until the latent realities of this chosen profession were slowly revealed. Sara was challenged by corporate politics and feeling stuck in a specific role. The societal mindset teaches us that to be successful we need to work hard and climb the corporate ladder. Yet all too often we overwork ourselves and begin to feel burnt out from the grind. She began to question her career path that involved designing for someone else's dreams, which were not in alignment with what she truly valued. Feeling discouraged she began exploring other alternatives.

In an interview Arianna Huffington states, *"There is a pervasive belief that burnout is the price we must pay for success. As we know from recent scientific findings, this is a delusion. When we prioritize our well-being, our decision-*

making, creativity and productivity improve dramatically." (2018)

The stress Sara felt compromised her well-being and she began to focus on a new direction for a life filled with greater purpose. Ultimately, this struggle within the corporate realm led her to reflect deeply on her situation and to discover more about her personal values that made her most happy.

Forging a new path, she began redesigning her life through self-development and creative design thinking techniques. Peeling away layers of who she thought she was supposed to be to find out who she was meant to be. In this experience she cultivated a new level of awareness within herself and the world around her.

As this new expansive and balanced energy grew within, Sara went backpacking alone in Alaska, connecting intimately with nature while staying in cabins deep in the forest. This simple journey immersed in nature was a very pivotal moment, allowing her the space to reflect.

Returning from Alaska it was clear that her heart craved new adventures, enlightening experiences, and freedom. Sara shifted her mindset into a more minimalist way of living outside the preconceived notion that society often teaches us. She learned that the fast-paced society does not always allow for time to reflect or to learn about ourselves. Often, we get caught up in corporate objectives chasing after success, promotions, and titles at the detriment of our health.

All too often the patterns of society condition us to constantly be doing, leading us to feel that if we aren't always 'doing' then we aren't successful. This 'doing' mentality is counterproductive especially when we do not have clarity. Working in this way becomes more robotic and less creative. To find clarity, it is important to slow down and reflect on what engages us most.

In pursuit of new opportunities, Sara left Universal Creative to begin a new position at AOA Builds as a Creative Design Lead. She was excited for this new experience within a smaller company, leading a team, and designing for a more diverse portfolio. However, at the end of 2020 Sara left this position. She embraced this change and took action to pursue her passion for new experiences and adventure. Sara often wondered what life would be like traveling and waking up in nature. She extensively researched alternative

options relating to bus builds and traveling. It seemed impossible to drastically change, but there was a desire within her that needed to be explored.

She found a very specific minibus and retrofitted it to become her new home on wheels to embark on a journey across the country. (Fig. 3) Her goals for the bus design were to be mindful of the build cost, beautiful in design, and as efficient as possible. She installed solar power, built much of the interior out of re-claimed materials, and salvaged a fallen camphor tree to create a countertop. Through this process she decreased her ecological footprint and cut her overall cost of living by 80%.



Fig. 3 Sara Maloney's completed bus interior.

Sara traveled solo in her bus through twenty-one states and drove over ten thousand miles in five months. During this time, she went hiking in forests, swimming in lakes, and camping in dispersed locations completely off grid. When the opportunity presented itself, she worked on farms, learned about permaculture design, ecovillages, natural building materials, and deepened her connection with growing and eating healthy organic food. (Fig. 4)

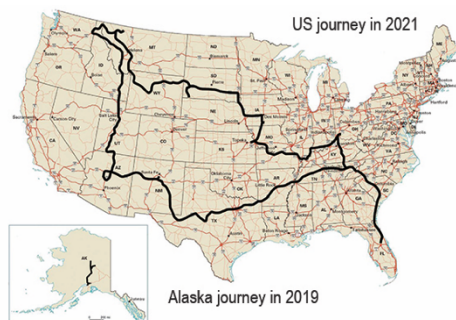


Fig. 4 Sara Maloney's route across the United States.

Having the opportunity to wake up and choose precisely what she wanted to do each day was healing. This new lifestyle nourished and taught her more about herself. As

she traveled, she cultivated friendships with like-minded individuals who had similar goals and began to feel as though she was finding her tribe, as well as a deeper meaning and purpose for her life. (Fig. 5)



Fig. 5 Sara Maloney in the Grand Tetons at sunset.

Although she had many remarkable experiences, this excursion clearly showed Sara a greater perspective on how consumption and waste is scattered across the country. This new awareness was revealed only through this personal experience and has fully reshaped the trajectory of her life. She witnessed first-hand the detrimental effects of mass consumerism and pollution. She saw forest fires igniting daily, dry and depleted crop fields, numerous semis consuming energy while carrying consumer goods, and deforestation in National Parks. Most disturbing was driving through oil fields so vast that the air smelled like a petroleum factory for hundreds of miles. Experiencing this up close transformed her views as a person and designer.

Sara now moves forward with greater intention and integrity. She leads with her heart and a clear mind allowing new creative opportunities to be revealed. She asks questions and challenges the status quo, while influencing change through design to coexist in more harmonious and natural ways. She continues to pursue creative endeavors that are authentic and unique for her life values.

Brigid's Journey

After receiving her first degree in Graphic Design Brigid chose to continue her design education and transferred to College for Creative Studies to study Communication Design. While visiting the College she came upon a wall of car renderings. They were futuristic, splashy, and appeared as if they were moving 200 mph on the page. The work captivated her attention. To her surprise, this work was signed by a woman named Julie. After viewing these futuristic concepts, she switched her major to Industrial Design to focus on transportation.

Upon graduation Brigid accepted a position at General Motors (GM) Design Center as a Creative Automotive Designer. Brigid felt that working at GM was fantastic. They organized diverse teams of talented people who pursued common goals and visions. Every employee was highly skilled and uniquely talented. The creative output was immense.

To refuel her repertoire of creative inspirations Brigid would spend time in nature. She enjoyed scuba diving having logged 191 dives and trained in five different specialties. In 1997 while on a scuba diving trip her perspective on design shifted drastically. She had an unnerving experience as she witnessed up close the devastating effects of coral bleaching and heard for the first time about climate change. This experience transformed her.

When Brigid returned to the GM studios, she couldn't alleviate the stirring sensation that something was wrong. How can the creative aspects of design be so advanced with innovations and technology, while at the same time contribute to such massive destruction?

Questions like this were hard to answer within the business environment where employees often share a corporate philosophy that is curated from the top down. When reflecting upon issues relating to the environment Brigid began to wonder about her professional philosophy outside the corporate bubble. She researched how car design contributed to the ethos of cultures. She inquired about the vast systems in place that support the materials economy in vehicle production. She investigated numerous positive aspects as well as the many challenges. However, her research only produced more questions.

Brigid was compelled to find answers to these looming questions. After ten-years at GM she decided to leave her position and was generously offered a two-year sabbatical. She moved to California and worked in the film industry as a Production Set Designer. There she quickly learned that in this role designers create visual representations of other people's philosophies and visions. She contemplated her individual values which linked to her affinity for nature and considered if she could find a design position that aligned with these standards.



Fig. 6 Professor Brigid O'Kane.

In 2000 her career path led her to accept a position as a professor at the University of Cincinnati. At that time, she focused largely on transportation design. In 2013 she accepted a position as Interim Director of the School of Design and from this leadership perspective she observed the design disciplines from a broader view. On one hand, design has many positive attributes including the ability to enhance the quality of people's lives. On the other hand, some of the design professions are large contributors to environmental challenges due to unsustainable practices. Even though there are many constructive aspects to design, Brigid found herself conflicted with the latent facets in this profession that were destructive. She began asking more questions about the role of design. How could design become an educational tool to bring about positive change? How can design promote and build ethical processes that do not harm the environment? How can design be a catalyst for positive change and build ethical awareness?

In academia professors are encouraged to pursue their own path of intellectual inquiry. Through focused research, Brigid developed new approaches to systems design, which include wholistic approaches to solving problems. Her

exploration also includes sustainable, transformative, and ethical design practices. In 2017 she shifted her teaching emphasis away from mobility to apply this newly acquired knowledge to the broader aspects of design.

Through the intentional cultivation of a path that was driven by curiosity, Brigid shaped her philosophical views and values. She believes this is a necessary journey for all designers. Far too often we become complacent with our circumstances and maintain existing situations. Or we may find ourselves overwhelmed by the immensity of larger systems in place and feel defeated by our inability to make changes. If we are motivated by money or attention, we may lack the ability to clearly see the challenges because of our relentless cravings that fog our vision. *“This emphasis on success often stands in the way of people’s doing what really interest them and makes them happy.”* (Bridges, 2004) If our work does not correspond with our innermost sincere inclinations, we rarely find fulfillment within our chosen profession.

Our professional work must reflect our personal values. *“The word “value” can be defined as your ethics, principles, ideals, standards, or morals. These are literally the ideas, concepts, and actions that fill your life with worth and importance.”* (McKay, Wood, Brantley, 2007) It is imperative that we realize our personal and professional ideals as early as possible. Design educators can teach students this significant lesson. This can be achieved first through leading by example and second by encouraging students to follow their own individual path of intellectual inquiry. Lastly, students must also be taught the tools to actively resist the forces that may distract them from following this path.

Creating a Pedagogical Shift in Design Education

When Brigid and Sara met, they were both focused on traditional transportation design practices. Since that time, they stayed in communication as they each journeyed through various career transitions. It meant a great deal to Sara to have Brigid’s support as she took risks to make meaningful change. Sara also witnessed the transitions that Brigid made in her career path, which were inspirational and encouraging.

Educators, leaders, and mentors can have a powerful impact on shaping the trajectory of a young designer’s career. Part of the responsibility that educators have is to

help students transform as they seek out personal values and develop purposeful goals. The following outlines three critical approaches to achieving these objectives; Reflective Thinking, Experiential Education, and Transformative Learning. Some of these methods emerged through Brigid’s and Sara’s experiences. They have also been vetted through direct implementation within courses that Brigid has taught.

Reflective Thinking

One of the main objectives in design education is to develop and facilitate creative thinking. The integration of reflective thinking throughout the design process emphasizes the exploration of ideas and accentuates the generation of creative thought. John Dewey, an American philosopher, psychologist, and educational reformer, articulated this in his book ‘How We Think’ when he stated, *“Active, persistent, and careful consideration of any belief or supposed form of knowledge in the light of the grounds that support it, and the further conclusions to which it tends, constitute reflective thought.”* (Dewey, 2014)

Reflection supports students in wholistic research activities not only with the output of thoughts, but also with seeing circumstances from different points of view. It also encourages students to make correlations between dissimilar ideas while developing conceptual articulations.

Reflective thinking encompasses the ability to examine one’s own thoughts and that of others. This involves an aspect of being aware of thinking patterns and habitual actions, which allows students the opportunity to consider options, analyze choices, and develop meaningful conclusions. It also gives students the ability to tap into their thoughts and emotions from a more human centered perspective while exploring multiple viewpoints.

It is helpful to consider two definitions of reflection. One definition relates to what we see when we observe an image given back by a reflecting surface or the image produced by a mirror. Thoughtful reflection is like an invitation for the viewer to process the information in a contemplative way. When we intentionally participate in focused observation and reflection, we are in essence putting a mirror in front of ourselves or the data so we can objectively examine what is really going on from different points of view. Re-contextualizing information helps us see from a broader perspective where we can view the bigger scheme of things.

From this vantage point we can infuse the nuances of the human element into the problem-solving equation, make more informed decisions, and live a more skillful life.

The second definition of reflection pertains to giving serious consideration to certain matters. Through conscious critical reflection we can explore the depths of our own intentions and values while making decisions in a more fluid organic way, rather than from a linear or analytical viewpoint alone. This introspective process allows us to explore deeper insights into how and why we make decisions. Thoughtful reflection leads to more meaningful conclusions that includes real human needs that cannot be found in researched facts and figures. When the human condition is part of the equation, we are more likely to make humane choices.

Incorporating reflective practices into the design process fosters professional growth through conscious critical self-reflection as well as creating space to reflect upon design projects in a wholistic way. Reflective thinking takes time and during these activities students move at a slower pace. This is in contradiction to the fast-paced studio environment. However, through reflective thinking and critical observations students form real world perspectives that more accurately depict current circumstances. This idea is captured in a statement by Carl Honoré, *"The central tenet of the Slow philosophy is taking the time to do things properly, and thereby enjoy them more. Whatever its effect on the economic balance sheet, the Slow philosophy delivers the things that really make us happy: good health, a thriving environment, strong communities and relationships, freedom from perpetual hurry."* (Honoré, 2004)

Through experience we have learned that it takes commitment and discipline to implement slow-design practices into studio projects. Dedicated time for reflective activities can be developed within a syllabus before classes begin. It is most critical to make time for reflection at the beginning and end phases of a project, and it can also be scheduled periodically throughout the semester.

One example of this is requiring students to spend time in nature and share these experiences in class. Outdoor immersion enriches our mental and physical well-being. Students often comment on the benefits of these excursions which also allow time for reflection. Sara experienced this firsthand when she went to Alaska on her own and took time

to consider her life circumstances. This trip was an important first step in changing her career path.

It is also critical to establish an environment that encourages a culture of questioning, where ideas can be discussed through mutual respect. Additionally, allowing for moments of thoughtful silence, where students are given time to think before answering questions, is conducive to more insightful feedback during discussions.

Experiential Education

Experiential education can be defined as learning through experience, which happens within academia. The benefits to this can expand when it goes beyond the classroom. Examples include volunteer opportunities, study abroad, and community service. It may also include internships and cooperative education which enhance the educational experience for students, however these opportunities are usually directly related to the discipline. Experiential learning beyond the design field offers students something different. Educators can implement experiential education activities into their curriculum that help students make connections and find deeper meaning in their studio projects.



Fig. 7 An example of experiential learning at the University of Cincinnati, College of DAAP where Brigid's students visit community gardens within the urban streets of Cincinnati.

For example, outside activities can connect students to local communities. In Fig. 7 Brigid's students are on a tour to see various community gardens within the urban streets of Cincinnati. Sara visited Brigid's design studio and shared her extraordinary journey of retrofitting a bus and traveling across the United States. (Fig. 8) These examples of

bringing outside opportunities into the classroom fosters new ideas.



Fig. 8 An example of experiential learning at the University of Cincinnati, College of DAAP where Sara is sharing her journey with design students.

One of the more key yet often overlooked aspects of experiential learning is the importance of teaching students the value of this type of learning so they seek these opportunities out for themselves. We've all heard the saying *'life is a classroom.'* There is great value in learning through everyday experiences. To benefit from life experiences, we need to take time to intentionally absorb what is happening around us. In many cases life is the best teacher. Therefore, it is critical to point this out to students, so they make a conscious effort to learn from and apply these lessons in a multitude of ways.

Transformative Learning

According to Wikipedia transformative learning, "...as a theory, says that the process of "perspective transformation" has three dimensions: psychological (changes in understanding of the self), convictional (revision of belief systems), and behavioral (changes in lifestyle)." A vital component of transformative learning is for individuals to change their stated values by contemplating their assumptions, standards, and beliefs, and then consciously making and implementing strategies that redefine their worlds. This process can be logical and analytical.

An example of transformative learning is described earlier in this paper when Brigid experienced coral beaching and was confronted with the realities linked to global warming. She recognized her affinity for nature as an important core value that led to her conviction to learn more, which

ultimately caused behavior changes with her leaving GM in search of answers. This calculated approach evolved over years and ultimately transformed her life and career.

We can also learn from moments of transformation that are irrational or hard to describe. These are often referred to as moments of "aha!", when circumstances present us with a sudden realization, inspiration, or insight. Instantaneously we relate to a deep sense of recognition or comprehension, and in these flashes of insight we change. An example of this was mentioned within Brigid's journey when she came upon a wall of car concept renderings that inspired her to change her major to transportation design. That moment altered the trajectory of her career path.

Another method for triggering transformative learning experiences is to integrate systems thinking or systems approaches into the design process. "A system is an interconnected set of elements that is coherently organized in a way that achieves something. ...a system must consist of three kinds of things: elements, interconnections, and a function or purpose." (Meadows, 2008) When students explore the vast network of systems that connect with the nuances of their projects or skills, they have moments of *aha*. As an educator it is rewarding to see the excitement in their faces as they explain what they learned through a systems approach and how it will influence their design moving forward.

Conclusion

As educators it is our responsibility to consider such options to improve the educational experience. If we believe it is essential to teach students how to discover their values and commence with a path of intellectual inquiry, then we must plan accordingly. This commitment allows educators the opportunity to change the trajectory of their teaching even if it is ever so slight, and perhaps begin a new journey themselves.

But why change? The *blatant* parts of the heroin's story discussed in this paper link to design education. The *latent* pieces relate to the challenges we face with climate change, consumption, and environmental degradation, which are key motivators for new approaches in education. For many of us we know change is coming, but we are unsure what we can do as individuals. Brigid and Sara hope that by sharing their journeys they will inspire pedagogical shifts that will shape a new path forward.

“The complexity of our present trouble suggests as never before that we need to change our present concept of education. Education is not properly an industry, and its proper use is not to serve industries, either by job-training or by industry-subsidized research. It’s proper use is to enable citizens to live lives that are economically, politically, socially, and culturally responsible. This cannot be done by gathering or “accessing” what we now call “information” — which is to say facts without context and therefore without priority. A proper education enables young people to put their lives in order, which means knowing what things are more important than other things; it means putting first things first.” (Berry, 2019)

So, how do we foster change? Of course, it comes full circle back to design. Moving forward, we urge educators to intentionally design classroom experiences that incorporate reflective thinking, experiential education, transformative learning, and other such approaches.

“However, classrooms can be designed to lead people regularly to a state of “natural flow.” That is the value of exercises that teach reflection and inquiry, of tools that foster systems understanding and of taking the time for explicitly focusing on aspirations and collaboration. If what happens in the classroom is primarily a product of the ways people think and interact, then methods that improve the quality of thinking and interaction can make everything else that goes on in the classroom more powerful.” (Senge, 2012)

The future of design must include nurturing the most important aspects of our lives, slowing the pace, and slowing mass consumption. The journey is about the experience, the present, the *now*. With this mindset we are more likely to make better decisions. Also, we must make humane and healthy choices today that will support the well-being of humanity and nature for a sustainable future.

Living and working authentically shapes new paths that bring us the most happiness and joy. We can experience creative freedom and explore beyond boundaries, while trusting the process as it unfolds.

Furthermore, if we all lived true to our unique selves, living out our passions, we can co-create and design a more sustainable and regenerative world far beyond what we can even imagine. Achieving this requires coming together

through connection and community to design a more balanced and harmonious life for ourselves, humanity, and the Earth.

We must teach students to walk in the direction that honors their beliefs and ask them to define and declare a path of intellectual inquiry. Students should be aware of their options so they can live a life that fits their unique journey. The alternative is traveling outside of one’s individual values, which compromises their integrity.

Moving forward with a new perspective on design, education, and the environment also comes with a new awareness around building community, connections, and the importance of educators and great leadership. Fostering a network of relationships that support our collective growth through trust, purpose, and meaning is critical.

As design educators we have an opportunity to revolutionize the fields of Design. By reframing our lens, we can see a broader perspective of the long-term effects our discipline has on the world, and do something about it.

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