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Why Design Matters for Learning Institutions

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*Macmillan Learning*

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ABSTRACT
Design is becoming a mainstream element in the business world, but it’s been late to reach academia. In this brief, I argue that embracing design is critical for institutions and that design affects learning, outcomes, and enrollment.

Keywords: design; design thinking; learning design; user-centered design.

When people think of design companies, they typically think of Apple, Google, or IDEO – big companies that employ leagues of user experience designers in the interest of designing commercial products, digital experiences, or consulting services. However, have you ever considered your school, college, or university to be a design organization? You should – after all, institutions design programs, curricula, courses, and learning experiences. Indeed, design underlies nearly every aspect of education, from environmental design to curriculum design, and increasingly to digital learning design. The experiences institutions and instructors design can make or break learning – and certainly influence student persistence, satisfaction and success.

It’s increasingly well known that good design is good for business. Over a year ago, the Harvard Business Review reported that companies that understood the value of design beat the S&P by 228% over a 10-year period. “The bottom line is that companies that use design strategically grow faster and have higher margins than their competitors.” The article continued, “this goes beyond traditional consumer products; government and B2B marketing, notorious for not-so-great aesthetics and customer experiences, are starting to make design a priority” (Rae, 2014). We have all witnessed the power of good design; many people credit design with bringing Apple back from the brink. Starbucks’s Howard Schultz set out to create the “Starbucks Experience” by designing “third places” for people to enjoy when not at home or work. Recently, IBM announced that it had invested $100M to expand its design businesses – opening ten new interactive experience labs around the world (Kolko, 2015; Wilson, 2014). This design revolution has created new career paths, with Fortune.com revealing that graduate degrees in design-oriented disciplines such as human-computer interaction are among the most lucrative of all degrees (Colpan, 2014).

What may be less familiar, however, is how design affects learning – especially in the increasingly online, blended, and digitally augmented environments in which students learn. First, design is essential for both accessibility and Universal Design for Learning. Neither can be achieved in the absence of design. Second, design promotes usability – and usability directly supports learning. Researchers at the University of Patras found that usability factors are significantly associated with students’ real and perceived learning performance (Tselios et al., 2001). When learners engage with a highly usable system, they perceive themselves as learning more. And when learners attempt to use a system that lacks usability, they attribute their difficulties to their own learning (Mackey, 2008). In addition, Richard Mayer’s substantial research on multimedia learning, and John Sweller’s research on cognitive load theory, both demonstrate that design is critical to cognition and transfer. Certainly, few would argue that well designed curricula are a central part of any learning experience.

Moreover, with institutions increasingly focused on outcomes, design is even more essential. Outcomes – whether related to student persistence, performance, or employment – require careful, research-based design for
Why Design Matters for Learning Institutions: Bergin


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References

