teaching graphic design

approaches, insights, the role of listening and
24 interviews with inspirational educators

Sven Ingmar Thies (ed.)

Interviews with:

Katrin Androschin	Gesche Joost	Stefan Sagmeister
Masayo Ave	Katsuya Kato	Kashiwa Sato
Paulus M. Dreibholz	Ruth Mateus-Berr	Yasuhiro Sawada
Fritz Frenkler	Kei Matsushita	Mathilde Scholz
Nikolaus Hafermaas	Johanna Pirker	Matthias Spaetgens
Brigitte Hartwig	Rathna Ramanathan	Erik Spiekermann
Jianping He	LeeAnn Renninger	Takeshi Sunaga
Michael Hohl	Ichiro Saga	Toshio Yamagata

edɪtɪon:'ʌngewʌndtə
Universität für angewandte Kunst Wien
University of Applied Arts Vienna

Rathna Ramanathan

teaches Typography and Graphic Communication Design

Dean of Academic Strategy
Central Saint Martins (CSM) and PhD Supervisor at the School
of Communication, Royal College of Art (RCA), London
Great Britain

It so happened that this lively online video interview crashed the very moment the discussion turned to remote teaching. One week later, Rathna Ramanathan goes on to talk about the enlightenment she got from peer reviews, why you should pay attention to your energy level when teaching, how to educate educators, and how thinking, making and feeling relate to each other. — January 2022

Thies: Your statement on the *university website*[52] says you were delighted to address the urgent challenges of social justice and anti-racism at the heart of your mission. What does the Dean of Academic Strategy do every day?
Ramanathan: Beyond attending lots of meetings? [smiles] I like the job because it is focused on the future and how changes in the present can make a difference in the student journey. How our students come to us, how they are with us and how they graduate from us.

So there is a wide range of people in the team I manage. We have, for example, someone who looks after the student experience, someone who focuses on pedagogy, teaching and learning, and someone who looks after knowledge exchange, which is about, 'How do we connect industry or organisations from the outside to the university and give our students opportunities to work on live projects and gain work experience whilst with us?' Also, digital delivery in terms of how we learn online, and digital platforms and environments as well as student recruitment also sit with me. And then we have Academic Development and Quality, which is how we design processes and structures so that our courses can work within the UK higher education framework.

So my work is both thinking about the course development and about future courses. In all that, I am a practising graphic designer; it is the way I see the world, my life and my work, whether I'm a mum, whether I'm a teacher, whether I'm a researcher or whether I'm doing my job as dean. We always have an audience we are serving; we must always consider who it's for.

In my work, strategy and delivery are equally important. It is critical that we consider how this might make the lives and experiences of our students better. So it can't just be words on a page, it can't just be policies. It has to change our student experience in a way that's meaningful to them, right now.

You mentioned student recruitment. How do you ensure getting a good mixture of students?

There is a saying that education is about mutual benefit. I think this is really important because, at the end of the day, it is about chemistry and a community that we're building as well as the work and processes that students bring to us. We interview students as a first part of this process. We see education as being transformative, and that may not suit everybody. Being here is quite intense and it is important that we let students know what to expect when they come to Central Saint Martins. And when you ask any of our students, 'What did you enjoy the most?' they talk about their fellow students, and they forget about us as soon as they leave. [laughs]

So it's ensuring that this chemistry is there, and that we bring together a community of diverse and different people, not just people who are like us.

Before leaving, what should students learn from you?

Having taught both undergraduate and postgraduate, I think it's important to remember what's required on these different levels. I'm uncomfortable with the teacher–student hierarchy, especially as our students, both at CSM and the RCA, come from different walks of life and professional backgrounds. I'm more interested in creating a community of practice where people from different parts of the world can learn from each other.

As to what I bring to the table, I would say my approach is a research-led practice that is grounded in publishing. I'm really interested in how research can ground and anchor a concept, and where graphic design and typography can function as a voice, in addition to the text and the image.

How do you help them to learn from each other?

One thing is to create intentional spaces for collaboration and conversation, which is an essence of an art school because that's really where the interesting relationships start happening, rather than just in the taught delivery.

Going to university or to art college means these spaces should happen everywhere: in the canteen, in the studio, in the workshops with people from different disciplines being alongside each other. For example, a graphic designer meets a textile designer in the workshop, and there starts an interesting conversation.

The second thing is to create intentional learning. We call that the 'collaborative unit' where every student in an undergraduate course comes together

with other students to work in interdisciplinary groups on one challenge, for example. They gain experience of working with others in art and design, but not in their discipline. There they realise they need to function first as a human, connecting with people, and then focus on their practice, whether art, design or performance. When you ask our students what they want more of, they want more collaborative opportunities with students outside of their own discipline.

Another opportunity at the RCA are the self-organised studios. You rock up and you go and find a table in a little room that can accommodate 10 to 15 people at the most. The animator sits there next to the graphic designer, who sits next to the typographer, who sits next to the filmmaker. And then you find the collaboration starting to happen.

So you create an interdisciplinary space where students live with each other, work with each other, and that's where the real learning happens.

Those are collaborations between students from related disciplines. Do you also provide opportunities to work with people from other disciplines, say, an engineer or a social scientist?
There are two ways in which we do that. One is knowledge exchange. You might have a company or an organisation who comes to us and wants us to look for new ways of engaging and thinking. Or, for example, it might be about global health. These projects look for creative solutions to global issues. At a postgraduate level we're increasingly seeing that we have economists, scientists, engineers, historians, business people – people from very different backgrounds who are very interested in a creative approach – bringing along their previous disciplinary backgrounds. That is more organic rather than intentional. At CSM we also have courses like Bio Design or Material Futures, which intentionally involve other disciplines like science, anthropology or climate studies. Those courses bring lecturers and teachers into the design departments who come from non-art and design disciplines.

And the other way of doing it is through collaborative degrees. So for example, we have collaborations with business schools, jointly providing degrees like MBAs at CSM or at the RCA Global Innovation Design or Innovation Design Engineering or MRes Healthcare Design. That's when really exciting and innovative ways of thinking about the world and ways of working start to happen.

In my experience, you need to find the same language to talk to architects or economists, for example. How do you support that in class?
I think collaborative units help do that. At CSM we call ours Creative Unions. At the RCA there was this one week where students would work 'Across RCA'. Basically, it's about students offering projects across the college, located in

different departments. And you could pick one to work with over a week in an intense, detailed manner to learn a new way of thinking and making. I think that sort of gives you a sense of the limitations of your own language, but also mechanisms that you need to find out. Such as what are your strengths and how do you build on them? And then students often sit and make together rather than just speaking together. I think it's quite interesting to think about how we use form as a language, and not necessarily spoken language, in ways of building that bridge of collaboration.

Can you give an example of using forms instead of spoken language?
It was a conceptual project run by one of our tutors who asked architects and graphic designers, 'What if books were buildings? What if buildings were books? What would they look like?' We wanted them to have little models, using nothing more than paper. So if the book was a building, or the building was a book, it still had to function in a way that it's both. And as both objects have certain rules, it's about a balance between structure and system as well as about being able to break rules.

What is more important in teaching: the thinking or the making?
That's a very hard question.

I am very glad to be the person who's asking. [laughs]
[laughs] I think that depends on the context and the stage of the work.
    There was Richard Guyatt, who came up with the term Graphic Design at the Royal College of Art. He believed in the hand, the heart and the mind. He said the three need to be linked in order for us to practise meaningfully.
    What we're talking about is a critical practice, and for a practice to be critical it has to engage with the context, it has to have a purpose that it is anchored by. If there's a constant rhythm and a narrative between head, heart and mind, then the work has purpose, it has resonance. It also begins a conversation with the people, because the work isn't finished when it leaves our hands.
    As a book designer, for me the work only comes alive when it goes to the reader, and then I learn from readers and bring what I've learnt back into practice. I'd say there's thinking and making, but there's also a sense of feeling of connection with others, which is our purpose. Making is very implicit for us, which goes back to your point about languages. How do you discuss making with someone who's neither a maker nor a practitioner? I believe that the easiest way is to begin the conversation through objects.
    For me, the word 'practice' brings together the head, the heart and the mind. The idea of practice is both, the English word 'to practise', which is regular,

daily connection, but also 'a practice', which means you're building something. Practice is something that is quite unique. I always refer to it as being like a sponge. You could take the practice and put it into a situation, a context, and it absorbs that situation and comes to life, based on that context. It's ever changing in some ways and yet consistent. It is wonderful when you get it right.

Have you ever had a situation where a student does a presentation, and it feels like everything is perfect, but the heart is missing. What do you do then?
That's a fascinating question because I sometimes think it's the fault of the brief, which isn't designed in such a way that you could bring the heart in with the mind right at the start. Because once the heart is activated, it will continue to provide the thread or the logic. Particularly if you're connecting the heart not to yourself and your purpose, but to the outside world and a larger purpose. That can be transformative. It is a very difficult thing to bring ourselves to our work in just the right way. For that, you have to be vulnerable. You have to put yourself at risk. And your ego matters less. In my experience, not everybody has the courage to do that. But to me, that is the only way your work will have soul. It has to touch, connect with somebody.

What happens when it's impossible to create that heart part with a student?
Especially in master's level education, there's a point where you must step back and reflect, 'We have given you everything that we can give you. And now you need to lead us.' The relationship of the tutor and the student then changes. You can't give someone heart; they need to find it themselves. Your job as a tutor is to facilitate their journey to that.

What are the most important skills teachers should bring to the classroom?
I would say there are five important skills for me.

First, an ability to listen and reflect with our students. There is never just one approach to any subject, and by listening and reflecting with our students, we learn how to guide them in a way that is appropriate to them.

Second, two fundamental skills that are crucial to graphic design are knowing how to read and write. Our work in typography is entirely word and language-based, so it is the first step to becoming productive designers. I see reading as a kind of listening activity as well.

Third, as teachers, we need to understand the limits of our own knowledge and experience. There are many diverse typographic and design traditions, and the worst thing we could do is to limit the approach of our students through the boundaries of our own knowledge.

Fourth is teaching by doing – through practice, and in practice with our students. Whilst theory is important and crucial, you only learn our craft through regular practice and by doing and making mistakes.

Finally, as one of my students at the Royal College of Art, Eugene Noble, once said: The best thing about the whole experience was that students left with questions that they would pursue for the rest of their lives.

If we can guide our students to this critical approach – or question – that is fundamental to how they practise, then this, I would say, is our most important task.

What is the application process for teachers like, and what is important to help you decide 'this is the right person'?
I think it's the same as when we look at students. It's someone who the community can benefit from. Someone who brings in a different voice. In recent interview panels, it was also someone who had the expertise, but was unafraid to challenge themselves and other people and suggest new directions.

And of course, there's practice. At the end of the day, we're an art college, and you've got to be doing the thing that you're teaching. That's absolutely critical. Otherwise, I don't think it resonates with students.

And then finally, like with any partnership or collaboration, it's really important to have chemistry and community. 'Why do you want to do this and how?' You know, that commitment someone wants to make, and why they want to join the college.

If we don't find that right person, we just pause it and open it up again. It is an important decision and important to get that sense of community right and to support it.

So what would be the best answer to your question, 'Why do you want to teach?'
That's a really … oh my God, Ingmar! I might have to send this back to you.

So people who have answered why they want to teach were saying because they wanted to make a difference, to make a contribution. And if you ask me why I want to teach, I'd say I benefited greatly from education, and would like to pass some of that benefit on. Ultimately, I teach because I learn from students.

Tough question. [laughs]

[laughs] I'm still lucky to be the one who's asking. Do you have teachers who are not practitioners?
No, actually everybody is, but some might be part-time practitioners.

How do you form and lead a group of teachers onto the right track?
That is interesting because it goes back to the idea of a community of practice. Sometimes we're led by the curriculum, because there's a level that we need to teach our first year's, or second year's, or third year's, or master' students on. But within that, I think that it's important to show diverse views. In India we have this saying: 'Unity and diversity.' When you build a community of practice, people lead each other together.

Do you reward teachers for doing a good job in class? If so, what kind of rewards do you have?
Not enough probably.

The university has teaching fellowships, for example. You also have this higher education academy in the UK of lecturers, senior fellows, fellows, all of that. And the students' union does reward; students nominate teachers every year. But I think we should do more of that rewarding.

You mentioned the teacher's ability to listen and reflect. Putting listening into a slightly different perspective, my hypothesis is that listening is the most important ability when designing. What do you think?
I think that's absolutely right. There's something that I'm interested in called active listening. Active listening is when you're not just hearing what that person is saying, in words, but you're actually really – again – heart-connected to the context of what they're saying. You're then trying to understand it from their perspective. When we listen well, it guides us as to how we design, and who we design with. You can listen to people, to objects, to history, even to culture.

And I think the design process starts first by us listening. From listening there comes understanding. And from understanding comes the drafting or the sketching and the thinking through. All quite wildly, and in the end, listening leads to ideas.

I agree with you there. But shouldn't we always ask a question before we start listening?
Let me think about that. [reflects] … no.

I'd say no, because I think that if we ask, we sometimes limit the brief by shaping the questions ourselves. But if we just listen – by openly or actively listening – then the questions might come to you from the people themselves. Otherwise we're just having a conversation where I'm waiting for you to stop, so I can interject. I think we should teach more across all cultures about how to listen.

Since I also believe that listening is one important ability when teaching, can you tell me a bit more on that?

I am going to give you a short anecdote on that. I was very, very lucky that I did my Postgraduate Certificate in Teaching and Learning at Central Saint Martins. The person who was teaching our group was James Wisdom, who had been in education for about 30 to 40 years. James had seen education go from an art college to a university, which I think provides a very broad perspective over time. He was doing a teaching observation of me. I normally went into a session, let's say, of 12 students, having a limited amount of time of about half a day. Everybody wants feedback, wants 100% from you. And you think the way to do that is to sacrifice yourself. But actually, the most difficult thing is to listen and to get that person to then reflect and understand, so that they provide the answer themselves rather than us providing it for them. And that takes time.

James Wisdom just said, 'Pay attention to your energy when you are teaching, because when you dip and you start to feel tired is often when someone is pulling at you really, really hard.' What I realised was that a part of me is listening, and I'm not paying attention to the part that's listening. So for me, you are absolutely right. Listening is the most important ability, but it's very hard. It's easier not to listen and to give in to what's actually being asked of you as a teacher, which is: *tell me what to do*!

But genuine teaching is when we become less and less important to the student because they are finding their own practice and growing in the confidence of their own voice, and how we facilitate that from the start.

I think active listening is the hardest part of teaching. And when done very well, it can be quite exhausting, because listening happens in a different part of us, rather than in the front of the mind. You're sort of going to your creative mind in a sense, and working with your intuition, which comes over time with practice.

Does the word teaching express what you do in class?

If I had to label myself, I would say I am not teaching, I am practising with students. It means empowering, reflecting and listening. Sometimes it also means it is frightening. Most of us teach to learn.

How are your peer observations organised?

It's a university mechanism, of which there is one every year, but it's organised on a local level. You could choose your partner and usually your partner is someone who teaches in a different subject area.

For example, coming from graphic design and typography, I did it with somebody who was teaching photography. We were looking at the relationship between the tutor and the student.

Do you follow any particular process?

We do have a process; you get some guidelines.

It's like colleague-to-colleague support. The observation is sort of that we meet, discuss things together and talk about some of the challenges. 'I have tried this experimental type of teaching', for example. We then choose the parameters and organise the observations in different contexts. We might just do two short ones. So you come and see me twice, I come to you twice, and then we write a couple of things to each other. Actually, that written stuff is intended for each other but it also goes back to the university in terms of documenting process and good practice so we can all learn from it.

How do you educate educators before they start to teach?

This is a chicken and egg situation.

At the RCA, a lot of people came to learn visual communication and then went on to teach. There was a real interest in teaching. So I started running a teaching workshop and exercises for postgraduate MA students and giving them projects that they could do. It was really popular.

At CSM, where you have a BA and an MA, you could potentially give interested MA students a pilot project for the undergraduate students. Or PhD students teach MA students. So it's sort of enabling that practice whilst they're with us, rather than saying 'This is how you teach.' It's interesting to ask people who are being taught what good teaching might be. It's a more reflective and really discursive exercise about what teaching is. Actually it's more an exercise about learning than it is about teaching.

The other way is the postgraduate certificate of learning and teaching I did at CSM. That's a reflective one. You've got to be teaching while you are doing it or preferably have taught for two or three years. So you've got a sense of your own practice, and then you have something to refer back to.

I shouldn't forget to mention PhD students. At the RCA, PhD students might be doing a project on typography and might be able to set up a project for MA students. Then young people are talking to young people, which is very different from our generation talking to them.

But I think again, we mentioned it earlier, it's about building that community of practice. And I think that I've been blessed very much with generous teachers who have shared their practice with me. So you learn from watching them, in that sense.

Last question: What are the advantages of blended learning, the combination of e-learning and space-based classroom methods?

One advantage is that someone is situated in the context of their work and of their practice, which is really important in design, and they're working with an education that helps them translate to and from that context.

I did my BA in Fine Art in India as we didn't have design degrees. Then I came to CSM to do my MA in Communication Design, and then my PhD in Typography. I went back and forth. I sometimes imagine how my degree of Communication Design would have been if I had done it blended with me situated in India and learning online. It would have been richer in my own context that was around me, but at the same time in London I was sitting next to people and working with people and I would have lost out on that in some way. I learnt by just watching them working and making and not even having a conversation. So I think we're too focused on the screen, the foreground of us, instead of on the background. I think blended learning gives us an opportunity to rethink that balance, to consider situating design in different places around the world.

Another advantage is time. You can't teach for hours on end online. So you have to be really choosy about how you teach, and also how you use the camera for design. For example, is showing drawings just turning on the camera? I think we need to explore that much more: what is a studio online? How do we share practice?

Finally, one great advantage for me is, personally, that I've been able to give lectures across the world. Likewise, I have had people from across the world come and talk to us.

Great suggestions, Rathna!
Many thanks.

SAMPLE ASSIGNMENTS

SAMPLE ASSIGNMENTS

How do other teachers plan their lessons and which tasks do they use?
The sample assignments provided by the interviewees on the following
pages offer some insight. The selected tasks vary in terms of subject areas,
topics and scope, and show how diverse project work can be.

Rathna Ramanathan and Sheena Calvert, Visual Communication
Royal College of Art (RCA), London, Great Britain

Proof

Assignment:
This eight-week project is founded on the belief that, as Rudnick noted, there is a crisis of graphic practices, providing us with distinct challenges for the future.

Proof is for those for whom the 'word' or text offers a starting point for creative inquiry and expression. It is an opportunity to use the research you've conducted in your dissertation, or if you have an interest in writing or in experimenting with codes and visual language.

Each week, over an eight-week period, is built around a combination of readings and focused workshop exercises (each with a particular provocation intended to motivate and inspire your thinking). We will investigate how you can produce communication material in an individual, personal yet impactful way that goes beyond the purely speculative.

We will start with the conclusion of a text that was transformative for you. It could be a paragraph you read that made you reconsider something or the conclusion of your dissertation. We will take a non-conformist, visually speculative approach to your work, asking *what if?* We will use this method of query to consider the concept of Stuart Candy's probable, preferable, plausible and possible futures in relation to your practice.

The project is grounded and structured to reflect the role of an independent practitioner-publisher. You will be working with your own content through phases of editing, drafting and designing to produce, publish and disseminate.

Our purpose is to move beyond designing communication for the way things are right now, to imagine communication for how things could be. We will seek audiences outside of the academic context to understand how to translate and create impactful communication and do this by speculating, imagining and dreaming to create work and graphic practices for the kind of world that we wish to live in.

Structure by week:
1. *Be curious* – Let Us Conclude | 2. *See more* – Metaphors of a Plausible Future | 3. *Think big* – Prototypes of a Probable Future | 4. *Make connect* – Images of a Preferable Future | 5. *Embrace paradox* – Provocations for a Possible Future | 6. *Take action* – Spec | 7. *Produce* – Look and Feel | 8. *Publish* – Let Us Begin

About the author

Born and raised in Hamburg, Germany, Sven Ingmar Thies studied graphic design at Braunschweig University of Art and completed his final thesis in Tokyo and Yokohama.

Since his time at university, he has focused on a holistic design approach that seamlessly connects to other design disciplines, other specialist areas or even to handicrafts. This conviction was intensified further by two professional engagements at Henrion, Ludlow & Schmidt in London, where brands were holistically developed, and at Kitayama Institute in Tokyo, where he learnt about the interplay between architecture and design during a two-year postgraduate scholarship.

Besides being involved in project-related work for brand agencies Landor (today, Landor & Fitch) and Enterprise IG (today, Superunion), he founded Thies Design in 1998, which develops tailored brand experiences for enterprises and institutions.

In addition to his professional activities, Sven Ingmar Thies has taught graphic design at the University of Applied Arts Vienna's Class of Ideas since 2011.

Interviews with specialists in:
Cognitive Psychology
Communication Design
Conception
Design Basics and Media
Design History
Design Management
Design Methods
Design Theory
Design Thinking
Didactics
Game Design
Graphic Design
Industrial Design
Information Design
Integrated Design
Interaction Design
Poster Art
Sensory Experience Design
Strategic Design
Transmedia Design
Typography
Visual Communication
Visual Language

This book is for:

- design educators
- design students
- practising
  designers

This book describes:

- sustainable teaching
  practice
- how to give learners
  their own experiences
  and discoveries through
  active listening
- how learners and
  educators can improve
  through shared
  reflection

This book offers:

- an insight into teaching
  parameters for a more
  conscious approach to
  teaching and learning
- 24 interviews with
  educators from Austria,
  China, Germany, Japan,
  the UK and the USA
- 12 selected project
  briefings
- recommendations for
  your first day in class