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The Future of the History of Design

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In March 2017, the School of Interiors at the University of Kentucky received the Teaching Excellence Award from the Interior Design Educators Council (IDEC), the national organization of interior design educators. The School of Interiors was recognized for the redesign of its first-year course sequence in the history and theory of design, which is taken by majors and non-majors alike. What formerly was a face-to-face, lecture-based march through history has been transformed into a hybrid (online and face-to-face) collaborative inquiry into the trans-historical themes of design with an eye on both global and local iterations. This work is particularly urgent for all disciplines reflecting on the form and function of the introductory historical survey sequence for undergraduates: how to present—and *make present*—the history and historiography that underpin current theory and practice.

To learn more about the story behind the award, I spoke with Interiors faculty Patrick Lee Lucas and Helen Turner about the conversations that led to the course redesign, the process of working collaboratively with colleagues, and the road ahead as they continue to refine and expand their efforts. As institutions have become increasingly keen to invest in online and hybrid delivery formats, many educators hesitate for fear that they'll further aggravate the *distance* in distance learning. This is a Faustian anxiety; do we save ourselves but lose our souls in the bargain? With precedents such as MOOCs and the Khan Academy, what are the roles of the educator, the student, and "class time" when part or all of the face-to-face hours become activity sequences housed in learning management systems? As with any question of teaching and learning, it's all in the design, and Lucas and Turner provide an example of intentional and reflective work with curricular and delivery models that *enhance* student engagement, collaboration, and experiential learning.

Redesigning the Survey

Trey: Let's start with the beginning. What drove your ambition to revise the freshman history courses and to explore different ways of teaching the history and theory of design to first-year students?

Patrick: We have very talented colleagues in the School of Interiors who inspire us. Rebekah Radtke got a grant to make a hybrid version of our junior-level professional practice course. We saw how it reinvigorated the energy around that subject, and Helen and I began talking about how a history-theory sequence could use some online components. Before we decided on how it would look online, we had to rethink how we teach history. The most important conversations were those initial explorations when we were challenging each other to think about how we reach students and how we tell the important stories of design history.

Helen: Even as a precursor to Rebekah's grant, I remember sitting outside of the old student center with Patrick in the Adirondack chairs [found across UK's campus] talking about how we teach history, how it's usually very chronological, but that it could be presented more thematically. Because everything in design is a precursor to something else we're always reminding students of the chronological narrative we've covered so far, and the connections we want them to make might be buried under several layers of the course. But Patrick and I wondered about the impact of thinking about a focused set of connections over time, all at once.

Patrick: For instance, we'd be able to compare ancient Rome to the Renaissance Revival, but also to what happens on the American stage with the same revivals another 200 years later, and, even further, to what's happening in the 21st century. We still work chronologically, but with a focus on a thematic thread over time.

Helen: Students get history several times, through different lenses. All of this led to a hybrid redesign of the freshman course sequence, supported by a grant from the UK eLearning Innovation Initiative.

Patrick: Writing the application was in large part responsible for decisions on overall course design and thematic coverage, but before we got the grant, we changed our face-to-face design to include both chronology and theme to learn about some of the challenges, especially with the sequencing. The freshman history and theory courses span two semesters. Some students take both semesters. But some take just the first, and some take just the second. It fulfills both the general core and the requirements for our majors. We have a lot of different learners, and before any of the hybrid or online modifications, we had to think about reaching students with different modes of communication.

> *Experiencing designed spaces has had a huge impact, but it also leads us to consider how we can align experiential, embodied learning with online instruction.*

I happened to be in a faculty cohort that was thinking about teaching—and teaching with—multimodal communication. That was a powerful influence because it led us think about how a traditional history course might require a paper, or two, or three, or nine, or ten [laughter]. When it comes to the hybrid aspect, we found that to balance online instruction with offline instruction, the latter needed to be meaningful. We eventually landed on a system that incorporates time for students to explore local sites on their own and report to the class, along with time that we spend together as a class. Undergraduate TAs lead small discussion groups, which means that students get peer mentoring and develop a sense of community in the program.

Helen: We want to get students out of the classroom to experience design and interiors, to analyze them, and to form their own critical perspectives on the environments they might have spent a lot of time in but may not have paid a lot of attention to in the past. Experiencing designed spaces has had a huge impact, but it also leads us to consider how we can align experiential, embodied learning with online instruction. We already have to help students imagine places we can't take them to, so we felt encouraged to experiment with tools like Google Earth and the 360 degree, self-guided tours of paces like the Colosseum or the Parthenon. Even virtually, we want to help students see environments differently.

Patrick: And the reality of that is, to be generous, that out of the 60 people who might take this class during a semester, one might turn out to be a history nerd. Fifty-nine of them need to know how to look at the built environment and say something meaningful about it, so we need to teach history in a way that takes advantage of both the online resources as well as the local environment. For example, will a student be able to look at the new student center and recognize its precedents,

articulate the principles and elements of its design, and identify materials, light, color, or technology that factors into the experience of the building? That's much more important to us than memorizing a fact or figure that a student is never going to use again.

Figure 1: design history students at Spindletop Farm in Lexington, Kentucky

Trey: Some of the most fruitful changes to a course seem to happen when you're re-thinking these fundamental notions, which often go without saying, about how we teach a certain subject or discipline. Question: "How do you teach history?" Response: "Well, we start at the beginning and we go to the end." History becomes something "back then," often somewhere else, happening to people we'll never know.

I'm hearing two assumptions that you're challenging: first, that history is something that you teach in the order that it happens, and second, that history and theory are grounded in other places and contexts as opposed to the here-and-now spaces that students inhabit in their day-to-day lives.

Working With and Beyond the Canon

Patrick: When we got the project going, we involved faculty, graduate students, and undergraduate students to workshop the oft-asked question, "What is in the canon?" Innovation aside, we do have to cover a master list to make sure our students know, for example, what the Parthenon is.

Helen: Or the difference between the...

Helen and Patrick: Parthenon and the Pantheon!

Patrick: ...which is a trick question for an exam. But we quickly ran into the limits of the Western canon when it comes to the world's traditions, especially in conversations about the beginning of the course sequence involving "the ancient world." How do we begin to talk about how humanity populates the planet? How can we do justice to the similarities and differences? We arrived at some really interesting questions, for example, regarding the stone circles at Stonehenge, which everybody knows from the Western tradition, but that also appear in Japan, China, Africa, and Australia. What is it about a circle that's really important to designers?

In the course, students receive online instruction on the theories of circular design, and for practice they visit and respond to circular spaces on campus. Are those spaces doing what we think they are supposed to be doing, or, in fact, do they accomplish other tasks? And, current spaces aside, what's the case in the ancient world? This is an example of how we negotiated what goes on "The List," the things we include (and the things we leave out).

Those were hard decisions. We don't get to talk about some of my own favorite things. We had to remind ourselves, when we came up with our themes, that if students know something about each of the themes and can apply that knowledge to current spaces and spaces from the past, we've achieved our learning outcomes.

Helen: Design doesn't occur in a vacuum, so talking about global and temporal contexts allows us to have bigger conversations about culture, politics, religion, government, and how all of it connects to design and designed environments. We get to have a conversation that extends beyond the aesthetic to a holistic consideration of how spaces are seen and experienced today.

Patrick: This reminds students that while we can talk about the Western tradition as a progression from the Dark Ages to more technologically and artistically sophisticated times like the Gothic era, a global perspective reveals that our "dark age" was a time of flourishing for places like Petra and the Middle East. Students struggle with that, because design history emerged out of the Western tradition but has grown to embrace a global perspective.

Students still encounter the broad narratives about the field, but they also think like a designer and do design work.

Trey: You've talked about decisions that involve what to include and exclude in the curriculum, and this comes up in a lot of conversations across the disciplines. I like to think about it as the "anxiety of content," the feeling that for a course to "count" as a certain kind of course, there's a threshold of how much to which students need to be exposed. Otherwise, as the thinking goes, students are not going to leave the course with the expected knowledge, literacies, or skills. You've had to keep certain things in and leave others out in your curricula. What have been the results for student learning?

Helen: I would say that student learning has been enhanced. Initially, we divided this "master list" canon in terms of what faculty said that we needed to address in the curriculum.

Patrick: And boy is it something to see.

Helen: Yes, it really is. The spaces, buildings, or environments that hit all of our chosen themes are what we talk about in lectures to provide threads that run through the curriculum. For areas that may just hit a few themes or only one theme, students do case studies on spaces or buildings in each of the thematic areas.

Patrick: This is a different kind of goal for a basic survey course. Students still encounter the broad-brush narratives about the history of the field, but they also practice the skills to think like a designer and do design work with any space they encounter.

Helen: In the discussion groups students share their case studies and learn from how their peers are interpreting spaces. It becomes much more of a dialogue as opposed faculty just talking at them about the spaces. They're actively engaged.

Trey: In a bit of a sneaky way, then, you're teaching students that history is not one master narrative. History is something that is constructed collaboratively, continuously, and like you said before, it doesn't happen in a vacuum.

Patrick: They do the case studies individually, learning deeply about one building, but when the groups get together, students learn collaboratively, compare their projects, and speculate as to how their insights fit into the larger narratives and themes of the course.

Teaching Collaboratively

Trey: Another innovative aspect of this course is that it's moving from the standard model, when one or two faculty are the instructors for the entire semester, to involving a lot of different people. What was the collaboration process like, and how did it stretch what you've done before in the way of teaching collaboratively?

Helen: I had taught this course sequence in its earlier form, and the first semester covered everything from prehistoric cave paintings to the industrial revolution. That was an animal to teach. We are a small department, and collaborating enables us to rely on each other's strengths. People come in for a short, three-week session and cover a topic that they are knowledgeable and passionate about instead of teaching a whole semester of content with which they're somewhat familiar.
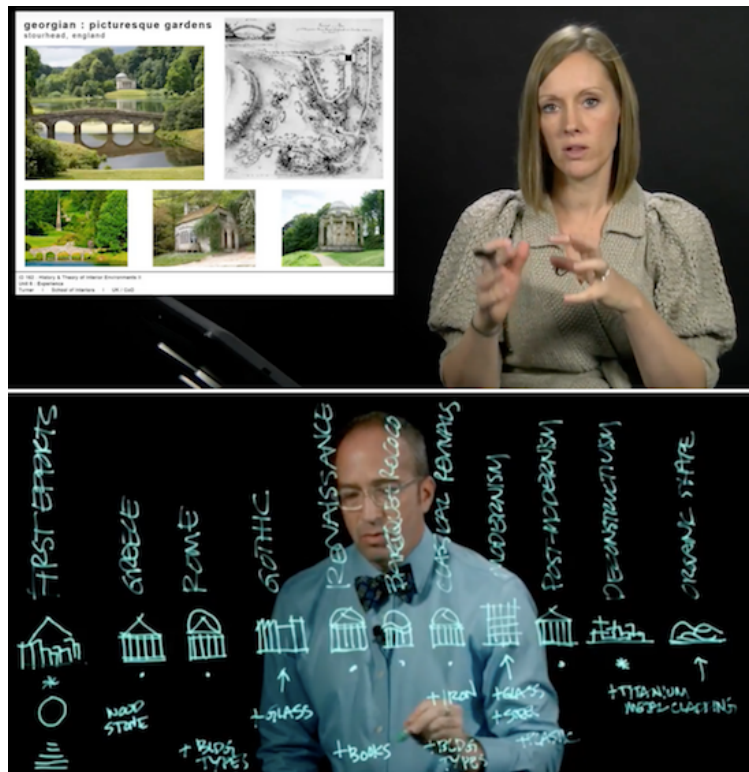
Figure 2: Helen Turner and Patrick Lee Lucas delivering online lectures for the design history course

Patrick: It taught us as a school and as a faculty group that there's greater power in collective wisdom than in one perspective, and that sometimes conversation is more important than an individual's depth of knowledge. This comes across implicitly to the students, who might feel more empowered to be a part of the conversation.

Helen has a triple skill set. She's a great studio faculty member. She's a wonderful history teacher. And, she also has a really avid interest in sustainability and materiality. We need to use all our strengths when we set up the schedule. By sharing the teaching load for the history sequence, we freed each other to do things in other classes. Helen is able to make significant connections between the materials unit of the history course and the materials course that our majors take two years later. This advances the scaffolding beyond the course and across the program. And, with more faculty on board, the introductory sequence models the elements of the program as a whole: principles and elements of design, scale, materials, and technologies.

Trey: That sounds like alignment, if I were to use the language of course design: aligning the curriculum of the course at once with the micro-structure of an assignment or with the macro-structure of the profession and how a designer thinks.

Patrick: Our colleague Joe Rey-Barreau would say, "begin with the end in mind." He's all about making the implicit explicit.

Helen: Begin with the end in mind.

Patrick: The reality is that in many design programs, the history courses are dreaded and have nothing to do with what students do the rest of the time. They're put through the paces to memorize all of these dates, facts, and figures, and it never comes to practical fruition. The minute I met her, I knew that Helen was not of that mindset. Even though we both are products of that approach, we recognized its shortcomings. Rethinking the value and purpose of that course sequence, I think, is why we got the award.

Trey: When it comes to retention, people say that introducing students to core faculty as early as possible is key, and it sounds like your collaborative, thematic approach is a sensible, integrated way to do just that.

Rethinking Educational Resources

Patrick: We should mention that our work has led to yet another grant for the development of a Design Drive.

Helen: For the history course we had created a website to host information and resources for students, and we started to think about how we might do that for the entire program. The Design Drive is intended to be an online encyclopedia of anything related to interior design: history, theory, communication, drafting, software, codes, standards, and so on. The Design Drive is in its infancy. We're working on a beta version that, in the end, we hope, will allow our faculty to share information with each other, with students, and, potentially, with alumni and the community.

Patrick: With the history course redesign we found ourselves wanting for a resource that organized the material in a way similar to the new curriculum. The website worked at first but it isn't sustainable in the long run considering the quantity and variety of information that we can access. An especially from a perspective of teaching online, we're always tinkering and adjusting to improve student learning

I'm willing to go as far as saying that the textbook for design history is dead.

and the overall experience of the course. It has been a bumpy, but fun road, and the silent partners are our graduate TAs who initially were involved in the design process and this [spring 2017] semester have taken charge of a lot of the course management and improvement. The project has also impacted our graduate education because the TAs get the experience of teaching design and managing a course in an evolving hybrid scenario.

Trey: I'm seeing a connection between the Design Drive and the history course redesign. If you change one thing, you have to change the other to realign both elements in a sort of feedback loop between the curriculum and learning outcomes and the resources that support them. And on the topic of professional development, what a valuable experience for graduate students to take into the profession or, perhaps, even back into a different teaching scenario if they choose to become teachers themselves. At this moment in higher education, we seem to be training a generation who won't have to negotiate the way they were trained with what they want to accomplish, as you both did. Or, perhaps they will, if what now is new becomes old hat and slowly falls out of line with what's needed in education.

Patrick: At least for our moment right now, I'm willing to go as far as saying that the textbook for design history is dead. Instead, we need a way to access and manipulate a wide range of information and media that no single textbook could possible encompass. But don't tell anybody I said that.

Trey: Thus spake your Zarathustra: the textbook is dead.

Patrick: We're trying to convey to students that history is relevant, and to do this we have to use relevant resources. A textbook in its 52nd edition won't accomplish the same things as Google Earth, 360 degree cameras, or virtual reality.

Trey: This question of relevance and student buy-in has a lot of stakeholders: students, parents, campus administrators, the community, the professions. Making history relevant seems to be the exigency behind what you've done here.

Helen: We've received an alternate textbook grant from the library, which has allowed us to look for open resources. Beyond relevance, economic stability and the accessibility of resources is important for students who otherwise might have to spend a lot of money on a textbook that doesn't cover all of what we want them to learn.

Assessing Innovation

Patrick: We've talked about the design, implementation, and resources, but we're also having to figure out how the course is assessed and evaluated because we've made so many changes over the past four years. The current end-of-semester evaluations ask about textbooks and the authority of the teacher, both of which we've thrown out the window or at least fundamentally transformed. We've learned that alternative surveys are more meaningful for us, and we actually use the small discussion groups as a way to get weekly feedback.

Trying to tell the story institutionally is going to be tough given the current instruments. We've gotten a good start, though. The conversations we've had about making the implicit explicit have changed how we talk about our teaching in terms of what we convey to our students about expectations and outcomes. Because of this, we're getting ready to put together some new communication courses from scratch.

Trey: As assessment culture continues to grow in higher education we have to think about the alignment of the assessment tools with learning outcomes, professional expectations, and disciplinary ways of thinking. It's exciting that your course redesign has led to down this path to such a programmatic perspective.

Patrick: We have an accreditation every six years, which means that we have to tell our stories of success in a compelling way. But the assessment ultimately has to be in service of the students themselves: how can they better perceive the connections between courses? Our in-house surveys ask students about how the course in question seems to align with other courses in the curriculum. And, for the history course, students are asked about the impact on their studio work. This implicitly conveys to students that they're responsible for seeking a holistic understanding of design beyond the silos of courses and subdisciplines, theory and practice. All of this started, I think, with the history course redesign. Who knew?

Trey: I'm grateful for the time to talk about your inspiring work. Congratulations again for such a well-deserved award!

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Dr. Patrick Lee Lucas is the director of International Programs and an associate professor in the School of Interiors at the University of Kentucky College of Design. An award-winning teacher, Lucas leads seminars, teaches lecture courses, and facilitates studio interactions by engaging in community conversations and encouraging students to think about the place of design in the world. He has led several education abroad experiences for students connected to his research agenda about design and community. He serves as the coordinator for international activities in the College of Design.

Helen Turner holds an MS from the University of Cincinnati and a BS from Ohio University, is NCIDQ certified and a LEED accredited professional with over four years of professional design experience. As a faculty member in the School of Interiors at the University of Kentucky since 2011, she has taught all levels of studio and a variety of support courses. Her interest in history, sustainability, materials, and home have awarded her unique opportunities including work on an archaeological dig in the ancient city of Pompeii as well as revitalizing a community garden on the University of Kentucky campus. Helen's main focus is on "materials" and various interpretations of the term as a means of expressing the ways in which design adds value to environmental experiences.

Trey Conatser is the Associate Director of the University of Kentucky's Center for the Enhancement of Learning and Teaching. He teaches courses and publishes on digital humanities, digital texts, writing, rhetoric, literature, and pedagogy. At CELT, Trey works on scholarly, pedagogical, and administrative projects including technology-enhanced learning, inclusive and equitable teaching and learning, online program and course development, and international faculty development. He is the founding editor of *Greater Faculties*.