Beyond The Whiteboard: Rethinking How Business Schools Teach Design

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At Yale, Michael Bierut and Jessica Helfand are teaching tomorrow's executives to think like designers—but also to be better clients.

"**Design** thinking" has become the watchword [for an entire generation of MBAs](#) who think that becoming the next **Steve Jobs** is as easy as a whiteboard filled with disruptive ideation. "This broad definition of **design** thinking [practiced at many businesses] is a single-faceted cliché of what **design** really is, and how it can contribute to business," says Pentagram partner Michael **Bierut**.

Along with his *Design* Observer colleague **Jessica Helfand**, [**Bierut** is now joining the faculty at Yale School of Management (Yale SOM)](#) to help teach students a deeper, humbler, and more empathetic approach to business **design** that goes beyond the usual buzzwords.

And while the duo admit they don't have some "grand unified theory of **design**" to teach business majors, they outlined their approach to me, explaining why they think **design** education is increasingly important for business majors—and, well, everyone else, too.

DESIGN IS A SECOND LANGUAGE

One way **Bierut** and **Helfand** intend on differentiating their approach from other business school **design** curriculums is by teaching **design** not as a "step-by-step methodology." Rather, it's more like a second language.

What passes for **design** thinking in most companies is actually very shallow.

Admittedly, comparing **design** to a language is sort of cliché. But learning **design** like you learn

a language isn't. The goal, **Bierut** says, is to teach business majors "to speak about **design** fluidly, with equal mixtures of humility and confidence, so that it can bring them not only commercial success, but to life itself."

In other words: more humility, more empathy, more understanding, and a hell of a lot less jargon.

SHAPING STUDENTS TO BE BETTER CLIENTS

A major reason that **Bierut** and **Helfand** say they think **design** should be taught in business schools is because what passes for **design** thinking in most companies is actually very shallow. "In business, **design** has become very systemized," **Helfand** says. She equates some of the techniques that businesses rely on (such as whiteboard brainstorming) as hoary, plug-and-play techniques that are just surface cover for a lack of real understanding about what makes **design** work.

Down the line, this superficial knowledge of **design** can cause problems between **design**ers and clients, who are not really speaking the same language, even though they might *think* they are. A better alternative, **Bierut** says, is bringing **design**ers into b-school classrooms early—as a way of training their future clients with the goal of "informing a rich, multifaceted view of the way **design** and business can interact with each other."

EVERYONE SHOULD LEARN ABOUT DESIGN—EVEN WALL STREET BROS

It doesn't take a lot to understand why **Bierut** and **Helfand** think that **design** should be taught to MBAs—the fields of **design** and business intersect all the time. But it's not just business students who should receive a **design** education, they point out. It's everyone.

Design, **Bierut** tells me, should be taught like any other subject in a classic humanistic education. It's all about educating what **Bierut** calls "the whole person," not just a part of them. Whether you're a nurse, a firefighter, or a future day trader or senior VP, **Bierut** and **Helfand** think that **design** is something that can enrich every person, and help them be successful not just in their careers, but in their lives.

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