

Design in Practice and Pedagogy with Nancy Snow

SUMMARY KEYWORDS

designer, graphic design, people, design, students, question, nancy, practice, studio, teach, starting, graphic designer, packaging, work, accessibility, components, production, women, package, piece

00:08

Zoya:

Hi, everyone. In this episode, we're talking to Nancy Snow. She's the program director of graphic design at OCAD University here in Toronto, Canada. And I'll just tell you, Nancy has extensive experience as a designer, both in studio and research, and now as an educator. She brings a wealth of knowledge and deep thinking, to the ways we learn and interact with the information the world presents to us. I worked with Nancy on my masters thesis, and it was the highlight of my graduate experience, forcing me, lovingly of course, to question things to think bigger, and to dig deeper. I hope you enjoy this conversation.

Thank you so much for being here, Nancy, and for doing this for us. Before I jump into questions, I wondered if you could give us a little bit about your background and how you came to be a professor of graphic design at OCAD. It's always nice to hear to know everyone's journey, like to where to get to where they are today. So if we could hear a little bit about that - that would be great.

Nancy:

Sure. Okay. Cool. Yeah. And it's really great to chat with you guys as well. So it's gonna be nice.

So how did I get here? Wow, that's good. It could be a really long story, but let's not make a long story. I'll be brief. So I can tell you -- oo why don't I frame it like my motivation to be here? Like, why did I want to be an educator. And I think part of it comes from the fact that when I came to study design actually didn't come to this to study design, it came to study sculpture. When I first started out, I thought actually okay, well, I'll study sculpture and then I'll go on, and, you know, maybe I'll get a subsequent degree in something else history or English, or, I don't know, something that would, I thought, complement an art practice.

And I should say, to contextualize it a bit, I'm one of the first family members, my sister and I are one of the first few family members to get a higher education. So I come from a family of wonderful people, but just people that didn't go, didn't move on to higher education as their life progressed. So, um, you know, heading into university and then into graduate work was very unknown. My parents were so supportive and excited for us, but they didn't understand

it, they're like, we were so excited, you're gonna go do these things. We don't understand it, we don't know what you're trying to do. Good luck. Off you go. So I think framing or contextualizing like that is really important, because it meant I didn't have sort of even the illusion of a safety net in terms of support, because you know, when you haven't had a lived experience in something you don't know anybody else who has either navigating can be quite challenging. So I always think about how grateful I've been now, in this moment, reflecting back on what it meant for faculty to support me in my education, who took the time to listen to me or explain things or meet with me after class or, you know. And then the people I worked with, when I first started designing, like, all of these people contributed to my learning and my growth as a designer, and as a student. And I think about those experiences a lot. So you know, I was a practicing graphic designer, I worked in all kinds of different disciplines, as you know, graphic designers, we kind of end up working with a great variety of different disciplines, different people. And so, you know, because I kind of made my way along, I started to realize that being a graphic designer, I had this great education and making things, but that there was only one component of what it meant to be a designer, you know, and I think the other component is really culture. So I started to pick up on I needed to know so many more things because graphic design is never unto itself, it's always in relationship to a great many other things. So realizing that I was like, wow, wouldn't it be great if that was actually put into the education. So when I started to get more and more into education and started teaching, that's the area of interest in the practice I wanted to engage in. I wanted to teach so that students, the next generation, somebody had contributed to my generation, I wanted to contribute to the next generation. But give more awareness and engage people's practices more with the cultural components of what it means to be a graphic designer because so much of the education focuses on the making. So I think that's kind of the motivation of what's led to me being here doing this work. And how grateful am I to be able to do that? Like what a great privilege to be able to teach.

Zoya:

So you're speaking about designing for education. Tania and I both have backgrounds in graphic design, and Tonia runs a graphic design studio in Mexico and I have worked in advertising and marketing and publishing companies as a designer and an art director. So we're practitioners, but we aren't educators. How is it different to design in the educational context? Like to design curriculum or to design for other people's learning? And how do you know if your design is successful?

05:46

Nancy:

Well, I have a joke I make all the time that like on my gravestone, I'm going to have something that along the lines of or the plaque on my urn, whatever ends up happening to me when my body when I go, it's something along the lines of like, at one point, Nancy almost wrote, like a really good assignment. Like, she almost did it, it was so close. If she just had another 100 years, she would do great. So I think it's like, I think it's recognizing, there's a lot of parallels with education and being a designer, I think, because you are, like you're designing and you're designing for this for complicated systems. So you know, being a practitioner, you both know this, right? There's, you're designing for all this complication. There's all these components, you're not designing for one thing you're designing for, it's a context you're designing for people, you're designing for various people, and you don't even know who you're designing for half the time, because once this thing that you make goes out

into wherever it goes, what happens to it? How do you track it? It's not like we have a little tracker, or it's not like we can capture people viewing what we do. Well maybe we're starting to, but you know what I mean, right? Like, it's very challenging to really, like, follow through the lifecycle of something you make in graphic design is so ephemeral too, right? So it's up to the moment it's instant. And then you know, it goes away, and the next thing comes. So I think that there's a lot of parallel with that to being a graphic designer.

Right? So it's, it's, it's, it's a lot of the practices you think you use as a graphic designer, you bring into being a teacher, because you're trying to make connections with people. And so one of the beliefs that I really became aware of when I was doing my, my graduate work, the thing I became aware of is that what I wanted to pay attention to as a designer, what mattered most to me was, was the communication part, right is a bit about like that access to information. How do I access information? How does somebody do it? What's what do you include? What do you exclude? Because in graphic design, there's often a reduction approach, like, reduce it down to its simplest form. And oh, wait a minute, we'll talk I'm sure later about like that. The problem with that, but really, like, it's the same with education, how much do I give you like, how much information do you need to do the thing you need to do? So in a classroom, you have, you know, you've all the components of a studio classroom, you've got an assignment, you've got a grading rubric, you've got critique, you've got the physical environment, you've got your peers, there's all these components that come together. So how do you foster a space? With all these things coming into play? Many of which you don't have control over, nor should you. And then you know, so what? What do you bring into that? That's, you know, that's kind of the trick of it. So I feel like that's a lot to do with the designer, what gets included? What don't you include? What can you augment depending on the person's needs in front of you, because the students have the goal in the learning of the assignment, they have to learn something, right? They're going to do something, make something, think something, share something, iterate on something. But then, on the other hand, what are their goals as individuals? What are they coming with? What do they want to do? What do they want to achieve? So those two things are kind of living in, like, you know, in articulation with each other? So when I think about all of that, how do you plan for that? Right? And then how do you know if it was effective, which I think is like the other part of your question too, right, like, how does it work? Does it work?

09:17

So a really applied thing I do is that I do a lot of reflective writing with the students. So I never mark or I never look at a project without them having some kind of verbal - whether they speak it or whether they write it - to share with me what they did when they made this. Because then I mean, if I'm just marking, you know, like, if we all do graphics for a cup, I don't know, we don't ever do that, but I'm just being ... it's just the thing in front of me....we never do that.

Tania:

We understand.

Nancy:

You know what I mean? Yeah, if we did that, I'm like, you know, like, how do I put it like....it's never just about the object. It's about the intent behind it. It's about how they got there. It's about what they tried to do. There's so many pieces. So if they write about their making, and

they tell us what they did, and how they got there, that to me is always more interesting. Otherwise, I'm marking myself, I got to see this, I can see that, who cares what I see? That doesn't matter. It's what did they do? So if they tell me, then I'm far more confident, and closer to marking them, and giving them feedback on them, versus what I think which is really, like, who cares? You know what I mean? Like, it doesn't matter what I think of their work, it matters what they did, and what they learned. So, yeah, so I think there's a lot when you're putting things together in that reflection that often then guides what I'll do next year with that assignment. Because I see a pattern, when I look across those reflections, like if people were missing something, and like, half your class is missing a certain detail, that's on me. I clearly didn't communicate something properly, I didn't help people make connections. So you know, you look at the ones that did. And then you try to fix you're always It's like putting together a big puzzle all the time.

Zoya:

You're always like, collecting data.

Nancy:

Always researching. It's how my brain works.

Tania:

You know, for me like Zoya said, I have a design studio in Mexico City, and many students that just graduate come and work with us. So I have many, many individuals that graduate and start, because one of the things since we're a small studio that we've been able to hold, is that we never hire on top of you. It's always like a little ladder. So in that sense, if someone goes away, it's not that sad, because of the ladder and we're constantly trying to make the designers work, work, work to be prepared. So the new designers have always just graduated. And so when every time they get in the studio at the beginning, we always see them with like, scared eyes, they're always really scared, they're very nervous. And the thing is that I see -- the speed is something that they struggle [with]. The action that is in the studio is one thing they have trouble with, but they get adjusted. But my question is -- the thing that I see them struggling with the most is the relationship with the client. And that's something that we take a lot of care of with them, and we don't release them openly because clients can be tough. Especially -- I don't know how it is in Canada, but in Mexico City, they are tough. They are not so nice when they give feedback. And sometimes we've seen that they are very rude, especially if they see that they are young, and especially to some women, they have been -- we have found that. So I have an area of opportunity to always make the same mistake about action bias. I get super, super angry, and I just say like no one treats people like that in my company. And I would get super mad and then I realized that that isn't always the way to go as far as helping them and to give them a voice. But I've always struggled with that, and I feel like how can I solve that? How can I help with that?

13:53

Nancy:

Right? Are you kind of looking for a way? Like there's a few things there? I think you are trying to find a way to empower them? Like do you want to empower them, and teach them? Yeah, it's oh, isn't that a tough one? Like, we all know that one. That is the biggest nut to crack. And I know, it's funny, I remember when I was coming up designing. There was one of my classmates I graduated with, he and I used to meet up on occasion, and we'd meet up

sometimes at like, midnight at this like restaurant, and we would you know, share stories and ideas because we were trying to like, recreate our student support networks together and be like, how do you deal with this? Like, how do you present or how do you? Like how do you get across what you're trying to say? Because you realized half of your job was making but this other half was this compelling language you had to come up with to convince people why they wanted to take a certain approach. So you know, it's funny, this almost connects back to the very first question, right? Like, as a designer aren't we always kind of educators because I feel like I spend so much of my time, even to this day, when I meet with a client, or in a client position, I have to, like, educate them on what they actually want. And I don't mean that, like, I'm going to tell you what you want. I mean, like, they don't even know really what they're asking for, right? Or how they're asking for it. Like, you know, like, recently, someone asked for something, and they were really alluding to spec work. And then I had to go on this whole thing where I'd explain what spec work was like how no one goes to an accountant and says, okay, there's three accountants in line for this job. So I'd like you to tell me how you're going to work the books for this. And then if I like how you do it, I'm going to hire you. So you better do a good job on the purple. Like, no one does that. That's, that's bananas. Right?

15:49

So like, I don't ever think of that happening. So, you know, when it comes to this idea of like, relating to clients? or how do you get them to do that? That is a really tough thing to do, because there's a lot of moving parts to that, right? So I think I feel your challenge, and so how do you do it? Do you model behavior? Do you get them to practice in advance? Because they really also have to be like improv artists too - do you know what I mean? Like, you have to think in the moment like, how do you like, how do you frame? How do you tell a story, and I think, you know, storytelling might be a great way to start with new designers, because then they can learn how to tell a story to relate to the client. And I think sometimes that that can be a great method, because it's also a really great research interviewing method. Zoya you know. You know me, I'm always like, tell me a story. I love it, but it can actually be a great way, right? Like, so people tell you a story about what they want, or if when you're sharing your design work, you're telling them a story. People remember stories, they can go back and share them with other people and it often makes them lower people's defenses because you're right, like clients can be rude. And they can say really rude things and even though you're talking about something that maybe has to go out to say, a certain audience, right, let's say you're talking to something, it's got to go to an audience. And because you pick a target, a targeted space for where something's going, and they start talking about their personal interests.

17:22

But it doesn't matter that you don't like blue. It's not for you. Right. So I think it's that kind of thing. It's like, how do you help someone see their own biases? How do you help someone see, you know, and there's a power dynamic at play, too, right? Like, there's, there's a job on the line, right? So this new designer coming in, they need to uphold the company value they work for. So for your studio, it would be you know, they'd be looking to you, they're also looking to the client, if they make them angry, or they're going to lose their job, are they gonna get fired? So it's, you know, there's a lot of power at play, but I think it's about maybe starting with the power dynamics, and recognizing it like that. But I don't know, like, what have been your strategies? I'd be curious to know. Your go to thing is kind of like getting

angry, but like [laughter]. I'm curious like, that's where I would go and ask you to tell me your story. Where have you helped that young person? Like, has there been a moment where you've had somebody have like, a really powerful moment?

Tania:

Yeah, well, like we've always said that, from the beginning, that there is no -- that we won't allow, like, -- always calm them down, saying that, we will always protect them versus the client, when it comes to being rude. So that it's not allowed, but that we can always defend them, because sometimes, growing up means starting to get to know clients and run the project by themselves. And that's something that they also find interesting, because most of them go on and do their own studio. So it's something they want to learn, but at the same time, they're a bit scared. What we've done is, for sure, just saying that, never on the phone, like if they're being rude, just like in the most possible way, just like cut the conversation to a close and say, this conversation will continue by mail, or with chat, or Tania or my other associate will call you. And that's how we start and what's happened a little bit that has helped is for starting, I always say to the client that we don't work like that in the studio. Like we do not communicate like that. None of these designers are used to being yelled at because we don't yell. And they're not used to being rude because we are not rude. So this conversation is a shock.

And by seeing that we don't get mad anymore, like the designers -- this was a long time, again, when I would engage in defending and it didn't work. So we stay as calm as possible. And it's like, we won't get mad. Even though we've been faced with many very, very, very unethical and wrong things, you would be amazed. Like, I remember once that it was in a place and we were designing a product that was very expensive, and the designer that I brought came, it was obvious he came from a background that maybe he had never afforded that kind of service. It was very high [price]. And like in front of him he said, like, why do you bring someone that can't even afford it? In front of the designer. So I was like, take, like 30 seconds breathing and don't answer and that kind of stuff. And then we ended up giving up that job. But like you say, like, the designer is watching me and the client is watching me and saying what's going to happen?

21:12

Nancy:

Yeah, so much is on you.

But you know, what's interesting about that, too, is that all of that is so baked in what we do, is class, right? Like I would want to say would your mother want you speaking to somebody like that? No, you just said that to somebody like you should be ashamed of yourself. Like, that's a terrible thing to say to somebody.

21:38

Tania:

Yeah, so it's terrible. [Or sometimes it happens to me when they're like], when does your boss come? And I'm like, I'm here. I'm the designer. And they're like, you?! I'm like, yeah me, I'm sorry.

21:53

Nancy:

I bet if we did a poll, and we polled every female designer, they would have a story of that. Like, I don't know, anybody that doesn't have a story like that being told that "Oh, you're the designer?"

Tania:

Yeah. Yes, I guess, teaching that has been hard. They've just graduated from normally, a very happy environment. They're very proud of their university. They love their teachers, they come like, super happy and then hard spoken by the clients.

Nancy:

Yeah, yeah. Well, that's, and I think that's the hard thing, too. It's like, this is a question we always have too because, you know, like, what are we teaching when we teach graphic design? Like, you know, the four years goes by so fast. So when we think about it, we're so focused, I think, on the practice of design, and then I know, my focus is not only the like the making practice, but all the other pieces that kind of come along with it in terms of culture, notions of good taste, those kinds of things. So, you know, getting at those things is kind of a tall order. And then how do you add in this, this like coating on the outside of all of that, to help them transition into a workplace. And to me, I don't know, like we've always -- we have this amazing group at our university, at OCAD, they're called CEAD, which is the Center for Emerging Artists and Designers. And so they're kind of like this co-curricular piece for us, because I think separating the two out can be -- I feel like that seems like it's helpful. So having the academic, the teaching of making and design, and then having this this other, like, connected piece where students can go and learn those kinds of things that you're getting at, I think that I really see a great future with the relationship with that particular group at the school, because then they can focus on that, because I really think it's like a different ...it's related, but it is a different set of skills. Right? Because I mean, what do I want to do? Do I want to create a classroom where I'm yelling at people so they can get used to being treated badly? Oh, I definitely don't want to be doing that. Terrible. Like, that's not the kind of education, I want to do more of what you're doing, where people are establishing meetings with respectful rules in place like this is how we're going to speak to each other. And this is how we're going to conduct ourselves and establish those good behaviors and practices. I don't want to be teaching students how to be abused in the workplace, but being yelled at, right, I don't want to contribute to that. So I think having this this co-piece, this co-curricular piece, I think it's been like it's been very successful so far for so many students, but I just think that I want to see that part of it grow more, because I think I'm so grateful for the relationship with the folks that work in that department. They're the best people. I just think they're fantastic. They work so hard, and they're so diligent in protecting the students rights, ensuring good contracts and negotiations.

25:00

In February, a couple of the faculty are working with that group to produce a pricing workshop. So what's going to happen with that group is, so it's between faculty, it's between the CEAD, and they're going to come together. And because we've had so many students because of COVID, graduate, but then graduate into freelancing, and so now they have to learn how to price things. So they're starting to realize you know, the things you're pointing at - how do I work with a client is something that they're missing. And so having those workshops that are directly targeted to those things, I think it's going to be a great

experience for the students and who we're bringing back to do it is other like recent graduates, who had the experience to do that kind of pricing and that kind of work, to come back in, to share their experiences. So these are people that, you know, that peer to peer kind of works, instead of having somebody come and talk, that you know is so far removed for them. So I think that that piece, I feel really good about, I hope that we get to build more of those kinds of relationships as we go. So that way, when you, running a studio hire somebody, they've got a bit of that experience, you know, and it doesn't come from the academic side of the house, it comes from this other side. And I think having to separate is also a good strategy for like a few different reasons. But I think it'll kind of start to address the things you're talking about.

Tania:

Thank you very much.

Nancy:

Yeah, no problem.

Zoya:

That sounds exciting because no one taught me how to price and I kind of floundered and sometimes I still don't know what to price. It's always like a learning curve, like a very steep learning curve. So I think that's really exciting.

Nancy:

Well it's such a different skill set too right? It's project management and it's accounting. So as a designer you're almost a director. Like I've got to learn all these different things and coordinate all these different things. It's like whoo!

27:15

Zoya:

So you spoke a little bit about power dynamics and class as built into what we're doing in culture. So that brings me to my second question of decolonizing design and I know there's a lot in design and in art that's a part of a class structure. And I wondered in what ways do you find part of decolonizing design education as necessary. And how does that trickle into graphic design, or let's just say how does it trickle into visual communication because I think at OCAD there's graphic design and there's also an advertising program. So how does it trickle into visual communication?

27:48

Nancy:

Yeah, so in the design faculty, we have advertising, illustration, graphic design, material art and design, industrial design and environmental design. Oh, man, I hope I didn't forget anybody. Oh, forgive me gang. If I forgot somebody, um, I think I did alright there. And so yeah, so there's a lot and yeah, there's so you can see there's Communication Design, there's fabrication design, there's lots going on there. So institutional wide we have what's called our academic plan, and that covers this component. So as a community, the entire institution has a set of values they're working towards. So there's lots of initiatives across the university as a whole to address, like to start to address and start to work through - what does this look like in practice? Right, you know, when you read an academic plan, they're

always lofty right. They're almost more visionary, but it's like, how do you make those things actionable? Right. So you know that's where many of us are interested in working. So the idea of decolonizing design really gets fronted by the dean Dori Tunstall, because that's her platform that she's building out as a way to talk about it, and as a way to share it. So what does that look like to decolonize design?

28:54

And of course, it needs to be decolonized, because if you think about what graphic design is, I mean, it's born out of the Industrial Revolution, right? Like mass production led to the need to reproduce things, but look at the ways in which it's gone. It's very much a practice, and still taught in many ways, not everywhere, and not all the time, but, you know, there's a great deal of approach taken up, which is about reductionism, you know, the simplest, oh, keep it simple, keep it clean. Like, I mean, how many times have we heard that language when we talk about design. But what does it mean when we say to keep it clean? Whoa, whoa, that's loaded. Right? Keep it simple. What does that mean? Right? So we think of these graphic forms. Well, what are we really doing when we do that? You know, is it like erasing culture where we do that? That seems pretty colonial to me.

So you know, we see examples of it all the time, right, because, you know, different cultures create graphic design in different ways, different aesthetic, sort of appealing to different groups of people. So, you know, there's not one way to make graphic design. There's like, many, many ways and for many different reasons. So we have to look at what languages we use? How do we frame things? What examples should be given in our classroom? So like, let's look at are just some very basic components of the studio classroom space, who is prioritized in those spaces? What work do we show? How do we talk about that work? How many? How many great, great male designers do we have, that we are just now starting to realize, had women who were in the same positions as them and had the same titles as them producing the work we look at? We didn't even know those women existed? Like that's, you know, there's this myth, I think you look at TV shows like Mad Men, you know, that popular advertising piece, and they act like that one character, the first female to ever write ad copy, which is ridiculous. Tons of women wrote ads, tons of women did all kinds of work. They're just never spoken about. They didn't make the magazine covers, they didn't make the documentaries on design. They didn't make the history books. Right. So it's, you know, there's so much work that we have to do in graphic design, about how we speak about our work, how we showcase our work, what work we prioritize, to show to our students. So I have an amazing colleague I worked with this year, Michelle Astrug, in our second year course. And we're doing motion design. We looked at a lot of video work. So she and I made a commitment that we would ensure that the bulk of the work we showed whether it was the work of the people behind the camera or in front of the camera, that they would be representative of a great many cultures and great many makers. So we forefronted like indigenous directors, and indigenous makers we forefronted all kinds of BIPOC community members; black artists, designers, because we really thought like, if you're in the room, and we're showcasing you, why are we showcasing only a bunch of white people, which happens a lot. Like if you do an audit of the examples in classes it's a bunch of like white people, and it's a bunch of white men. So why are those the only people that get to be showcased? There are many great designers out there. So we purposely set out to do that. And it seems like, you know, shouldn't we kind of always been doing that? It seems silly that we never even like, why aren't we doing that? So we, you know, that's what we chose to focus on. And

it's like, one small component, but there's like there's tons of others. How do we speak to our students about ways in which they make things? How do we frame critique?

33:20

So there's so much of the language in the components of the classroom that come from these colonial structures that we need to start to work to get rid of, right, because they're doing harm in the classrooms. You know, and it's interesting, we had a student who graduated recently who came back who's struggling to find work, because those spaces aren't available in practice. So that's the other piece like here we're doing this work in the classroom, but what happens when the student leaves us? You know, and because they come in as juniors, they become as they come in as these emerging designers. They don't have the power to affect change. So they come into these hostile environments that don't have this, and it's a concern. So you know, how do we help the students navigate that? So I'm hoping that next year, that's something we can have talks about or address to say, okay, what are you experiencing when you're going into the studio? Are you getting yelled at? Right? Are those comments getting made to you? Are you the designer, like, to the women who step in the room? A lot of our students in our classroom, they're women. So we, you know, like, how do we address that? So what are we doing for the design community at large to do this? Because it's great that we at the institution are looking at these things, but you know, these students leaving go into systems, are we positively effecting change within the systems themselves?

Zoya:

Do you think there's more female designers than male designers? I was just thinking as you were speaking about mostly females in your class, and I was just thinking of the art department at work, which is more than 15 people, I can't count them all. I might be leaving somebody out....but it's more than 15 people and we're mostly women. Are there more female designers than male designers? Do you think?

Nancy:

Yeah, I'd love to, you know, we should look at some of the organizations and see like the SGA or the RGD. It would be good to look at those groups and say, who do you have in your membership? Yeah, how many of your members are male or female? What are the demographics of the community? It would be really interesting to see what that breakdown would look like, but I know in the classroom, I'm seeing a lot more females when I started studying design, there were far more men than women, but that's changed over the years for sure, way more women in design.

Zoya:

That may be a little bit of a trend throughout all design disciplines. Also we were talking about something I don't remember what we were talking about.... but we were talking about architects the other day, Tania, and I know like architecture was a very male dominated in the past but there's a lot of female architects now -- I don't know, it's the age of female, that's all I'm saying.

35:58

Nancy:

I know lots of women who are in architecture and yeah, it's still a tough go. I remember when I started practicing graphic design, I realized I had to build a good relationship with printers. So I learned how to drink scotch and talk about scotch so I could -- I had to perform super male to to work with a lot of printers. And they were lovely men, it's not that they were rude to me, but I knew -- you could feel it. You knew how to negotiate your spaces, because you're like, okay, I need these guys to listen to me, because I need if I'm going to be on press with this guy at two o'clock in the morning, I need him to hear me I need him to believe I could do this work, you know, and that I knew what I was talking about. So yeah, isn't that like -- i had to learn to appreciate scotch just to be able to like, throw down with these printers. It was nuts.

36:50

Zoya:

I do remember as well when we started the inclusive design program, and it might have been the Summer Intensive and we had Gayle as one of our professors - she's lovely - and her background is in architecture. I remember her sharing, like her stories, like, you know, it was very tough. She's tough. She's very tough. She came from a very male space and so forth.

Nancy:

Yeah, and it's wrong, right? Like I kind of resent it now. Like, why did I have to behave that way? Like, who am I? Who am I really as a person? I don't even know sometimes, because I'm like, you're formed by your experiences. And I think, like, who would I have been if I didn't have to behave that way? Yeah, I think about it often, like, what would that have been like, if I don't know, if I'd grown up in a different way, or seen things a different way, or experienced things in a different way that weren't so like, that didn't teach me I had to perform male in order to be successful. You know, and I think you see that in a lot of our elders, right, like a lot of the women that have come before us, you know, there's a pattern and how they behave. And there's enough consistency in those patterns where you say, did we do that to you? Did our environments do that to you that you need to function that way? I don't know, it's kind of super unhealthy. That's hopefully the change we can make to right like with this next generation, like, I think somethings got better with us but what about this next generation coming up? You guys don't have to behave like that. Like, you don't need to do that. Yeah, you don't have to do that. Like, we can just, you know, we're all here to make stuff. And we don't have to do this to be heard or seen.

38:40

So yeah, that's kind of the name of the game, I guess, right? What we're trying to do, you know, these are the kinds of things I think people need to hear, for the next generation kind of coming up. And I think even ourselves, we need to remind ourselves that we don't have to do these things like these are, these are traditions that came up. And if we, I guess, if we stop and think about their origins, like, where did they come from? Why are we doing this? And do we have to keep doing this moving forward? Right? Like, I always, I always kind of think, you know, when we talk about things like decolonization, or we talk about things like, you know, these big systemic changes that we need to do. I'm like, it's easy to go after the overt, right, like when we think of like a bad guy, you know, the twiddling the mustache, you know, tying the woman to the train tracks, old timey bad guys, like, you know, it's, it's obvious to be like, that's the bad guy. Right? But that's not how the real world works at all right? And I

mean, the real world, but just the real world even mean, right? Like, what does that even expression mean? But it's in all of us, like, these things are systemic. And so it's like, as a person, you've got to go through and say, Okay, what about, like, I've grown up without questioning certain aspects of my life. So now I need to do the work not only in, you know, with the university, but also personally, because I don't want my children growing up this way. Right. I don't want to go out there and do harm because I never thought to question some of the expressions I had. I never thought to question and I every now and then I think, oh, man, what have I done over the years where I did harm and I didn't even know I'd done it. So I think that it's personal too, you have to do the personal work. So I know like my sister and I, we get together and we'll read books together. So we read like, you know, decolonizing wealth and looking at how the structures of wealth have led to these systemic issues because again, we're all part of this big ecosystem. So it's not just design that needs to change. There are aspects of our lives that need to change. And so I think if I start that work personally too with my family and with me, then I think that's that's a part of it too, because then I'm just like, I'm really living what I'm saying. And it's and it's really hard, right? Because there's, there's been fallout from that. And it's been tough, but it's...I know, it's the right thing to do. And so even then, that's to me, that's, you know, I always thought, when things are hard, can I do what I'm saying? Can I really do it? And so every time I do it, I'm like, yeah, I did it at that moment. I did. My instinct was to do that. Yeah, nailed it. And there's some times where I'm like, I didn't do the right thing there.

41:15

I hesitated, or I didn't say something when I should have. And so you know, I think it's just constantly reminding yourself that it's like, it's your whole life, it's going to take to do this, right. And then, you know, so I think it's just recognizing it's not this big easy fix. It's all these little things that are going to add up to something. And it's going to add up over time. And so if I remind myself of that, and I, and I keep going, I think in 10 years, I'm going to come back and high five like me today to be like, yeah, you know, five years, there were some changes we did and good for us. But yeah, so that's, I can get some kind of thinking of it right now. Because first it gets overwhelming, it's really hard to change the thing you can't see. And that's really, really, really hard. But you've got to do it. So how do you do it? And you do it and you're messy, and you're awkward, and you mess it up. But you still gotta keep going anyway. So I just kind of remind myself when I don't get it right, I kind of remind myself that and then what can I learn from it? And how else can I change? And so I think that's just a messy kind of work, but man, it's got to happen, because like, no one can have the excuse anymore. You know, like, you know it, you know. Like knowing and not doing anything that's worse. One thing to be ignorant. We can't all know everything. But boy when you know, and you're gonna keep doing it. What are you doing? Like, that's just worse? No, it's worse. Can't do that. So, yeah.

42:53

Zoya:

So we were discussing Tania and I like that we've gone from graphic design and we're now trying to move into inclusive design solely. And in doing that one thing that came up when we were putting everything together - for Manifold - the brand, the website launching the website, we realized that an overlap is visual accessibility. So I did not put together this site, like Tania and Nahin designed it, and I completely resigned from my graphic design duties on this project, but I watched how much work went into it. Because one thing we wanted to

ensure is, if our company is about inclusive design and accessibility, that our site needs to be fully accessible. So I watched and they did so much work on the backend of the site, you know, to make sure that the screen readers would work and that the colors and the text, they all pass all the accessibility checks and so forth. And I just felt like for some reason, I don't feel like that mindfulness and awareness of visual accessibility was there when I was learning graphic design. Like we did so much emphasis on legibility through typography, but not legibility in terms of disability. And it seems like a really big gap. It's not something that we focus on.

44:25

Nancy:

Right? Yeah, no, I think that's, that's a great point. I think it goes back to my earlier kind of comment where I was saying how, like, as I was a practice, I was a practicing designer, I recognized I was missing so much of like, it was like a my education needed to be like, a decade long, so I could cover up all these things. Because in practice, you start to realize there's these gaps, right? Accessibility, ageism, sexism, racism, like all of these things. And that's what I think like that's, you know, the cultural components of graphic design hides in plain sight. It really does. So yeah, exactly. I think I agree. My education did not cover off a lot of that. And it's a lot of stuff I learned in practice. And as I went along, I think there is change coming in that regard. Like I know, we just redesigned our curriculum at the Institute. And you know, we really favored some of the type kit classes in early years. And those type classes do start to get that information to say about what it means to be to have something be accessible. So we have a great sessional faculty member, and he has one of his areas of expertise and actually why he was hired to teach tight was because of accessibility. So there was even emphasis put on place to, to do that. And even as we've been working to, with our hiring strategies, really looking at how we can, we can get better at ensuring we have a better representation with faculty, so even culturally, as well as things like accessibility, so it's happening. But it's, you know, these things... they're interesting to watch unfold too, because you see how excited the students get to learn it. Like, they're, they feel like they're learning something "real" right? Like, I'm learning this real thing. And it's like, yeah, this is a real thing. So having production components within and I think a lot of times when we think of production, we think of printing, but that's not the case. Right? Like there's production means how does this thing get produced and distributed? And it's, that is a big piece of that. So yeah, I would argue there's a lot of work being done to make that shift happen in education.

46:33

Zoya:

Yeah, you're right, you always bring the right language to what I'm trying to say. I was like, oh, yeah, that is production when you were talking. I don't know why I did not put it in that category before, because I think I learned production when I was on the job. I got like a crash course when I was doing my degree but I really learned it when I went into advertising. And then that was the component of my on the job learning.

Nancy:

Yeah. And I think that's most of us, like we did have a wee bit of production, in class, because I think, yeah, like when I was studying, we did have a bit of production, but no, it's mostly on the job that you learn those things, right? Because it's like, because those systems are put in place, and you work with those systems. And those systems aren't always put in

place in educational assignments. I know like, for example, this year, we actually in our class I was talking about that would be written with my colleague, we actually taught a research method in that class, we never taught research methods in the studio classes. So we actually taught people how to interview. So I was so excited, like, here you are, second year, graphic design, and you're going to learn how to conduct an interview respectfully, we worked, we wrote an REB application for the for the class, we taught people and explained to people about respectful practices when you interview how to handle the data. So it's all that production, like where does this person's data go? What do you do with it? What's raw data? How do you then anonymize it? How do you make it for production? How do you get sign off from the person you've interviewed, and then they made this motion graphic response to that piece. So they're learning making practices, but they're also learning research methods. So I think we're starting to get to a point in our culture where we can actually like in our design, studio culture actually starts to bring these things in. And that to me is a part of the production as well what happens before you make the graphic design thing, actually putting it into place. So things like research methods that will be very practical for many of these students. And these production pieces; accessibility, in Ontario, we have the AODA. So we have to be compliant with these things. Like they're actually like policy here, in our province. And in our country, we have policies around, you know, accessibility. So as a graphic designer, you better know them. Right? And if they don't get baked into the studio practice, like holistically like that, you won't have those habits, and they really are habits.

49:03

Zoya:

So our last question is about designing for more inclusive representation. We were talking about, you know, in graphic design or in visual communication, messaging tends to skew towards younger people and tends to forget about more mature people, for example, unless maybe the product is specifically intended for senior citizens, or a specific age group or something. And even then, you know, graphic designers can fail in packaging, for example, like using really small type when it's a product for a more mature age group. That said, packaging design is very limiting in itself. But with culture, and society, always skewing towards a certain type of representation... I don't even know how it's possible... but how do you think it's possible for designers to be more mindful of these types of things and building more inclusion?

50:05

Nancy

That's a great question. And there's all there's so many answers to that, I think because again, there's we have to think about the system at play, right? There's a couple things that are happening. So I think a lot about packaging. I remember there was a food company who made a package that was biodegradable, and it was like a potato chip or popcorn and I'm sorry, I can't remember which company it was but what they did was they made this biodegradable packaging, which everyone's like, amazing, right? Because you know, you have those foil packages that these snacks come in. It's not it's not recyclable, it's garbage. And it's temporary, like eat your snack, and then it gets thrown away. So they created this thing. But what happened was, the packaging was super loud, like, super loud. So it would crinkle. And it turned out that they received, like, an incredibly high number of complaints

about this package. And the reason why is people were taking the package, and they were hiding it. So maybe it was like, there were a lot of these moms who would like to take the package and try to eat like, eat one, and then the kids would hear it. And then like, Oh, my cookie, no. And then they, so they got all these complaints. So here, this company is trying to actually make a package that's biodegradable, amazing. And for all the right reasons. So sustainability is huge and should be important in any packaged item. But it was the consumer response to the package that they actually took it off the shelf. And it was for this really, really, and it was like repeated enough that it became kind of a thing, like it was this thing, why this package got canceled. And I think about it with all kinds of like, that's just one example. But there's so many things, so that idea of that model that you're hiring people sometimes, you know, they won't buy things, and they're like, well, that's not what I really look like. So there's a societal component like we've made a world where we're trapped by our own nonsense, right? I know, at the university, we're having trouble getting students to turn their screens on. So we teach to all of these little Zoom or Microsoft Team dots, right? Like these little, they're not people, they're little, little shapes. And so one student said, "well, you know, I don't want to put my screen because I don't like the way I look". And that's like -- they're not being vain, they're just self conscious. Well, no wonder somebody's self conscious. Look at the world we created, we told people, they have to look a certain way, they have to behave a certain way. So we've created this world that traps us in these kinds of things. So we produce packaging, because, you know, people want it to sell. So they're beholden to a product to sell it. So you know, we have almost created a culture that accepts that, that accepts those changes, too. Right? So I think there's a back and forth, because there's a cycle here. It's the consumer as well as, as the producer. But I think so that's sort of my big picture thought on that. But I think more specifically, really to get to your question. Well, that's all well and good Nancy you point your finger at somebody else. Nice job. What are you accountable for? So let's talk about that. Because I think that's really more what your question is getting at right is like, what are we accountable for? And this is one of the things about the myth of the "rockstar designer", right? Where you're the designer, but you're really designing for yourself. So I think the question comes down to like, how do we remind ourselves as designers, we're not designing for ourselves.

53:20

So who are we designing for? So this is where that's the best question, right? Like, who is this for? So, and then when there's another sort of societal or a systematic piece here to the packaging? Because so much of that is held to regulation and policy. Right? So the point size, it can't be below this, it can't be above that. So some of those packages, yeah, you're, you know, you're going to hit a certain age, you're getting reading glasses. You know, and I don't know if some of that packaging, if you realistically could make it bigger, right? But what's interesting is where we can, or where we can change the way the packaging comes together? Do we even note or think to do it? And I think that's what it comes down to? Sometimes you are beholden to the system, but have you even considered it? And has it been baked in? And I think that's where we're accountable. So when we teach design, what are we teaching? How much of what we teach -- do we talk about the form and the structure and the visuals and the elements and the, you know, the aesthetic, we really talk aesthetically about the work, but how much do we talk about who, who needs it? And who we're designing for? And so I think if that gets included in the actual design education, are we doing a good job of that, you know what, we could go we could do a lot better than then I think what we're doing now, but you know, like there's I think there's so many different

systems so I think it's like a multi pronged approach because we have to look at the other systems that play into it. So how do we make it acceptable? You know, like, here we have somebody like a musician like Harry Styles, really changing up the perception of male fashion. Right? We all hear about him now. He's all in these covers of Vogue and he's wearing pearls and earrings and a lot of dress that -- he's shopping in the women's sections. Now we had a moment of this in the 70s with music, right with glam rock. But here we have this again. Now, interestingly, why are we having this again, in terms of representations of clothing? We had it in the 70s. It was a trend and so is Harry Styles is he going to be a trend? Or does he actually affect change? So these are the things I'm always kind of curious about, right? Like these bigger picture system things like, what are we doing as a society to make these things like, desirable and seeing. So I think, what are we accountable to? What are we as citizens are members of the community accountable to? And it's I think there's like a lot of it's a multi-pronged kind of an issue. And I think yeah, but again, I think designers, we have to start with ourselves. And I actually think that's on a lot of the educators like, what are we doing about that? And yeah, that's one area, I think we could definitely do better. I know, I'm seeing changes, but are they as fast and as urgent as we could make them? If I'm critical of us, probably not as urgent as I think we probably should be doing? Yeah.

56:30

Zoya:

So this is my last question, a bonus question, since I had you as my advisor. And I've always found you to have a lot of empathy, and you're very non-judgmental, and inclusive, basically. And I find that you lead by example. So I wanted to get your opinion on this. There's a lot that happened this last year, and a lot of people have the right intention, and they want to do good, but they don't necessarily know where to start. And they may not be intellectuals or academics, as such, like us, and so they lack the information on history and so forth. But they want to do the right thing. What is one thing, a thought or a belief that you would suggest to an average person on the street, to help them begin shifting their mindset towards being more inclusive?

56:48

Nancy:

Oh, that's such a good question. Like, well, I don't know, like, you know, part of my go to answer I think on something along these lines is it's like, asking what kind of stuff are you bringing into your space? And I think it can be as simple as things like, what TV shows do you watch? What movies do you watch? And the big one, like, what books do you read? Right? So I think it's about starting there, right? Like, do people have a relationship with stories from people who aren't from their world. And I think that's what I would say is like, really try to reach past your go to things like it's really easy to kind of go to your staple forms of entertainment, but I think that could be a really accessible way for people to start to think outside of their own bubbles. Right. And that's something I always try to do. Like, I'm always trying to read new authors or read new, like, read new areas of things, but not everybody's a reader, right? Like, if you if you hate reading that will be torture for you. Right, I love reading. I love it. It's and I haven't done, I've done all this academic reading, but I can't wait to read something not work related. It's gonna be amazing one day I'm gonna do it. And read anything, like even read things you don't believe in. Like, I think that's great. I remember when -- ah this is terrible -- like when Twilight came out and it was super popular. Remember that book series, like vampires all sparkly. And people made fun of me. They're like, Nancy,

how can you be reading that? I'm like, ah, don't be so judgy a lot of people are connecting with that book. And I want to know why. So it's like being curious. It was really a hard book for me to read because it was not, it was just not, it was not for me. It was very hard but I got through it. And I learned things and I so I thought to myself, you know, sometimes you just like if something's popular, find out why, like, don't be so judgy. Like I think that's what you got to do sometimes.

59:35

And I ended up having some really great conversations after reading after reading that book because, you know, people were super into it. So then I could say to people like why do you love this book? Like, tell me about it, but if I hadn't read it, I wouldn't. I couldn't have the conversation. I was just being this jerk without even knowing what I was talking about. So you just have to experience some things in order to understand the best you can but then ask questions of other people. So I think you know, it's about weighing in on and getting into spaces where you're uncomfortable. Even if it's something as easy as reading Twilight. It seems like a silly thing to say but like it's it's kind of like being okay to follow your curiosity and read something you don't connect with or watch something that's not your taste, but try to figure out why. Right like so I guess be reflective and I find sometimes the easiest way you can do that is just by watching entertainment. And I remember a student was saying to me, oh, Nancy, like I just want to watch a show. I don't want to critique it. I was like, I know but man, there's so much in there. If you dig for it? Right? So I think even just starting with something as simple as a TV show or a video game, you know, start with Netflix, start with a book, something that's accessible, like what were you like to meet yourself where you're at? Do you know what I mean? Like, where are you at, and start there. And I think that's been like, that's, for me, the only way I could ever do anything, I just, I can't be I wish I was somebody else. I wish I was this other amazing person who knew all these great things. But I'm just me. So I'm gonna start where I'm at, you know, so I found that's kind of been the pathway for me, like, what's accessible to me and then kind of go from there. So I think that it builds a long way for you to start to hear other people's stories. And even if you don't like them, even questioning why you don't like them, or questioning why you do like, right, like, what are you getting out of this? And so that reflective kind of practice with things that use simple entertainment? I don't know, they seem to be, that could be a good way. And then I would love, of course, to know how other people do it. Because that'd be cool to know, too.

Zoya:

So meet yourself where you are. Question things. Follow your curiosity.

Nancy:

Yeah. And don't, don't be embarrassed to read Twilight on the subway, and that way, you'll have a good conversation.

1:01:55

Tania:

I love that advice.

Nancy

Right?

Tania:

Yeah, of course. If people like something, instead of, like, just critiquing get to know why. Why do they act?

Nancy:

Yep. Like a lot of people really connected to that book man. Like people, it was like a phenomena. So that's anything to like, as a designer? How can you not be curious? What, what, what, what people are drawn to? Like, I think that's, you know, I think that's important, like, always be curious about things. Otherwise, the world gets pretty boring, because you're just always going back to the same places. Like, aren't you curious about what else is out there? You know, and that's, and that's a great way to learn. I know, I think it's, I guess a lot of things for me connect to a story, right? Like you really do, like, tell me a story. And then I'll get to know you better, because you're going to tell me how you see the world and I can only see the world through. I'm so limited, I can only see the world through my own eyes. That's really boring. So you're gonna write something for me, you're gonna make something for me. Oh, man, I get to experience that I get to know who you are. That's great. Like all these people spend all their lives making things and you get to just enjoy them and study them and know like, man, that's amazing.

Tania:

This was really, really great, great and inspiring. Thank you very much, Nancy.

Zoya:

So that was it for our conversation with Nancy. I really hope that you got something meaningful from that chat. I definitely did. And if you would like to connect with Nancy, please check out the description of this episode. And you can find out more about Manifold and what we're up to by heading to our website hellomanifold.com or follow us on social media. The handle [@hellomanifold](https://twitter.com/hellomanifold).