

# Why Critical Design Literacy is Needed Now More Than Ever

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One thing is clear in our work at Texas City High School (TCHS) this year: students like to create their own media. Students at TCHS create their own YouTube channels, compose original music, comics, games, Tumblr pages, art work, and fashion designs. As young people's use of social and digital media applications continues to evolve they are developing what I call a "design disposition." This is a reference to a distinct generational view that they expect to not only consume media content but create content, too. Throughout the year we have sought out ways to both understand and support student's disposition to design. Intrigued by what we are learning we will pilot two programs this summer-one with middle school students and one with high school students- that create learning environments that support what I call, critical design literacy?

What is critical design literacy?

## Critical Design Literacy

The concept is informed by design thinking, a rich and dynamic process that emphasizes inquiry, innovation, ideation, building, and problem solving. Critical design literacy applies the protocols of design thinking to practice social innovations that lead to social transformation. In the learning environments that we will pilot we want students to become literate in critical thinking *and* critical designing. The former encourages students to look at their community through an inquisitive lens while the latter encourages students to design for community impact.

Critical design literacy challenges some of our most 'common-sense' notions of schooling. In general schools seek to produce good, loyal, and dutiful citizens. But what if the mission of our learning institutions is to create engaged, critical, and future-building citizens? [Keri Facer](#) reminds us that future-building schools must do more than train students to inhabit some pre-determined future. Schools should be community resources and laboratories that help students develop the competence and the experience to intervene in the making of a future that is more equitable, desirable, and sustainable.

Critical design literacy also challenges the notion that the primary role of schools is to prepare students to get jobs in the global economy. Because a majority of the students at Texas City High will not attend college there

is a tremendous amount of pressure on teachers and administrators to focus on career readiness. Critical design literacy strives to do more than prepare students for participation in the economy; it strives to prepare students for participation in their community. There is something extraordinarily empowering about seeing the world through the lens of critical design, a lens that encourages students to do what designers do: develop the skills to change existing situations into preferred ones.

Additionally, critical design literacy embraces the [learning and design principles of connected learning](#), a interdisciplinary research network that believes, "that the most meaningful and resilient forms of learning happen when a learner has a personal interest or passion that they are pursuing in a context of cultural affinity, social support, and shared purpose."



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### Practicing Critical Design Literacy

What would critical design literacy look like in practice? Here are a couple of ideas:

1. Schools would be required to ask their students to identify a social, local, or communal situation and make a case for making change. In addition to identifying the situation, students would engage in a process of inquiry in order to gain some degree of content mastery. For example, they might grow their knowledge of issues like food justice, public health, or digital citizenship. In addition, students would have to generate a series of ideas and low-resolution prototypes that propose ways of creating a more desirable situation. Along the way students begin to not only study a local problem but intervene in a meaningful way.

2. Libraries, museums, and other public institutions could offer design challenges that encourage young people to create ways of enhancing the quality of life in their communities. This year the National Endowment for the Humanities, American Library Association, Institute of Museum and Library Services, and the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation convened a meeting in Washington, DC to consider the role of libraries in transforming communities. The conversation was shaped, in part, by the knowledge that learning in the networked age is evolving in ways that compel educational institutions to rethink their mission and how they can support today's young designers. Building opportunities for critical design literacy is one way that libraries can engage the designer disposition by becoming a laboratory for social exploration and connected learning. Done properly, these design challenges can become dynamic learning hubs and social innovation incubators that play a crucial role in the lives of the communities that they serve.

## Redesigning K-12

Designers often claim that, "design is too important to be left to designers." Across the U.S. and the world designers are making a case for bringing design thinking into K-12 environments. The design consultancy [IDEO](#) has been working with schools to integrate design thinking in ways that reimagine how teachers teach and learners learn. [Emily Pilloton's Project H](#) has brought socially engaged design thinking to high school students in Bertie County, North Carolina. In a conversation that I shared with Pete Maher, COO of the [LUMA Institute](#), he consistently maintained that designers should be connecting with educators. Chris Pacione, Director of the LUMA Institute, believes that design should be as pervasive as reading, writing, and arithmetic. In a 2010 essay Pacione lays out the case for design literacy: "pervasive competency in the collaborative and iterative skills of 'looking' and 'making' to understand and advance our world" could represent a breakthrough moment in the history of common literacy.

## Designing for Equity

Finally, introducing critical design literacy across a diverse spectrum of young learners expands the possibility to remix and revitalize the pathways to youth participation in their communities by addressing what [Joseph Kahne and Ellen Middaugh](#) refer to as the civic opportunity gap in our schools. In a 2008 study Kahne and Middaugh found that the chances for high school students to participate in the civic life of their communities are unevenly distributed. Students, for instance, with parents of higher social and economic status are more likely to be involved in service learning or civic oriented classes, clubs, and organizations compared to students with parents in low status employment. Rather than helping to equalize the capacity for democratic participation Kahne and Middaugh argue that schools may actually be widening the gap by providing more preparation and experience for students who “are already likely to attain a disproportionate amount of civic and political voice.”

The need for critical design literacy has never been more urgent than now. There is one clear and dominant trend in the most populous metropolitan areas of the U.S.: growing racial and ethnic diversity. These areas are also ground zero for some of our country’s greatest challenges in education, civic engagement, and public health. The problems that these communities are facing require a broad array of resources, skills, and social innovations. Crucially, the individuals living in these communities must become the change that they want to see. Their very survival will be dependent on the ability of educators to make the skills and learning principles that critical design literacy promotes accessible to the students and communities that need them the most.