The Design Thinking Movement is Absurd

Lee Vinsel on 2018-11-26

Have you ever heard of Design Thinking?

Your answer to that question will depend largely on where you sit in the world. The phrase Design Thinking is known almost universally in design circles. It's made its way around networks of business hype more than once. Hell, the folks at Singularity University — a cult of technological utopians who hoover handfuls of vitamins and believe we'll all upload our minds to servers in a few decades — think Design Thinking may be your "Secret Weapon for Building a Greater Good." No doubt, many others have also heard from people excited about Design Thinking — a state of being known as "having a bad case of the DTs."

As the designer Natasha Jen explains, Design Thinking can be traced back to foundational thinkers like the polymath Herbert Simon and the designer Robert McKim. The architect and urban designer Peter Rowe, who eventually became the dean of Harvard University's Graduate School of Design, was one of the first people to popularize the term in his 1987 book, *Design Thinking*.

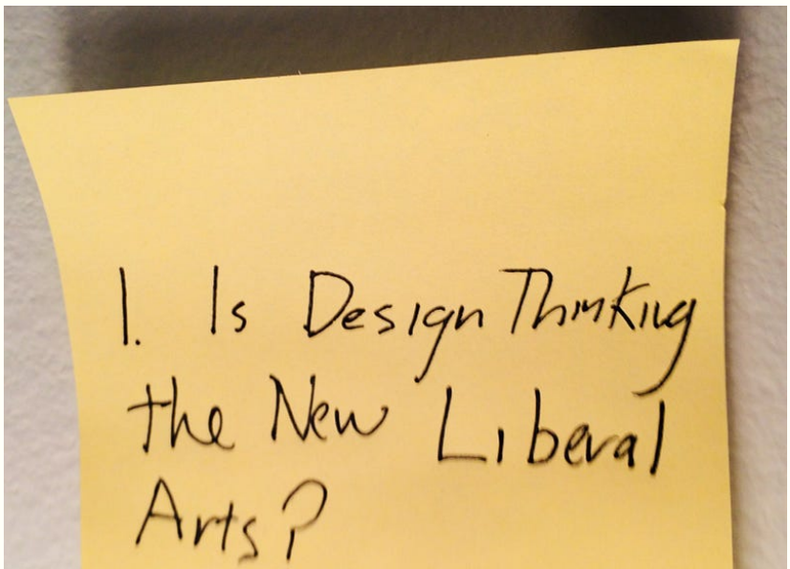
The notion of Design Thinking is often centrally associated with the fabled design and consulting firm, IDEO, most famous for crafting nifty consumer electronics, like Apple's first mouse and the look of the Palm V personal digital assistant. But in recent years, it is individuals at Stanford University's design school — or d.school (their asinine punctuation and capitalization, not mine) — who've been pushing and *selling* Design Thinking. IDEO will charge you $399 for a self-paced, video-based Design Thinking course, "Insights for Innovation." *Or* you can pay Stanford $12,600 for a 4-day "Design Thinking Bootcamp" called "From Insights to Innovation."

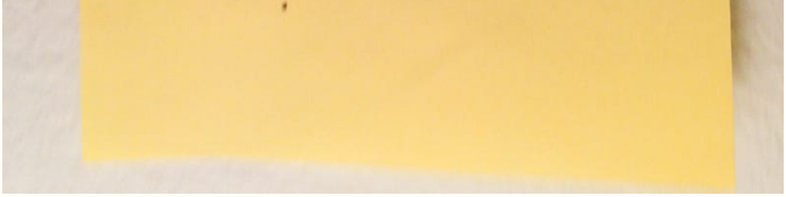
What is Design Thinking, this thing you'd want to put all your hard-earned bread towards? That's a good question. Its Wikipedia page, which was clearly written by enthusiasts, defines the term in this way: "Design Thinking refers to creative strategies designers use during the process of designing. Design Thinking is also an approach that can be used to consider issues, with a means to help resolve these issues, more broadly than within professional design practice and has been applied in business as with as social issues."

If you're confused, don't worry. You're not alone. That confusion is a common reaction to a "movement" that's little more than floating balloons of jargon, full of hot air. The deeper you dig into Design Thinking, the vaguer it becomes.

None of this would matter, though, if Design Thinking was just another fad taking hold with the gullible. The problem is that certain individuals and interests have recently been pushing Design Thinking as a way to reform higher education and other fundamental social institutions. A recent New York Times article describes a new high school called d.tech in Redwood Shores, California. d.tech, which was funded by the Oracle corporation, focuses on giving teenagers the DTs. As the NYTs article puts it, "Big Silicon Valley companies have been in a race to shape students' education and use schools to train their next generation of workers." You might ask, are these schools factories for producing corporate tools?

While Design Thinking is mostly just vapid, I will argue that, via illicit connections, this fad could spread through the nation — possibly even the world — and that, kind of like syphilis, if Design Thinking goes left untreated, it eats your mind. Therefore, it's our duty to protect our fellow citizens — especially the innocent and impressionable young — from its ravages.





Over the last year, the *Chronicle of Higher Education* has run articles on Design Thinking with titles like "Can Design Thinking Redesign Higher Ed?" and "Is 'Design Thinking' the New Liberal Arts?" The reasonable answer to both of these questions is "oh hell no," but that doesn't keep some individuals from thinking otherwise.

Both the just named articles feature DT enthusiasts taking pilgrimages to Stanford's d.school. In "Is 'Design Thinking' the New Liberal Arts?" Peter N. Miller, a professor of history and dean at Bard Graduate Center, explains that the d.school has its roots in three streams: the ultimate source is the product-design program in Stanford's engineering school. The second stream is a product of geographical happenstance: in the 1960s, Stanford community members started hanging out at the Esalen Institute, a retreat center in Big Sur, California, which was a home to the Human Potential Movement and an institutional purveyor of New Age nonsense. Esalen, Miller claims, gave the d.school its focus on "creativity and empathy." Finally, the designer David Kelly, who received a master's in design from Stanford and got deeply into the empathy thing, started the design firm IDEO in 1978.

After founding the company, Kelly was a sometimes instructor at Stanford. In 2005, he approached the software billionaire and IDEO fan-client, Hasso Plattner, with, as Miller writes, "the idea of creating a home for Design Thinking." Plattner donated $35 million, creating the d.school, or "IDEO.edu."

Kelly became influential at Stanford, particularly by getting the ear of the university's president, the computer scientist John L. Hennessy. Hennessy now believes that undergraduate education should be reformed around a "core" of Design Thinking. Kelley pushes this view, arguing for "incorporating Design Thinking into existing courses across the humanities and sciences."

Hennessy and Kelly think the goal of education should be "social innovation,"which makes you wonder how earlier "innovators" ever managed without getting the DTs. The d.schoolers believe Design Thinking is the key to education's future: it "fosters creative confidence and pushes students beyond the boundaries of traditional academic disciplines." It equips students "with a methodology for producing reliably innovative results in any field." It's the general system for change agent genius we've all been waiting for.

Miller fawns over the d.school and notes that its courses are "popular" and often "oversubscribed." He writes, "These enrollment figures suggest that whatever it is the d.school is doing, it's working." We will see that popularity is a crucial marker of success for Design Thinkers. Following this criterion, one social innovator Miller might look into is a guy named Jim Jones who had many enthusiastic followers and who, among other things, is most famous for the breakthrough, disruptive innovation of introducing sugary drinks to his fans. But, then, Miller knows a thing or two about Kool-Aid.

Miller struggles to define Design Thinking in the article, "It's an approach to problem-solving based on a few easy-to-grasp principles that sound obvious:'Show Don't Tell,' 'Focus on Human Values,' 'Craft Clarity,' 'Embrace Experimentation,' 'Mindful of Process,' 'Bias Toward Action,' and 'Radical Collaboration.'" He explains further that these seven points reduce down to what are known as the five "modes": Empathize Mode, Define Mode, Ideate Mode, Prototype Mode, and Test Mode.

NOAH BERGER FOR THE CHRONICLE

One workshop session was meant to help faculty members come up with ways to encourage busy students to focus on innovation.

"Make It Cool — Cool Kids Do It" : Design Thinkers in the Ideate Mode Putting Post-It Notes on a White Board (Source: Chronicle of Higher Education)

Miller never bothers to define all the modes, and we will consider them more below. But for now, we should just note that the entire model is based on design consulting: You try to understand the client's problem, what he or she wants or needs. You sharpen that problem so it's easier to solve. You think of ways to solve it. You try those solutions out to see if they work. And then once you've settled on something, you ask your client for feedback. By the end, you've created a "solution," which is also apparently an "innovation."

Miller also never bothers to define the liberal arts. The closest he comes is to say they are ways of "thinking that all students should be exposed to because it enhances their understanding of everything else." Nor does he make clear what he means by the idea that Design Thinking is or could be the new liberal arts. Is it but one new art to be added to the traditional liberal arts, such as grammar, logic, rhetoric, math, music, and science? Or does Miller think, like Hennessy and Kelly, that all of education should be rebuilt around the DTs? Who knows.

Miller is most impressed with Design Thinking's Empathize Mode. He writes lyrically, "Human-centered design redescribes the classical aim of education as the care and tending of the soul; its focus on empathy follows directly fromRousseau's stress on compassion as a social virtue." Beautiful. Interesting.

But what are we really talking about here? The d.school's *An Introduction to Design Thinking PROCESS GUIDE* says, "The Empathize Mode is the work you do to understand people, within the context of your design challenge." We can use language like "empathy" to dress things up, but this is Business 101.Listen to your client; find out what he or she wants or needs.

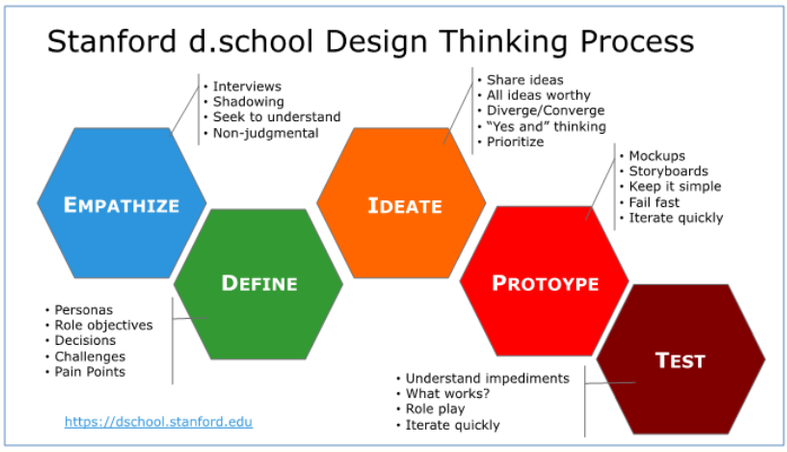
Miller calls the Empathize Mode "ethnography," which is deeply uncharitable — and probably offensive — to cultural anthropologists who spend their entire lives learning how to observe other people. Few, if any, anthropologists would sign onto the idea that some amateurs at a d.school "boot camp," strolling around Stanford and gawking at strangers, constitutes ethnography. The Empathize Mode of Design Thinking is roughly as ethnographic as a marketing focus group or a crew of sleazoid consultants trying to feel out and up their clients' desires.

What Miller, Kelly, and Hennessy are asking us to imagine is that *design consulting* is or could be a model for retooling all of education, that it has some method for "producing reliably innovative results in any field." They believe that we should use Design Thinking to reform education by treating students as customers, or clients, and making sure our customers are getting what they want. And they assert that Design Thinking should be a central part of what students *learn*, so that graduates come to approach social reality through the model of design consulting. In other words, we should view all of society as if we are in the *design consulting business*.

Let's pretend for a second that we find ourselves thinking, "What a fantastic idea!" But, then, the part of our brain that occasionally thinks critically starts asking, "Hold on, but is Design Thinking really that great? Does it even work in any deeply meaningful way?"

If Design Thinking is so terrific, you'd expect designers to be into it. But often enough the opposite is true. In June 2017, the graphic designer Natasha Jen, a partner at the design firm Pentagram, gave a talk titled, "Design Thinking is Bullshit."

Jen began her talk by complaining that Design Thinking has become a meaningless buzzword. But the deeper problem is that Design Thinkers treat design like a simple, linear process. Stanford represents the five modes as a series of hexagons that someone with the DTs, searching for rehab no doubt, can stumble through.



Here's How to Innovate, Y'all

The version above is full of Silicon Valley buzzwords and jargon ("fail fast"),but it's missing what Jen calls "Crit," the kinds of critical thinking and peer criticism that designers do all the time and that forms the foundation of design and architecture education. Crit is essential at every stage, insists Jen.

Jen also points out that Design Thinking reduces design to a single tool: the 3M Post-It note.

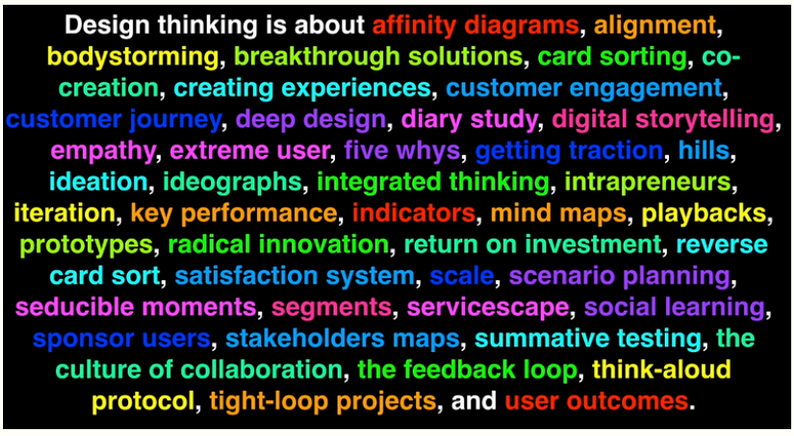
A Google Image search for "Design Thinking Post-Its" will get you photos of individuals spraying their ideations all over every nearby body and surface.

Jen argues this Post-It mania ignores the rich set of tools, methods, and processes that designers have for thinking, doing their work, and challenging themselves.

Still deeper, Design Thinking touts its own greatness, but has few successes to show for it. There's "little tangible evidence," Jen says. She lists cases where Design Thinking was supposedly used, like painting cartoons in a hospital room to make it less frightening to children, and points out that the solutions are completely obvious. You don't need a special method to reach these ends.Later, she argues more forcefully, if Design Thinking is really that great, "Prove it."

Jen puts forward a definition of Design Thinking today: "Design Thinking packages a designer's way of working for a non-design audience by way of codifying design's processes into a prescriptive, step-by-step approach to creative problem solving — claiming that it can be applied by *anyone* to any problem." Design Thinking is a product — a Stanford/IDEO commodity.

She points out that the words that have become associated with Design Thinking are a variety of business bullshit that have little to do with actual design.



An Image from Natasha Jen's Talk "Design Thinking is Bullshit"

In recent episode of the Design Observer podcast, Jen added further thoughts on Design Thinking. "The marketing of design thinking is completely bullshit.It's even getting worse and worse now that [Stanford has] three-day boot camps that offer certified programs — as if anyone who enrolled in these programs can become a designer and think like a designer and work like a designer." She also resists the idea that any single methodology "can deal with any kind of situation — not to mention the very complex society that we're in today."

In informal survey I conducted with individuals who either teach at or were trained at the top art, architecture, and design schools in the USA, most respondents said that they and their colleagues *do not* use the term Design Thinking. Most of the people pushing the DTs in higher education are at second- and third-tier universities and, ironically, aren't *innovating* but rather*emulating* Stanford. In a few cases, respondents said they did know a colleague or two who was saying "Design Thinking"

frequently, but in every case, the individuals were using the DTs either *to increase their turf* within the university or to extract resources from college administrators who are often willing to throw money at anything that smacks of "innovation."

Moreover, individuals working in art, architecture, and design schools tend to be quite critical of existing DT programs. Reportedly, some schools are creating Design Thinking tracks for unpromising students who couldn't hack it in traditional architecture or design programs — DT as "design lite." The individuals I talked to also had strong reservations about the products coming out of Design Thinking classes. A traditional project in DT classes involves undergraduate students leading "multidisciplinary" or "transdisciplinary" teams drawing on faculty expertise around campus to solve some problem of interest to the students. The students are not experts in anything, however, and the projects often take the form of, as one person put it, "kids trying to save the world."

One architecture professor I interviewed had been asked to sit in on a Design Thinking course's critique, a tradition at architecture and design schools where outside experts are brought in to offer (often tough) feedback on student projects. The professor watched a student explain her design: a technology that was meant to connect mothers with their premature babies who they cannot touch directly. The professor wondered, what is the message about learning that students get from such projects? "I guess the idea is that this work empowers the students to believe they are applying their design skills," the professor told me. "But I couldn't critique it as design because there was nothing to it as design. So what's left? Is good will enough?

As others put it to me, Design Thinking gives students an unrealistic idea of design and the work that goes into creating positive change. Upending that old dictum "knowledge is power," Design Thinkers giver their students power without knowledge, "creative confidence" without actual capabilities.

It's also an elitist, Great White Hope vision of change that literally asks students to imagine themselves entering a situation to solve other people's problems. Among other things, this situation often leads to significant mismatch between designers' visions — even after practicing "empathy" — and users' actual needs. Perhaps the most famous example is the PlayPump, a piece of merry-go-round equipment that would pump water when children used it. Designers envisioned that the PlayPump would provide water to thousands of African communities. Only kids didn't show up, including because there was no local cultural tradition of playing with merry-go-rounds.

Unsurprisingly, Design Thinking-types were enthusiastic about the PlayPump.Tom Hulme, the design director at IDEO's London office, created a webpage called OpenIDEO, where users could share "open source innovation." Hulme explained that he found himself asking, "What would IDEO look like on steroids? [We might ask the same question about crack cocaine or PCP.] What would it look like when you invite everybody into everything? I set myself the challenge of . . . radical open-innovation collaboration." OpenIDEO community users were enthusiastic about the PlayPump — even a year after the system had been debunked, suggesting inviting everyone to everything gets you people who don't do research. One OpenIDEO user enthused that the PlayPump highlighted how "fun can be combined with real needs."

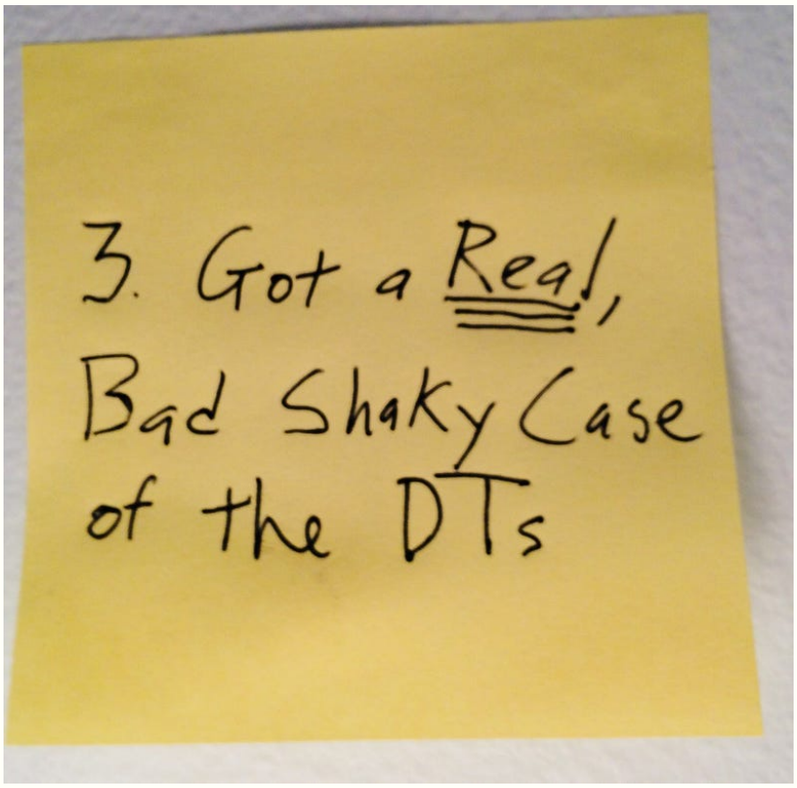
Thom Moran, an Assistant Professor of Architecture at the University of Michigan, told me that Design Thinking brought "a whole set of values about what design's *supposed to look like,*" including that everything is supposed to be "fun" and "play," and that the focus is less on "what would work." Moran went on, "The disappointing part for me is that I really do believe that architecture, art, and design should be thought of as being a part of the liberal arts. They provide a unique skill set for looking at and engaging the world, and being critical of it." Like others I talked to, Moran doesn't see this kind of critical thinking in the popular form of Design Thinking, which tends to ignore politics, environmental issues, and global economic problems.

Moran holds up the Swiffer — the sweeper-mop with disposable covers designed by an IDEO-clone design consultancy, Continuum

— as a good example of what Design Thinking is all about. "It's design as marketing," he said. "It's about looking for and exploiting a market niche. It's not really about a new and better world. It's about exquisitely calibrating a product to a market niche that is underexploited." The Swiffer involves a slight change in old technologies, and it is *wasteful*. Others made this same connection between Design Thinking and marketing. One architect said that Design Thinking"really belongs in business schools, where they teach marketing and other forms of moral depravity."

"That's what's most annoying," Moran went on. "I fundamentally believe in this stuff as a model of education. But it's business consultants who give TED Talks who are out there selling it. It's all anti-intellectual. That's the problem.Architecture and design are profoundly intellectual. But for these people, it's not a form of critical thought; it's a form of salesmanship."

Here's my one caveat: it could be true that the DTs are a good way to teach design or business. I wouldn't know. I am not a designer (or business school professor). I am struck, however, by how many designers, including Natasha Jen and Thom Moran, believe that the DTs are nonsense. In the end, I will leave this discussion up to designers. It's their show. My concern is a different one — namely that some fools are proposing that we build the DTs into many other parts of education. With even a bit of critical reflection, it's clear that Design Thinking is even worse in these other contexts.



In a book I'm writing with Andrew Russell, *The Innovation Delusion*, we examine the origins of our culture's current obsession with "innovation." We make a distinction between *actual* innovation, the introduction of new things and practices into society, and innovation-speak, the empty-headed and misleading ways people have come to talk about technological and social change in the past few decades. Importantly, there was a lot of actual innovation before World War II, but use of the word "innovation" only began rising after World War II, with the steepest increases in the 1960s and 1990s.

This Google NGram shows historical usage trends for the word "innovation." The word was increasingly used after World War II, with the steepest period of increase in the 1960s and 1990s. Sadly, the NGram

Since the 1990s, innovation-speak has grown into an entire Silicon Valley-centered lexicon of newspeak, including terms like disruption, disruptive innovation, angel investors, thought leaders, entrepreneurship, change agents, startups, incubators, Regional Innovation Hubs, smart this or that, unicorns, STEM education, pivot, lean, and agile as well as dead or dying faddish jargon, like killer app and Big Data.

tool only goes up to 2008, so we can't get a sense of whether use of the word has increased, decreased, or plateaued since then.

Innovation-speak also has bunch of paraphernalia: hoodies, white boards, open, flexible building plans, and the Post-It notes that Natasha Jen lampoons. Envision pornography produced by Apple: cool hues, white and silver, everything soft lit, precisely the *mise-en-scène* of films like *Ex Machina*.The whole thing has a minimalist aesthetic that you *know* is going to age poorly — the shag carpeting of the Second Gilded Age, the green corduroy bell bottoms of Digital Robber Barons.

In *The Innovation Delusion*, Andy and I examine how innovation-speak has led us to neglect many essential aspects of our culture, including maintenance, our infrastructure, essential cultural traditions, and the ordinary, humdrum, mostly anonymous work that keeps the world going. Moreover, innovation-speak does not necessarily, or even often, lead to actual innovation. By some measures, truly deep technological change that increases economic productivity slowed down around 1970, but the era of high innovation-speak began later. Indeed, post-1970 innovation-speak was likely, in part, a response to wide-spread worries and fears about flagging productivity and economic growth, increasing international competition, and a host of uncertainties. The innovators would come and save us. Only they haven't.

The value and usefulness of innovation-speak is totally unproven, but since 1980 or so, we have reformed a number of basic cultural institutions in innovation's name. Universities and education more generally may be the institutions most deeply affected. For example, the Bayh-Dole Act of 1980 enabled researchers to patent inventions that had been supported through federal funding, something that was previously illegal. Since that time, the research time of professors has increasingly gone into patentable and exploitable; professors are encouraged to view themselves as entrepreneurs; and universities have amassed portfolios of intellectual property.

Universities have cast themselves as engines of innovation, and innovation-speak has traveled from campus to campus, something the English professor John P. Leary has examined beautifully. This kind of me-too-ism gets you Stevens Institute of Technology trademarking the *highly*-ironic motto "The Innovation University" (really? MIT and Caltech aren't more innovative? Huh.); Texas Tech's College of Arts and Sciences declaring "We Build Innovators"; and the University of Pennsylvania's pathetic PENNOVATION Works ("Where Ideas

Go to Work"). Reportedly, Penn faculty — female professors, mind you — refer to the PENNOVATION Works as the PENNETRATION Works and send each other speculative doodles of what exactly a PENNETRATION logo would look like.

You See "PENNETRATION," Don't You?

Books like Philip Mirowski's *Science-Mart: Privatizing American Science*,Lawrence Busch's *Knowledge for Sale: The Neoliberal Takeover of Higher Education*, and Elizabeth Popp Berman's *Creating the Market University: How Academic Science Became an Economic Engine* have shown repeatedly thatleaders have increasingly remade universities in the corporate image. This transformation is thoroughgoing: professors are entrepreneurs now, and students are customers who have to be prepared for positions in corporations,particularly by receiving so-called STEM education. STEM ostensibly stands for science, technology, engineering, and math, but as the historian Nathaniel Comfort and others have argued, the science here isn't about knowledge for its own sake or about the beauties of inquiry. STEM is focused on knowledge that can be easily commodified and sold.

Interests typically push these changes by arguing that higher education is in some kind of crisis and that it must be totally remade. Now, don't get me wrong. I agree that higher education has *DEEP* problems. Most important is the well-known fact that college tuition has outpaced inflation for years, burdening students with mountains of debt. This way of doing things is completely unsustainable.

But innovation-centric reformers aren't focused on these financial issues. Rather, they tend to make claims like "education hasn't changed in 100 years." They make vague and unsupported assertions, such as that "society is growing increasingly complex and will only be more complex in the future."(What does this claim even mean? Complex in what way? Increasingly complex with respect to what metric? I have asked many professional historians this question, and they believe this increasing complexity claim is unsupportable.)

This manufactured general perception of "crisis" creates opportunities for change from two directions — from-above and from-below — though in practice these directions often work together hand-in-hand. From above, university presidents and provosts introduce new initiatives, funding streams, and incentives to encourage, or even force, faculty to model themselves on the current image of "innovation." From below, the perception of crisis provides openings for faculty members to create new programs, centers, institutes, and other initiatives that promise to make the university more innovative and transform students into little innovators and entrepreneurs.

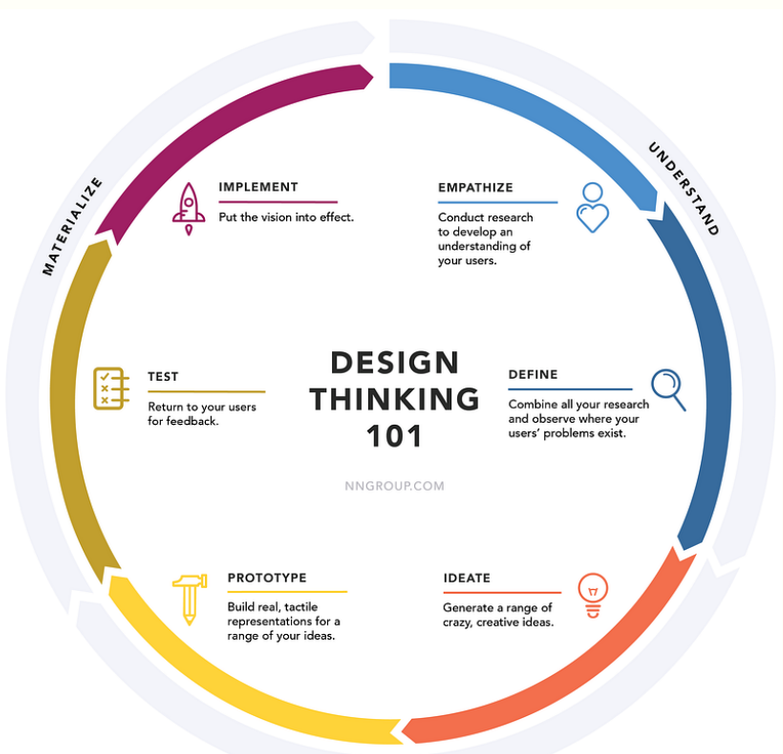
Furthermore, because STEM has become dominant model of innovation in universities, other disciplines have had to contort themselves to fit that profile. Artists raised their hands to announce, "Look, we can commodify things too," and started talking about STEAM. Crucial point: if you add the humanities to this mix, you get SHTEAM. (Say it like Mel Brooks would say it.)

All of this is the larger context for current discussions of Design Thinking and questions about whether Design Thinking might be the new liberal arts and whatnot.

Design Thinking's roots in consulting are instructive. As Margaret Brindle and Peter Stearns explain in their book, *Facing Up to Management Faddism: A New Look at an Old Force*, fads often enter organizations from outside in moments of perceived crisis, and the fads complete certain functions for the organizations' leaders. First, they assuage leaders worries and uncertainties because this *novel* thing promises to solve their problems. Second, the fads legitimate the organization because it can show that it is keeping up with all the new, cool stuff out there. Third, fads enable leaders to show that they are *doing something*. And, finally, individuals get to champion this or that fad and, thus, build and advance their careers and win acclaim for being cutting-edge.

Christopher McKenna's book, *The World's Newest Profession: Management Consulting in the Twentieth Century*, is also helpful for understanding the current hubbub about Design Thinking. Of course, we refer to prostitution as the world's oldest profession, so the book's title gives you some sense of how McKenna approaches his topic. McKenna emphasizes repeatedly that consultants had to create the perception that they were experts with legitimate knowledge, especially by leading others to believe that the consultants had access to esoteric *systems* of thought, or "sciences."

Natasha Jen and others complain about how schematic and "linear" Design Thinking's self-representation, but as a tool for hucksterism, turf-grabbing, and bullshit-peddling, this seeming-systematic is precisely what makes the DTs attractive. Design Thinkers use modernist, science-y terms like "modes" to push the idea that they have some special technique.



Remember, Design Thinking is "a methodology for producing reliably innovative results in any field." Strictly speaking, "methodology" is the analysis of methods. That just quoted sentence really means to say "methods for producing . . . ", not "methodology," but Design Thinkers use the longer word because it sounds fancier and more sophisticated.

As George Orwell noted under the heading "Pretentious Diction" in his famous essay on language, "Bad writers . . . are always haunted by the notion that Latin and Greek words are grander than Saxon ones." Fittingly, Design Thinkers prefer the three-syllable Latinate word "ideate" to the one-syllable Germanic word "think" and even more the four-syllable word "ideation" to the simpler words "thought" or "thinking."

If you reflect for even half a second, you realize how vapid Design Thinking is.Here are the Design Thinking "modes" put next to some steps I was taught when I took a freshman writing class in 1998:

1. **Empathize Mode: Consider Your Audience.**
2. **Define Mode: Pick a Clearly-Defined Topic, Neither Too Broad, Nor Too Narrow**
3. **Ideate Mode: Fucking Think**
4. **Prototype Mode: Write Your Fucking Thoughts Down**

5. **Test Mode: Give What You've Written to Someone You Trust to Read It and Let You Know if It Sucks**

When you contemplate writing and many other activities, you realize there is nothing new about Design Thinking. It is commonsense tarted up in mumbo jumbo. For sure, it is commonsense tarted up . . . *by design*.

The even deeper problem, however, is that Design Thinking gives students a terrible picture of technological and social change.

I love design. (With tears in my eyes, I recall the heart-breaking moment when I realized that Design within Reach meant design-within-physical-proximity and not design-that-could-ever-be-grasped-by-my-income.) What's more, anyone who has studied the history of capitalism knows how important design and style have been to the diffusion and reshaping of products.

But Design Thinkers put forward a seriously skewed picture of designs' role in innovation. When IDEO-logues David and Tom Kelly write in their book, *Creative Confidence*, "Our first-person experiences help us form personal connections with the people for whom we're innovating," their bending the definition of innovation to the point meaninglessness. This is Design Thinking's lipstick-on-a-pig conception of innovation.

Design Thinking has a lipstick-on-a-pig conception of innovation

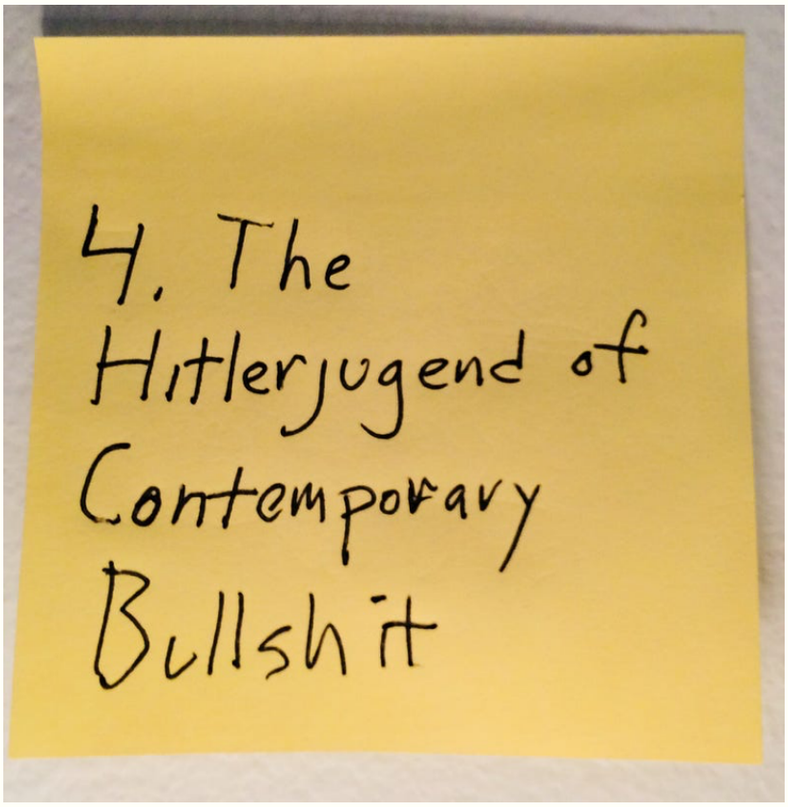
Economists and historians who study innovation, like Nathan Rosenberg, David Mowery, Steven Klepper, and David Hounshell, often write about the genesis of *entire industries* born around new fundamental technologies, like steel, railroads, automobiles, electricity, airplanes, pharmaceuticals, chemicals, petroleum, electronics, computers, and the Internet. As Robert Gordon argues in *The Rise and Fall of American Growth*, most of these technological breakthroughs happened before 1970. We have been stuck in a period of slow economic growth and lagging productivity since that time. Yet, innovation-speak claptrap has mostly only developed *since then*. There's no evidence that IDEO, Design Thinking, or the d.school have contributed to deep change. Compared to this more foundational kind of transformation, the lipstick-on-a-pig conception of innovation is just so superficial.

Design Thinking-types tend to worship Jony Ive, Apple's Chief Design Officer, who deeply influenced the look and feel of that company's most famous products. As writers like Patrick McCray and Mariana Mazzucato have described, however, the technologies undergirding the iPhone weren't created at Apple but elsewhere — in fact, often through federally-funded research. Design Thinking isn't focused on generating these kinds of fundamental technological changes; it's centered on repackaging existing technologies behind slick interfaces. It's the annual model change of some consumer electronic, slightly reconfigured in the name of planned obsolescence and unveiled at CES as a "New Revolution" in whatever. It's iShit.

The picture gets even worse when you compare Design Thinking's "social innovation" with movements that lead to deep and abiding social change.Were Rosa Parks and other activists supposed to "empathize" with owners, managers, and city leaders when "designing" the Montgomery Bus Boycott? How did Rosa Parks, Dorothy Height, Martin Luther King, and leaders of the Civil Rights Movement ever manage to be so successful without the Ideate Mode hexagon? Thank heavens they didn't have to wait for the founding of IDEO to get going. Design Thinkers dream lubricated dreams of "social innovation" free of politics and struggle.

In the end, Design Thinking's not about design. It's not about the liberal arts. It's not about innovation in any meaningful sense. It's certainly not about "social innovation" if that means significant social change. It's about *COMMERCIALIZATION*. It's about making all education a shallow form of business education. It reminds me of a story I read when I was young where an unorthodox figure went into a building and started flipping over tables because the people at the tables had made a market of the temple. The is-design-thinking-the-new-liberal-arts people want the instrumental reason of commodity-making to reign all.

Design Thinking will mess up your brains. Decline sets in. Enthusiasts embrace sexed up platitudes as profundities and believe smooching lipsticked pigs is innovation. If you manage an organization, you do not want individuals infected with these mental models in your meetings. Their ignorance and gullibility are not assets but liabilities. But for all these issues, there's an even deeper way in which pushing the DTs in education is problematic.



A couple of years ago, I saw a presentation from a group known as the University Innovation Fellows at a conference in Washington, DC. The presentation was one of the weirder and more disturbing things I've witnessed in an academic setting.

The University Innovation Fellows, its webpage states, "empowers students to become leaders of change in higher education. Fellows are creating a global movement to ensure that all students gain the necessary attitudes, skills, and knowledge to compete in the economy of the future." You'll notice this statement presumes that students aren't getting the "attitudes, skills, and knowledge" they need and that, more magically, the students know what "attitudes, skills, and knowledge" they themselves need for . . . the future.

The UIF was originally funded by the National Science Foundation and led by

VentureWell, a non-profit organization that "funds and trains faculty and student innovators to create successful, socially beneficial businesses." VentureWell was founded by Jerome Lemelson, who some people call "one of the most prolific American inventors of all time" but who really is most famous for virtually inventing *patent trolling*. Could you imagine a more beautiful metaphor for how Design Thinkers see innovation? Socially beneficial, indeed.

Eventually, the UIF came to find a home in . . . you guessed it, the d.school.

It's not at all clear what the UIF change agents do on their campuses . . . beyond recruiting other people to the "movement." A blog post titled, "Only Students Could Have This Kind of Impact," describes how in 2012 the TEDx student representatives at Wake Forest University had done a great job recruiting students to their event. It was such a good job that it was hard to see other would match it the next year. But, good news, the 2013 students were "killing it!" Then comes this line (bolding and capitalization in the original):

***THIS* is Why We Believe Students Can Change the World**

Because they can fill audiences for TED talks, apparently. The post goes on, "Students are customers of the educational experiences colleges and universities are providing them. They know what other students need to hear and who they need to hear it from. . . .

Students can leverage their peer-to-peer marketing abilities to create a movement on campus."

Meanwhile, the UIF blog posts with titles like, "Columbia University — Biomedical Engineering Faculty Contribute to Global Health," that examine the creation of potentially important new things mostly focus on individuals with the abbreviation "Dr." before their names, which is what you'd expect given that making noteworthy contributions to science and engineering typically takes *years* of hard work.

At its gatherings, the UIF inducts students into all kinds of innovation-speak and paraphernalia. They stand around in circles, filling whiteboards with Post-It Notes. Unsurprisingly, the gatherings including sessions on topics like "lean startups" and Design Thinking. The students learn crucial skills during these Design Thinking sessions. As one participant recounted, "I just learned how to host my own TEDx event in literally 15 minutes from one of the other fellows."

YAYYYYYY!!! Conformists for Change Just Covered Another White Board with Post-It Notes!

The UIF has many aspects of classic cult indoctrination, including periods of intense emotional highs, giving individuals a special lingo barely recognizable to outsiders, and telling its members that they are different and better than ordinary others — they are part of a "movement." Whether the UIF also keeps its fellows from getting decent sleep and feeds them only peanut butter sandwiches is unknown.

This UIF publicity video contains many of the ideas and trappings so far described in this essay. Watch for all the Post-It notes, whiteboards, hoodies, look-alike black t-shirts, and jargon, like change agents.

When I showed a friend this video, after nearly falling out of his chair, he exclaimed, "My God, it's the Hitlerjugend of contemporary bullshit!"

Tough but fair? Personally, I think that's a little strong. A *much* better analogy to my mind is Chairman Mao's Cultural

Revolution.

When I saw the University Innovation Fellows speak in Washington, DC, a group of college students got up in front of the room and told all of us that they were change agents bringing innovation and entrepreneurship to their respective universities. One of the students, a spritely slip of a man, said something like, "Usually professors are kind of like this," and then he made a little mocking weeny voice — wee, wee, wee, wee. The message was that college faculty and administrators are backwards thinking barriers that get in the way of this troop of thought leaders.

After the presentation, a female economist who was sitting next to me told the UIFers that she had been a professor for nearly two decades, had worked on the topic of innovation that entire time, and had done a great deal to nurture and advance the careers of her students. She found the UIF's presentation presumptuous and offensive. When the Q&A period was over, one of UIF's founders and co-directors, Humera Fasihuddin, and the students came running over to insist that they didn't mean faculty members were sluggards and stragglers. But those of us sitting at the table were like, "Well then, why did you say it?"

You might think that this student's antics were a result of being overly enthusiastic and getting carried away, but you would be wrong. This cultivated disrespect is what the UIF teaches its fellows. That young man was just parroting what he'd been taught to say.

A UIF blog post titled "Appealing to Your University's Faculty and Staff" lays it all out. The author refers to Fasihuddin as a kind of guru figure, "If you participated in the Fall 2013 cohort, you may recall Humera repeating a common statement throughout session 5, 'By connecting to other campuses that have been successful, and borrowing from those ideas you hear from your UIF peers, it removes the fear of the unknown for the faculty."

Where does the faculty's fear come from? The blog post explains, "The unfortunate truth in [Humera's] statement is that universities are laggards (i.e. extremely slow adopters). The ironic part is universities shouldn't be, and we as University Innovation Fellows, understand this."

Now, on the one hand, this is just Millennial entitlement all hopped up on crystal meth. But on the other hand, there is something deeper and more troubling going on here. The early innovation studies thinker Everett Rogers used the term "laggard" in this way to refer to the last individuals to adopt new technologies. But in the UIF, Rogers' vision becomes connected to the more potent ideology of neoliberalism: through bodies of thought like Chicago School economics and public choice theory, neoliberalism sees established actors as self-serving agents who only look to maintain their turf and, thus, resist change.

This mindset is quite widespread among Silicon Valley leaders. It's what led billionaire Ayn Rand fan Peter Thiel to put $1.7 million into The Seasteading Institute, an organization that, it says, "empowers people to build floating startup societies with innovative governance models." Seasteaders want to build cities that would float around oceans, so they can escape existing governments and live in libertarian, free market paradise. It's the same notion undergirding the Silicon Valley "startup accelerator" YCombinator's plan to build entire cities from scratch because old ones are too hard to fix. Elon Musk pushes this view when he tweets things, like "Permits are harder than technology," implying that the only thing in the way of his genius inventions are other human beings — laggards, no doubt. Individuals celebrated this ideological vision, which holds that existing organizations and rules are mere barriers to entrepreneurial action, when Uber-leader Travis Kalanick used a piece of software to break city laws. And then they were shocked, shocked, shocked when Kalanick turned out to be a total creep.

Now, if you have never been frustrated by bureaucracy, you have not lived.Moreover, when I was young, I often believed my elders were old and in the way. But once you grow up and start getting over yourself, you come to realize that other people have a lot to teach you, even when — *especially* when — they disagree with you.

This isn't how the UIF sees things. The blog post "Appealing to Your University's Faculty and Staff" advises fellows to watch faculty members' body language and tone of voice. If these signs hint that the faculty member isn't into what you're saying — or if he or she speaks as if you are not an "equal" or "down at you" — the UIF tells you to move on and find a more receptive audience. The important thing is to build the movement. "So I close with the same recurring statement," the blog post ends, "By connecting to other campuses that have been successful . . . it removes the fear of the unknown for faculty."

Is there any possibility that the students themselves could just be off-base?Sure, if while you are talking someone's body tightens up or her head looks like it's going to explode or her voice changes or she talks down to you and doesn't treat you as an equal, it could be because she is a demonic, laggard-y enemy of progress, or it could be because you are being a *fucking moron* — an always-embarrassing realization that I have about myself far more often than I'd like to admit. Design Thinkers and the UIF teach a thoroughly *adolescent* conception of culture.

Edmund Burke once wrote, "You had all of these advantages . . . but you chose to act as if you had never been molded into civil society, and had everything to begin anew. You began ill, because you began by despising everything that belonged to you." The brain-rotting illness of innovation-speak leads us to see everything around us and others as objects that are in our way and to overvalue our own precious uniqueness.

It's ironic because significant changes in art, technology, science, and all culture starts by building on what has come before, not by throwing it away.In jazz, for instance, Bird, Coltrane, and Herbie Hancock all spent years understanding the tradition — thousands of hours of listening and practice — before making their own musical breakthroughs. The best and deepest thinking always involves a dialectic between us and those who came before us, feeling our way forward together, forever imperfectly, towards truth. This is also why great teaching is always both a subversive and a conservative act, and why one of the foundational liberal arts is called love of wisdom.

In computer programming, there is an idea called "Chesterton's Fence," which is "the principle that reforms should not be made until the reasoning behind the existing state of affairs is understood." Or as Burke again put it, "We are but too apt to consider things in the state which we find them, without sufficiently adverting to the causes by which they have been produced, and possibly may be upheld." These principles challenge our impatience and overweening estimation of our own genius.

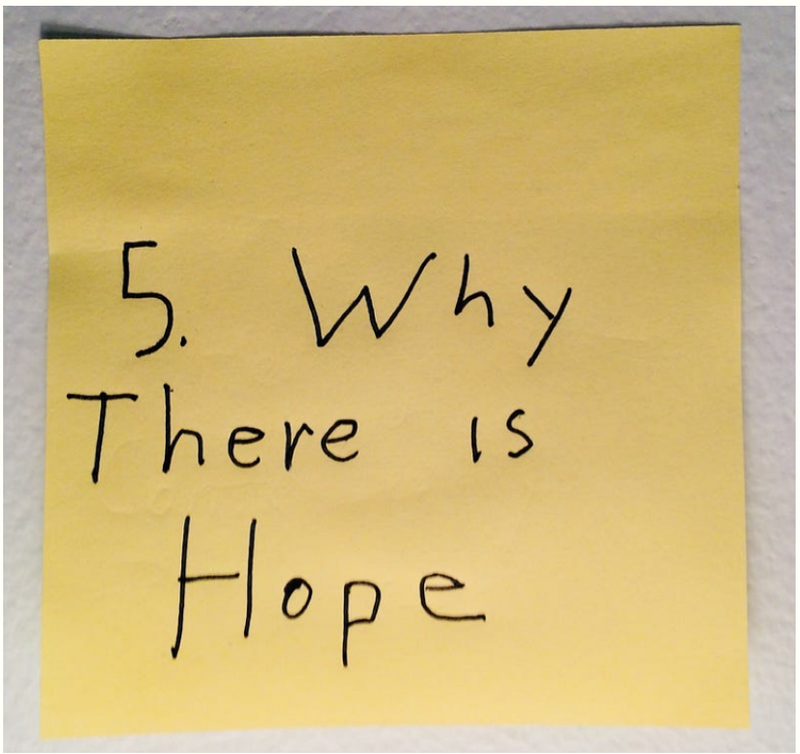
Individuals who hanker after "modes" and crave diagrams rich with hexagons cannot handle this kind of subtlety. Indeed, it is precisely this kind of subtlety and local tradition that, what André Spicer calls,

"business bullshit" aims to erase. Spicer encourages us all to form an "anti-bullshit movement." Perhaps we could sign up students all around the globe, who could have dance offs with those lame conformists, the University Innovation Fellows.

Spicer writes that the anti-bullshit movement "would also be a way of reminding people that each of our institutions has its own language and rich set of traditions which are being undermined by the spread of the empty management-speak. It would try to remind people of the power which speech and ideas can have when they are not suffocated with bullshit. By cleaning out the bullshit, it might become possible to have much better functioning organizations and institutions and richer and fulfilling lives."

I do have to thank Humera Fasihuddin and her goose-stepping "innovators" for the newest addition to my wardrobe, however.

Design Thinking, the UIF, the whole trade association of Bullshit Artists United — it's all so bleak. But thank God, there is hope.



There is reason for hope. There really is.

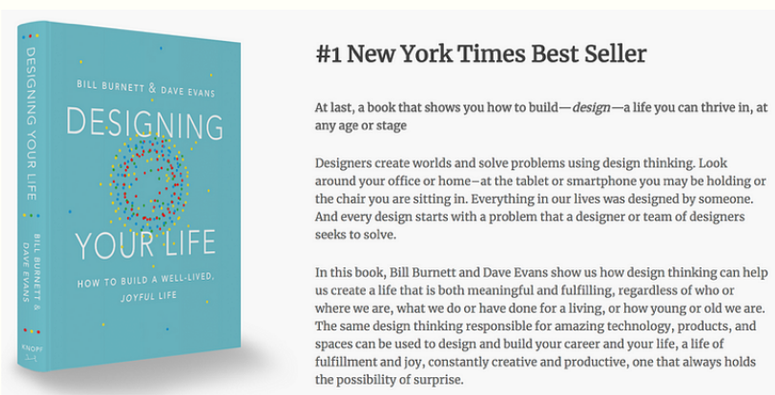
The greatest and most savage critic of Design Thinking has emerged from the heart of the Design Thinking world itself. His name is Bill Burnett, and he is a comedic genius.

Burnett is the Executive Director of "Stanford's innovative Product Design program." As his bio explains, Burnett has a "Masters of Science in Product Design at Stanford and has worked in start-ups and Fortune 100 companies, including seven years at Apple designing award-winning laptops and a number of years in the toy industry designing Star Wars action figures."

No one is really clear what made Burnett break. Perhaps he just got tired of pretending that making yet another Chewbacca figurine constituted any kind of meaningful innovation. But about a decade ago, he began plotting to overthrow the Design Thinking madness that surrounded him — and to do so solely through the use of comedy.

Burnett's first step was to found something called the "Life Design Lab" at the d.school and to create a new course, "Designing Your Life," where he would begin rehearsing his satirical material. The conceit was that you could use Design Thinking as a form of self-help. He called the class d.life to lampoon Stanford's ridiculous fashions and to skewer the idiocy of thinking a paint-by-numbers system for consulting could also be used to "design" human existence.

After nine years of creating and rehearsing jokes and one-liners in d.life, Burnett was ready for prime time. With his co-author Dave Evans, he wrote and published the 2016 book, *Designing Your Life: How to Build a Well-Lived, Joyful Life.*



If you thought Stephen Colbert's *I am America (and So Can You!),* John Hodgman's *The Areas of My Expertise*, or Amy Schumer's *The Girl with the Lower Back Tattoo* were hysterical, you really must rush out and get a copy of *Designing Your Life* right now! I have read the book aloud at parties and nearly killed everyone in the room.

Designing Your Life is full of wonderful satirical moments where Burnett and Evans unmask Design Thinking as a fraud. For instance, they write, "Design doesn't just work for creating cool stuff like computers and Ferraris; it works in creating a cool life." They also poke fun at DT's habit of overselling its promises, "*A well-designed life is a life that is generative — it is constantly creative, productive, changing, evolving, and there is always the possibility of surprise*." (italics in the original) The book mauls Design Thinkers' oversimplification of the world through absurd diagrams and formulas, like this one: **Problem Finding** + *Problem Solving* = *Well-Designed Life*. (Bolding and italics in original).

There's a deeper level to Burnett's humor, though, a layer beyond farce, which is a kind of meta-commentary on Design Thinking's hucksterism. The best example is how Burnett and Evans use the term "reframe" in the book. In Design Thinking, "reframe" is jargon for looking at a problem in a different way. As an article titled, "How Reframing a Problem Unlocks Innovation," puts it, "Mastering the ability to reframe problems is an important tool for your imagination because it unlocks a vast array of solutions."

In *Design Your Life,* Burnett and Evans apply the reframe to self-help. Here's one example from page xii:

Dysfunctional Belief: *It's too late.*
Reframe: *It's never too late to design a life you love.*

B&A's too-cruel satire works in this way: anyone who knows anything about the history of psychology will instantly see that "reframe" as a reformulation of cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT). CBT has been one of the most prominent schools of therapy since at least the 1980s. A core assumption of CBT is that individuals are tortured by "negative thought patterns" or "negative automatic thoughts." CBT encourages us to "challenge" those often by coming up with mantras that give a more realistic and supportive perspective. We can challenge "I am a fat turd" with "I'm good enough, I'm smart enough, and gosh darn it, people like me."

This CBT rubric has formed the basis for hundreds, thousands, maybe even hundreds of thousands of self-help books for the last three decades, but Burnett and Evans make nary a mention of this fact. They just call negative thought patterns "dysfunctional beliefs" and challenges "reframes."

In a gorgeous example of meta-commentary, what they are pointing out is that Design Thinking is the act of taking ideas that already exist, sexing up them up with a bit of rouge, and putting them *in other words*. Typically, people with a bad case of the DTs do this without recognizing their predecessors but instead claim to have done something new, to have made some "innovation."As the historians David Edgerton and Will Thomas have argued, such bogus novelty claims actually produce ignorance because they hide the true nature of social reality from the speaker's audience; they elide whole traditions of thought.

Burnett and Evans unmask all of this for us. Truly, this is some of the smartest humor in decades.

Writing humor is hard, but doing standup is *much* harder, and Burnett turned out to be a master. Watch at least the first minute and ten seconds of this video, and listen for the line, "Now, I'm gonna give you the first reframe, designers love reframes."

Did you see and hear how he totally nails it? A perfect landing. He doesn't even smirk. If you weren't in on his brilliance, you might not even realize he was joking. He's just that good.

Now, you can pay Burnett and Company $950 or more to take trademarked "Life Design" workshops — like this one, Designing Your Life for Women — though it's not clear if the rumors are true and these are actually improv comedy classes or if Burnett just decided to take advantage of people who are stupid enough to believe that self-help banalities put in other words as Design Thinking could somehow improve their lives. My own guess is that these are comedy seminars, though. Just read this description: "We will focus on balance and energy, use ideation techniques to help get you unstuck, build Odyssey Plans for three potential futures, and define ways to prototype the compelling parts of these futures."

Burnett has become the first comedian of the emerging and uncertain Post-Innovation-Speak Age. His wry voice is one of wisdom. He's showing us the path away from bullshit and away from a juvenile picture of culture. As some book once said, "When I was a child, I talked like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child." Burnett is imploring us to put away our childish things, to donate our Star Wars toys to Goodwill. It's why his fall-down-laughing "reframe" jokes work so flawlessly. Burnett's saying that we have to move beyond a moment where we put old wine in new bottles and call it genuine progress, that we have to move beyond this hollow era of *repackaging*. Burnett is reminding us that, for whatever reason, God did not fill his promised land full of Juiceros. He's arguing that we shouldn't pretend that we can boil education and, like, human life down into five-point diagram for selling shit. What he's telling us is that it takes *so many years* of training, discipline, and hard work to even recognize something that is genuinely new, let alone pull it off.

Burnett is also pushing us to move beyond Design Thinking's lipstick-on-a-pig conception of innovation. For instance, there is the question of where the pig came from and how to maintain and care for the pig so that it lives a long, healthy, happy piggy life. Burnett is begging us to adopt a mature, grounded, realistic picture of ordinary human life with technology. It's the view of technology you get from authors who write books for grownups, like Ruth Schwartz Cowan's *More Work for Mother* and David Edgerton's *Shock of the Old*. It's the conception of technology Andy Russell, many others, and I have been trying to explore through The Maintainers, an international research network dedicated to studying maintenance, repair, upkeep, and all the mundane labor that keeps the world going.

For all of these reasons and more, we've recently adopted Burnett as the Patron Comedy Saint of The Maintainers. I mean, how could we not? Virtually everything that comes out of his mouth is hilarious. That dude *SLAYS!!!!!!!!!*