
Presented at the 21st Century Academic Forum Conference held at Harvard in 2016

Written by Rhea Alexander, Founder and Director of Parsons Elab and Assistant Professor of Strategic Design and Management along with Aaron Fry, Associate Professor of Design Strategies.

Practicing What We Teach: Iterative Design Methods for Innovation Education soon to be published in 2017

Abstract: There can be little dispute that the past two decades have seen an acceleration in the pace of change in the hyper-connected parts of both developing and developed worlds. Termed VUCA (Volatile, Uncertain Complex and Ambiguous) this new social and economic landscape may itself provide some clues about how future generations (i.e. Alpha) might be educated, what they may be expected to learn and know, and ultimately how they may be prepared to thrive. The authors propose that design-led entrepreneurship and innovation are both essential skill-sets and mindsets that stand at the core of how future generations might successfully navigate VUCA environments. However, despite the rise of design-entrepreneurship and a broader acceptance of “design thinking” in business, the authors contend that entrepreneurship and design education remain marginal in current mainstream pedagogy worldwide.

We describe VUCA conditions and the emergent values and priorities of the post-recession, Millennial-and-beyond generations of consumer, learner and employee. We examine the manner in which Gen Z and Alpha generations learn, and contrast this with current pedagogical modalities and innovations within this landscape. We then conclude with the case of Parsons’ Entrepreneurs Lab (ELab), a design-driven business incubator and academic research lab, which seeks to develop a design intelligent pedagogical approach addressing the pivotal role of design in developing that most intangible quality; the entrepreneurial mindset, asserting that teaching and using design principles and methods for innovation and entrepreneurship at an earlier age will better prepare future generations to respond to the unknown.

