

Beyond the Classroom

Industry education leaders chime in on today's self-help methods

By Courtney E. Howard

“Self-education is, I firmly believe, the only kind of education there is,” Isaac Asimov, a famous science-fiction writer, has stated. While his may be an extreme view, self-education, most would agree, is important, especially when used in conjunction with more traditional methods.

Many forms of learning exist beyond the formal multi-year programs that many colleges, universities, and trade schools offer. Although a brick-and-mortar school is often the route most taken, it is not the only option. There is something to be learned everyday in everything we do, and this is especially true in animation and computer graphics. According to many players in the education segment of the digital content creation industry, several options and resources are available to further one's education without having to go to—or, in some cases, go back to—school.

On the Job

One effective way to extend education is through your job. “Never be afraid to take an entry-level or more junior position in an area in which you do not have much experience but are interested in,” says Alastair Macleod, head of animation at Vancouver Film School (VFS). “Sometimes, to be qualified to work in another field or country, you must master the one you are currently in, and then you may only be qualified for a junior position.

“Put yourself in a situation where you are surrounded by people who are doing what you would like to learn,” Macleod continues. “Observe, then ask questions. School is a good place to do this, but not the only place. If you are already in production, you should sit in on dailies, production meetings, or any discussions where you can hear the issues as they unfold, and listen to the solutions that are used. Find out how effective those solutions were.” This method of learning through experience is, according to some, the only way true knowledge and education are gained.

Another interesting approach for the experienced professional does involve going back to school, but not as a student. Why not teach? “Taking a teaching position will generally expose you to a wide range of subjects, often brought to you in the form of interesting questions,” says Macleod. “You'd also be amazed at how much can be learned when working with talented and creative students. Teaching does require a certain type of personality, but this is another interesting method in which to gain education while actually earning money.”

On the Interwebs

Given the ever-expanding bandwidth of the Internet and continued gains in technology, many novel online and digital media formats now efficiently deliver interactive and educational courses based on myriad subjects.

Many sources exist for educational material today, and one of the more popular available is Lynda.com. This online resource offers so many education methods and titles that it is easy to get lost among the many instructional books and video courses on a wealth of topics, from Autodesk's Maya to Adobe's Photoshop, and anything and everything in between.

Peter Weishar, dean of Film, Digital Media, and Performing Arts at Savannah College of Art and Design, recommends online and video methods for seasoned veterans, but cautions newcomers on their initial use. “For a beginner, I would strongly suggest a class,” he says. “Relying on software tutorials will not help you avoid clichés and aesthetic pitfalls that can be reflected in your portfolio. For professionals, I prefer training DVDs.”

While training in the digital medium is growing, Jim McCampbell, department head of Computer Animation at Ringling College of Art + Design, reminds us not to forget the importance of talking to our peers. “Videos and books are fine for learning tools, but it is incredibly important to get individual, personalized feedback on your work,”

he explains. “The most valuable possession you have is your art-direction skill. All the technical proficiency in the world won’t help you if you don’t understand how to harness it for making good art. Everyone loves the convenience of online learning, but an intra-personal experience is still the most effective way to learn.”

Peter Patchen, chair of the Department of Digital Arts at Pratt Institute, reinforces this idea. “We find one of our best resources in this area is the time our students spend working with our faculty and each other in the computer studios, sharing solutions and references,” he notes. While we self-described geeks and artists can tend to be a bit reclusive at times, our peers are our most valuable resource for making the most of what we produce, whether in a class, at work, or online.

On the Page

In any industry, a “bible,” or educational “Holy Grail,” exists, and the computer graphics industry is no different.

“*The Illusion of Life: Disney Animation* is the bible and should be used as the cornerstone for any serious animation program,” McCampbell says. This oft-recommended text was authored by Ollie Johnston and Frank Thomas, two of Disney’s Nine Old Men—the core animation group responsible for creating some of Disney’s most famous films, from *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* to *The Rescuers*. In their book, Johnston and Thomas preserved many of Walt Disney Animation Studios’ breakthrough techniques in animation, including the 12 Basic Principles of Animation. The book is based upon hand-drawn animation, but many of its concepts can be directly applied to computer graphics and animation today.

Richard Williams’ *The Animator’s Survival Kit* is another book many experts consider an essential read for anyone entering or currently working in the industry. Although it has not reached “bible” status quite yet, it is nonetheless considered essential.

Williams is best known for his work as animation director on the once-cutting-edge film *Who Framed Roger Rabbit*, which earned 18 award wins and another 21 award nominations. Of the film’s 18 wins, three were Academy Awards: one was for Best Effects, Visual Effects and the other a Special Achievement Award for

animation direction and creation of cartoon characters. He has worked in the animation industry since the 1940s; been involved in many award-winning productions, including the Academy Award-winning *A Christmas Carol* in 1971; and boasts three British Academy Awards and more than 250 other international awards to his credit. Most recently, Williams released a 16-DVD boxed set of his acclaimed masterclass animation course, called *The Animator’s Survival Guide—Animated*.

The last bit of sound advice on the page comes from Macleod, who recommends “any good book on stress relief or meditation.” After all, it’s something perhaps everyone could use more of within this fast-paced industry, in which sleep is considered a luxury.

While school is generally agreed upon as the best option for learning, it certainly is not the only effective and efficient way of expanding one’s knowledge and experience. Alternative methods exist for obtaining knowledge, skills, education, and wisdom in this field.

Remember, as the great Mark Twain once said, “I have never let my schooling interfere with my education.”

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Industry Experts Suggest:

Guide to Computer Animation by Marcia Kuperberg
Focal Press
www.focalpress.com

Creative Code: Aesthetics + Computation by John Maeda
Thames & Hudson
www.thamesandhudson.com

The Writer’s Journey by Christopher Vogler
Michael Wiese Productions
<http://shop.mwp.com>

How Images Think by Ron Burnett
The MIT Press
<http://mitpress.mit.edu>

Texturing and Painting by Owen Demers
New Riders Press/Peachpit
www.pitchpit.com

The Animator’s Survival Guide by Richard Williams
Faber & Faber
www.faber.co.uk

The Illusion of Life: Disney Animation by Frank Thomas and Ollie Johnston
Disney Editions
<http://disneybooks.disney.go.com>