EXPLORING JOURNALISTIC GENRES AS A REFLECTIVE INQUIRY INTO THE HISTORY OF DESIGN

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WITH THE ARRIVAL OF GENERATION Z IN UNIVERSITY CLASSROOMS, PROFESSORS FACE THE CHALLENGE OF REINFORCING THE ACADEMIC SKILLS THIS COHORT FINDS PARTICULARLY DIFFICULT, SUCH AS WRITING LONG-FORM TEXTS AND THINKING INDEPENDENTLY. THIS IS ESPECIALLY TRUE IN DESIGN SCHOOLS, WHERE STUDENTS TEND TO PREFER STUDIO-BASED LEARNING—MAKING IT URGENT TO DEVELOP STRATEGIES THAT FOSTER THESE COMPETENCIES FOR THE FUTURE OF THE FIELD. THIS ARTICLE EXPLORES BOTH AUDIO AND WRITTEN GENRES OF OPINION JOURNALISM AS A MEANS OF ENCOURAGING DESIGN STUDENTS TO ENGAGE IN CRITICAL INQUIRY. OPERATING ON THE ASSUMPTION THAT STUDENTS CONNECT READILY WITH MEDIA FORMATS, WE ASKED THEM TO CREATE COLUMNS AND PODCASTS TO LEARN ABOUT AND REFLECT ON THE HISTORY OF DESIGN. IN DOING SO, STUDENTS PRODUCED ARGUMENTATIVE EXERCISES THAT PRACTICED FORMAL WRITING, DEVELOPED THEIR OWN AUTHORIAL VOICES, AND ENGAGED IN BOTH INDIVIDUAL AND GROUP REFLECTION ON THE ROLE OF DESIGN IN PAST AND PRESENT SOCIETIES.

KEYWORDS: DESIGN EDUCATION, HISTORY OF DESIGN, GENERATION Z, ACADEMIC WRITING, CREATIVE WRITING

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GENERATIONAL AND TECHNOLOGICAL CONTEXT

As we move into the third decade of the 21st century, university students find themselves at the center of a whirlwind of technological changes that are transforming how people study, work, and socialize at an unprecedented pace. Moreover, they are the ones who embody both the benefits and drawbacks of this shift. Generation Z students are characterized as digital natives who readily adopt new tools, multitask with ease, and demonstrate high levels of creativity (Iorgulescu, 2016). However, being hyperconnected from birth has its downsides. Excessive reliance on the digital world has weakened their ability to concentrate and communicate effectively, while their habit of seeking instant gratification has earned them the label of the most impatient generation (Cilliers, 2017). Despite these challenges, they remain genuinely interested in making a difference in their communities (Marrodán, 2022).

The digital age presents a paradox: while students have immediate access to almost any information they might need, they struggle to understand and reflect critically on that information (Briseño Senosiain, 2021). Access to vast amounts of unfiltered, unverified data leaves little time for processing and generating new ideas. In other words, students can find data faster than ever before, but they struggle to incorporate that knowledge into their work with the expected critical judgment.

In recent years, this trend has been exacerbated by the widespread use of AI-powered chatbots as everyday search engines. These new tools present both opportunities and substantial risks in higher education. Specifically, concerns have been raised about the declining use of intellectual and analytical skills in writing and research (Guzmán-Valdivia, 2024), as well as the lack of critical evaluation of AI-generated responses, which are often based on inaccurate, biased, or fabricated data (Elsayed, 2024). Together, these factors undermine critical thinking, problem-solving, and the ability to generate original ideas.

This situation highlights the urgent need for educational experiences that encourage research and self-reflection. One way to help students develop these skills is to encourage them to express themselves in their own words. Long before writing became a means of producing documents, it served as a way to organize ideas and reflect on them (Maigua Taipe et al., 2025). This practice—once indispensable but increasingly dispensable in 21st-century daily life—allows students not only to absorb information more effectively but also to carve out their own perspective amid the many opinions of others. The benefits of strengthening writing skills in design education extend beyond producing rigorous texts to include developing critical judgment about one's environment, analytical thinking within the discipline, and the effective communication of design proposals.

WRITING AND READING IN DESIGN EDUCATION

While teaching academic writing is challenging enough in today's higher education landscape, doing so in design programs presents particular difficulties. This may stem from the perceived disconnect between design and writing itself (Hussaini, 2023). This gap likely has its roots in the fact that the academic history of design only began in the 1960s; before that, professional designers were trained through studio-based practice (García Díaz, 2018), imitation, and informal, everyday instruction.

Following the tradition of the early design schools that shaped the 20th century, instruction in this field is typically grounded in studio-based practice from the very outset, unlike traditional academic programs where reading and writing remain the undisputed cornerstones of education (García Díaz, 2018). This studio-based practice emphasis is likely a key reason why many students choose this career path.

If there is a writing format specific to the design process, it is arguably the design notebook—though it is intended for personal use rather than for sharing. With its mix of words, numbers, and sketches, its content is often readable only to its owner. Prose writing thus becomes essential for organizing information and thoughts meant to be shared. Given that design can be viewed as a unifying force across disciplines (García Arano, 2020), it is essential that students be able to communicate their findings effectively, in both project-based and theoretical contexts.

In terms of learning preferences, Generation Z tends to favor multimedia, participatory, and group-based activities over traditional resources like academic reading (Sánchez-Altamirano & Rodríguez-Rodríguez, 2025). At the same time, they show interest in content published on mainstream, user-generated platforms—such as social media and blogging apps—as well as stories in podcasts, audiobooks, and short videos (Noorda & Berens, 2024). This preference is likely key to understanding students' resistance to traditional theoretical assessment formats like reports, term papers, and argumentative pieces (Gröppel-Wegener, 2012). These formats leave little room for students to develop their own voice, unlike media genres, which are built on authorial expression.

In light of these considerations, we set out to test whether opinion journalism—specifically as practiced in the media outlets that Generation Z frequents—could serve as an effective format for encouraging research, writing, and critical thinking among future design professionals. To what extent can opinion journalism foster communication and critical thinking skills in theoretical courses within a design degree program?

WRITING AND SHARING PERSPECTIVES ON THE HISTORY OF DESIGN

The following case study draws on a pedagogical experience developed for the Design Theory course, in which opinion journalism genres were introduced as new assessment formats to foster argumentative writing and critical thinking. Yin (2003) defines case study as "empirical research that analyzes a contemporary phenomenon in its real-world context" (p. 13), drawing on multiple sources of evidence, grounded in theoretical propositions, and attentive to its contextual conditions. It is a methodology well suited to "shedding light on complex educational realities that are obscured by everyday life, for understanding internal processes, and for uncovering dilemmas and contradictions" (Álvarez Álvarez & San Fabián Maroto, 2012, p. 5).

In particular, this research drew on a comprehensive review of the documentation produced during the course—assessment rubrics, evaluation results, and teaching log entries—to identify changes in students' writing and reflective skills over the semester. The results presented here correspond to the first semester of 2024, which marked the inaugural year of this strategy's implementation.

Design Theory is a third-semester required course in the undergraduate programs at the School of Design at the Universidad del Desarrollo. On the Concepción campus, most students are between 19 and 20 years old and are pursuing degrees in Graphic Design or Spatial and Object Design. The class is taught in person

in a traditional classroom equipped with desks, a projector, a screen, and a blackboard. In 2024, enrollment stood at 43 students. The course, grounded in historical perspectives, examines design's impact on cultural heritage, economic development, and community well-being, while also addressing the ethical challenges of contemporary design practice. Students are expected to develop a global perspective, analytical thinking, and critical judgment regarding the role of design in society.

To address the writing difficulties identified in previous years' Research and Theory courses, the department introduced new assessment formats with the following objectives:

- Practice writing long-form, original texts while developing historical research skills and using formal academic language.
- To encourage students to form their own opinions on the subject matter, thereby sharpening their argumentative skills and stimulating critical thinking.
- To determine whether students view opinion journalism formats more favorably than traditional academic formats.

To this end, four assignments combined traditional academic formats with those typical of opinion journalism: an essay, an opinion column, a podcast episode, and an investigative report—in that order, as listed in Table 1.

The opinion column format was chosen because it is the genre that best lends itself to a detailed personal reflection. Written in the first person, it requires the author to present their perspective in an engaging and insightful tone. Beyond its persuasive nature, the opinion column has also gained significant traction on social media, where it is often shared in full or via excerpts on carousels, threads, and other digital formats. Thus, despite its formal character, it remains a familiar and appealing format for digital natives. Podcasts, meanwhile, are heavily consumed by Generation Z on streaming platforms (Spotify, YouTube) and social media (Instagram, TikTok). Their versatility allows them to tackle both serious subjects and lighthearted, humorous content.

The first graded assignment was an individual essay, designed to assess students' initial level of academic writing and their reflective capacity. This format required students to support their arguments using both bibliographic sources and personal insights, simultaneously revealing their ability to produce academic texts and generate their own ideas based on the course content. For this assignment, each student was asked to articulate their position on the similarities and differences between art and design, drawing on one of the schools or avant-garde movements discussed in class as an example, and examining the formal and conceptual aspects shared by both disciplines. The assignment was evaluated using a rubric organized around three main criteria:

- **Structure:** Present the essay's structure; fulfill its argumentative function.
- **Argumentation:** Present a clear thesis; master the supporting evidence.
- **Length/Format:** Pay attention to grammar, and adhere to the requested format and length.

Out of 43 students, 40 (93%) achieved the maximum score on the Structure item. However, only 11 (25.5%) achieved the maximum score on the Argumentation item, and 27 (62.7%) on the Length item. These results suggest that the most common obstacle was difficulty in articulating a clear, well-developed position. Rather than offering in-depth analysis, students tended to present ideas superficially or rely heavily on uncritically assimilated sources.

To encourage students to generate their own ideas and communicate them effectively, the second assignment took the form of an opinion column that required each student to write for a fictional publication specializing in design, reflecting on the role of the designer in relation to a 21st-century challenge within design. To this end, each student-columnist was asked to address one of the ethical dilemmas discussed in class—specifically, plagiarism and/or cultural appropriation; photo retouching as a form of symbolic violence against women and girls, or as deceptive advertising; the environmental impact of fast fashion; and planned obsolescence. Each text had to analyze a case study from a critical perspective, offer insights into the role of design in addressing these issues, and propose ways in which professionals can contribute to solving them. The assignment was evaluated using a rubric based on five criteria:

TABLE 1. Summary of the semiannual evaluations.

UNIT	CONTENT	FORMAT	TYPE OF EVALUATION	EVALUATION DATE
Unit 1 Design and Art: A Controversial Relationship	Definitions of art and design. Their points of convergence and divergence throughout history. Global and local examples.	Academic Format	Essay	April 2024
Unit 2-A Design as a Driver of the Economy	Ways to Stand Out: From Styling to Experience Design. Ethical Dilemmas Facing Designers in Today's Workplace.	Opinion Format	Opinion Column	May 2024
Unit 2-B: Design as a Driver of Development	Post-World War II design and reconstruction. Design and modernization in Latin America.	Opinion Format	Podcast episode	June 2024
Unit 3: Design as a Way of Thinking	Great Thinkers in Design. Design Manifestos.	Academic Format	Research Report	July 2024

- **Structure:** Present the structure of the format; fulfill its argumentative function.
- **Argumentation:** Present a clear thesis; master the supporting evidence.
- **Content:** Inclusion of the requested case in the required scope.
- **Personal Voice:** Developing a Style That Reflects the Author's Values, Vision, and Personality.
- **Format:** Pay attention to grammar, follow the format guidelines, and adhere to the requested length.

For this assignment, students produced stronger work in terms of argumentation and reflection, while also showing significant development of their personal voice. Results showed that all students effectively addressed an ethical dilemma; 39 students (90.7%) achieved the highest score in Personal Voice, 36 (83.7%) in Structure and Length, and 31 (72.1%) in Argumentation and Persuasion. This improvement was reflected in higher overall grades.

Given this positive outcome, tapping into students' professional ethics and simulating the publication of their work in a media outlet fostered greater commitment to the final product. In light of the notable increase in original ideas, students were encouraged to share their work with friends or on social media if they wished.

While the opinion column provided an opportunity for personal reflection, the podcast episode was chosen to facilitate group reflection. The third assessment tasked students with investigating and reflecting on the positive impact of design initiatives across business, government, and academia that proved instrumental to the development of nations undergoing reconstruction and modernization during the second half of the 20th century. To this end, the 12 groups selected case studies from the United Kingdom, Italy, Germany, Switzerland, Mexico, and Chile.

Teams researched their chosen case and recorded a podcast episode for a fictional media outlet, following the provided editorial guidelines and ensuring that all members participated. Students were not given any instructions on how to record or edit the podcast; they were simply provided with a file format (.mp3), a duration (10 to 15 minutes), and a few suggestions for audio editing software. The same criteria used in the previous assignment—Structure, Content, Argumentation, Personal Voice, and Length—were applied to evaluate this work.

For this assignment, all groups achieved the maximum score in Structure, and 83.3% achieved the maximum score in Scope, Personal Voice, and Argumentation. A notable improvement was also observed in the development of personal voice, which was likely fostered by the collaborative discussion required by the guidelines. Recorded in a trusting peer environment, the podcasts captured the authentic opinions and concerns of aspiring designers. This experience also encouraged each team to hold a peer-led reflection session on the role of design in society. Additionally, some students shared their recordings with the rest of the class, extending the discussion beyond the formal academic setting.

Although students were told that post-production would not be evaluated, they added background music and various audio effects. This proactive approach may reflect Generation Z's ability to quickly adopt new technologies, as well as their interest in producing work that appeals to an audience—even if only a hypothetical one.

Finally, to conclude the semester, students wrote an academic report in response to a specific set of questions. This brought the course back to a traditional assessment format, with the aim of determining whether the earlier opinion-based exercises had strengthened their writing and critical thinking skills. For this final task, each group chose a designer they admired for both their work and their design philosophy, researched that designer's career, and reflected on their views of design. The assignment was evaluated using the same criteria as the previous ones.

Here, there was substantial improvement in writing, length, and argumentation compared to the first assignment. Out of 14 working groups, all achieved the maximum score in Structure, Personal Voice, and Length, while 85.7% achieved the maximum score in Argumentation. The results showed that the teams not only presented coherent, well-informed design concepts, but also drew parallels with their own principles, offering new perspectives with eloquence, conviction, and local relevance. Table 2 provides a comparison of the four evaluations by item.

TABLE 2. Percentage of students with the highest score per item.

	ASSIGNMENT 1 (ESSAY)	ASSESSMENT 2 (COLUMN)	ASSIGNMENT 3 (PODCAST)	ASSESSMENT 4 (REPORT)
Structure	93,02 %	83,72%	100%	100%
Argumentation	25,58%	72,09%	83,33%	85,71%
Contents	69,77%	100%	58,33%	64,29%
Extent and Form	62,79%	83,72%	83,33%	100%
Personal Voice	–	90,7%	83,33%	100%

CONCLUSIONS

This study has limitations that should be acknowledged. These include the small sample size—43 students from a single institution—so the findings do not constitute universal evidence but rather a proposal within a specific context. Additionally, the project was carried out over a single semester, with only one academic hour per week, which limited the number of exercises that could be completed and precluded any investigation into long-term outcomes. Nevertheless, the case offers a relevant precedent for developing communication and critical thinking skills among design students.

This assessment experience in the Design Theory course suggests that, while students may initially resist academic writing, their willingness to engage improves considerably when they are invited to articulate a position in a format that feels familiar and potentially publishable. Working on the opinion column and the podcast episode encouraged them to write more authentically; when treated as influential professionals rather than passive recipients, they responded with greater initiative and agency. This achievement is especially significant in the current landscape, where the widespread use of generative AI has raised questions about the critical and creative capacities of higher education students.

Early-stage undergraduates are an ideal group for fostering the development of their own opinions. As they enter early adulthood, they are in the midst of social exploration and identity formation (Barrera-Herrera & Vinet, 2017). College can function as a hybrid space between adolescence and adulthood, where defining personal and professional values takes center stage. With this in mind, higher education institutions should create more space for exercises that use creative writing as a tool for making reflection explicit (Gröppel-Wegener, 2012).

The findings presented above suggest that the opinion journalism assessments helped bridge students' writing, research, and reflection, serving as a connection between academia and media culture. Given their digital presence and viral potential, these formats appear to have sparked students' interest; students showed steady improvement in length, argumentation, and personal voice, alongside their engagement with the course content. Furthermore, when prompted to exchange opinions, they generated opportunities for group reflection on the subject.

These results suggest that adjusting course formats can be a valuable teaching strategy for developing challenging skills across disciplines and cohorts. Design, a field characterized by its constant evolution in response to social, technological, and ethical changes, creates a fitting environment for questioning traditional academic practice and proposing new exercises that foster critical thinking (García Díaz, 2019). In particular, the teaching process should include identifying students' strengths, weaknesses, and preferences (Hussaini, 2023). In this case, recognizing both an academic challenge—limited critical thinking, communication, and formal writing skills—and a generational interest—the desire to share and make a difference—enabled an effective adjustment.

Additionally, student participation in class increased, as students felt more confident and articulate in expressing their points of view. Although this outcome was not among the original objectives of the methodological innovation, it highlights the need for courses aimed at developing critical thinking to provide a safe and supportive environment for students (Siguenza Campoverde & Castillo Vera, 2025). Certainly, the relationship between this exploration of formats and classroom participation would benefit from further research.

Finally, as design becomes increasingly interdisciplinary in both professional and academic contexts, writing and communication skills are essential for leading in this field (Hussaini, 2023). While not all students will pursue careers in research or theory, all will face communication challenges in the workplace and will be expected to contribute informed, critical, and articulate perspectives. Assuming that the changes driven by the digital age are not fleeting trends but rather a structural shift in how we learn and teach, academia must venture into proposing new exercises and assessments.

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