Hello and welcome. I'm your host, Neil Ward, and I'm grateful that you're taking time out of your day to learn more about design educator's paths to tenure. I really appreciate it. On this episode of "Tell it to Neil" we are chatting with John O'Neill, Assistant Professor of Graphic Design at the University of Minnesota, Duluth.

Let's listen in.

**Neil**: Hi John. How are you?

**John**: I’m doing great. How are you doing?

**Neil**: Pretty good. Pretty good. Thank you for being on "Tell it to Neil."

**John**: Thank you for having me.

**Neil**: Of course. So let's get into it. How did you get into graphic design? Where did that start?

**John**: Well it all started my first year of high school. I had to do a career research project. I had to pick a career and do some research on it. And I just happened to choose graphic arts. I didn't even know it was called graphic design. I just thought it was called graphic arts.

My dad had a contact who was a graphic designer and he was a freelance graphic designer and we went over to his house and I was able to interview him and he told me what he did. This was at a time when Macs, Apples were coming into the profession. At that time he had just got a Mac and he was learning to use it. And since that time, since that moment in time when I met this person, I knew exactly what I was going to be doing for the rest of my career.

**Neil**: Interesting. So what was it that really drew you in?

**John**: I think it was the whole process that he was talking about. At that time, you know, he did a lot of hand-drawn things, and what have you. And working with people. Making things for the college he happened to work at. And society. And just the fact that when you do the design – well, print design -- there are multiple copies of it. I think that's always one of the appeals that I have about graphic design. That the thing that you work on can be mass-produced. Now even nowadays with websites, the same website will be seen by multiple people. So that's one of the awesome aspects of graphic design for me.

**Neil**: Since you're interested in mass-produced objects, have you ever thought that, or have you ever dabbled with industrial design at all?

**John**: No, I have not, but I'm greatly influenced by other forms of design and art. I think as a graphic designer and design educator we need to look at other disciplines to gain insight into how other people work. How they make it.

**Neil**: Kind of more on the empathy side of things--then learning people's behaviors and what they're expecting, and what they need?

**John**: No. It's like, for example, with architecture. If you want to look at architecture, what are the things that they do in the process of making a building or place. I think there’s a bit to be known now for graphic designers now. And that goes for science as well. Any topic, it doesn’t matter, that you can gain something. Whether it's about the process that can influence your design process or influence how design comes in contact with people. There's no limit on inspiration or the influence that you would get from that.

I've been reading a lot about disability studies. And what scholars have said and written about in terms of disability. Most of the content that I read about that has nothing to do with design, but because I have a design background, and I know what design can do for people, I can connect the dots to what they say and how that relates to design.

*(6:16)*

**Neil**: One of the people that I've been following is Liz Jackson. Are you familiar with her at all?

**John**: I am not.

**Neil**: She is an advocate for including those with a disability into the design process, insuring that the products that are made are actually addressing a problem that the disability community actually needs help with solving, instead of what she calls "disability dongles," which she defines those as "products for the disabled community by non-disabled designers, that solve a perceived problem, rather than an actual problem."

So coming from an academic lens, by working with the community instead of for the community you begin to avoid the academic savior complex, and begin to dismantle a more ableist view of the world.

If you're interested, you can go to her website, www.thegirlwiththepurplecane.com and look at some of her videos and look at the disabled list.

**John**: Yes, now I know what you're talking about. Another person that’s deeply involved on that topic is a person by the name of Kat Holmes. H-O-L-M-E-S. Holmes. Kat is spelled K-A-T. Kat Holmes. She has multiple jobs in the last couple of years, but the one that she is most known for is the one when she was working at Microsoft. She was part of the team lead of inclusive design at Microsoft. The team made what is called the inclusive design toolkit on the Microsoft design website. It gives you a whole bunch of information, questions, processes that anyone can use to design what they want to design.

**Neil**: What a valuable resource that inclusive design toolkit is, especially with it being widely available.

**John**: Yes, I'm assuming that maybe you know about it?

**Neil**: I do. I've also read her book, "Mismatch, How Inclusion Shapes Design." Brilliant, brilliant book. You mentioned that you came into graphic design in high school. Then after high school did you wind up going to a four-year, or did you end up going to a graphic design program after high school? Did you work in the field? What happened after graduation?

**John**: Yes. And if I may back up a little bit. When I had that career person and I knew exactly what I wanted to do, from that time forward my main mission in life at the time was to become a graphic designer. So when it got to time to apply for college I was only looking for graphic design programs. And the state of Virginia, where I grew up, had one of the best schools for that, Virginia Commonwealth University School of Arts. They have a big art school and a very well-known graphic design program there. And so that's where I got my BFA degree. And I should say, at that time the department was not called Graphic Design, it was called Communication Arts and Design. It had graphic design, illustration, and photography. So all that was in one department.

*(11:16)*

**Neil**: That’s nice. So did you end up crossing over with students from other areas there?

**John**: Yes, we had to take photo classes, we had to take illustration classes. Now at this time Visual Arts. Now it's its own department. So I think I got there at the right time before they did that. Because all of those classes as part of graphic design certainly impacts me to this day. So in addition to graphic design I also do photography as well.

*(12:09)*

**Neil**: Nice. And do you have a website for people to look at your photography and graphic design?

**John**: Not yet!

**Neil**: Okay.

[laughter]

**John**: That is in the works. But they can go to my Instagram account.

**Neil**: Okay so what would the name be?

**John**: jdesign209.

**Neil**: jDesign209. That's fun. And it rhymes. That should be easy to remember.

**John**: The way it came about was the last year of my time at VCU I began to do some freelance work. My apartment off campus was 209. So the first letter of my name. jdesign209.

**Neil**: Great. I certainly will look for jdesign209 on Instagram. Thank you. So after you graduated from VCU did you work in the field a little bit or did you wind up going for an MFA?

**John**: Well, no. I knew before I graduated from VCU that I was going to get an MFA, but my parents, my dad particularly, said "you need to make money" [laughter].

**Neil**: Yes

**John**: You need to make money. He also said that "you have to go and get some experience before you go to get a master's to make it more-- I wouldn't say meaningful -- but make the equation between what you learn in grad school to how it would be applied in the profession. So I did that for three years and then I thought -- I applied to multiple schools. And I went to RIT in upstate New York.

**Neil**: Oh my gosh! I love Rochester.

**John**: It prepared me for living in Minnesota.

[laughter]

**Neil**: Continue with that thought.

**John**: Yes. I'd be happy to. Before that time, the only place I've lived in was Virginia. And Virginia is in the south. Technically it is right in the middle of the country. Virginia, during the wintertime it doesn’t get so cold, but it gets cold and in the summertime it gets very hot.

**Neil**: Yup

*(15:35)*

**John**: When I went to upstate New York it was whole new weather. Weather I had never experienced before. Obviously, I'd experienced cold weather before I got there, but it took that to a whole new level. Soon after that experience I found my way to Duluth. In Duluth we've had temperatures that go -10, -15 at times.

And you normally don't see green grass from December, the end of November to maybe May. Every other time is white. But we make up for that in the summertime because in the summertime Duluth is amazing. It's not too cold, it's not too hot. It's a perfect temperature. So every cold temperature that you experience in the winter time, hopefully you make up for that in the summertime.

**Neil**: Yes, and you know, I kind of think that's what all of us northern people tell ourselves -- that the summer makes up for it.

[laughter]

**John**: Right…

**Neil**: Just so we can continue living in the northern states. [laughter] So when you were at Rochester Institute of Technology for your M.F.A what was your M.F.A in? Was it in graphic design? Or was it in another area?

**John**: Yes, at that specific time RIT had two graphic design degrees, M.F.A degrees. One was in what was called computer graphic design and other one was called just graphic design. So the computer graphic design program was a multiple media program. You learned about media graphics, web design and what have you. You have to remember this was in the early 2000s. 2001, 2002, 2003 and '04. That's the time period that I am talking about. So I was in the other graphic design program. We learned about everything. We learned about print design, we learned about information design, systems design, all that kind of stuff. I just took courses in that program. And in addition to that I took motion graphic courses. I don't know if that answers your question.

**Neil**: Oh, absolutely! Then what was your final project then? Did you have a thesis paper you had to write? Or did you have a project you had to do?

**John**: Yes, I had a project I had to do. It was how -- wow, it has been a long time since I've talked about this, so…

[laughter]

**Neil**: Remember as best as you can.

**John**: It was how teachers in K-12 could use information components like diagrams, charts, time lines, to teach a wide variety of different topics to kids. At that time I had an interest in education and design education, to be more specific.

When I did that project, it wasn’t fun, put it that way. Not because I didn’t want to learn about the topic, but discuss the timing for a project like that and graduate on time. But thinking back on it, it was one of the best moments I had in my M.F.A education. And I have the best regard for that program, for that school, and the people I had for professors. All very dear to me still to this day.

*(20:57)*

**Neil**: That's what we hope that an M.F.A experience is, right? Something that sticks with you the rest of your life, hopefully.

**John**: Yea..

**Neil**: Do you think having an education in information and systems design -- very handy, especially as we advanced in the 2000s. Do you feel like that has really informed your work now?

**John**: Yes, because my focus right now and always going forward would be inclusive design, it is tied into systems thinking and the processes that goes into that aspect of design. Information design definitely ties into accessibility, inclusive design. Information is trying to make information accessible. So it ends up being a constant through the work that I'm doing now. Where did you go for your master's degree?

**Neil**: So I went to the University of Tennessee at Knoxville.

**John**: Ok

**Neil**: What's really interesting about this is that you went to Rochester Institute of Technology and I grew up in upstate New York. So RIT was one of the colleges or universities that I looked into for an undergrad program. I didn't go. But it's funny. We probably saw each other at one point in the past and didn't even know it.

[laughter]

**John**: Yes, it's funny how things like that happen. It was meant to be that we would meet one other.

**Neil**: Absolutely. But, I too had the same immersive, impactful experience at UTK. So it's nice to hear that we had similar experiences. At what point did you have the ah hah moment that you thought, "You know what? Being a design educator might be for me"?

**John**: I wouldn’t necessarily say that there wasn't one moment in time when I thought I would do this. But because at that time Faith Fairbanks was teaching at VCU at that time, Ben Day was teaching at VCU at that time, and Rob Kyle was teaching there at the time. A whole way, set of people formed their own teaching was there when I was a student. I was in awe of them. Every time I saw Fairbanks, I got really nervous. I couldn't speak, I was so in awe of him. And Ben Day is the one I had for many different classes. His teaching has impacted me still to this day. They were my design heroes. They were the people that I looked up to. I could look at a design book and see a famous graphic designer and see the work that they do. But for me it was my teachers who were my design heroes. I wanted to be just like them. That's what really drew me in to design education.

Obviously, I like the academic scene. I just liked to be on campus and mingle and interact with different people. I’ve always liked that.

*(25:15)*

**Neil**: It is a really nice environment, especially for design.

**John**: Yes, I often tell people when they ask me what do I do for a living, I say I get to learn things for a living. I get to learn things and apply them to things I have done before and continue to develop my own understanding of different things and relate that back to my students.

**Neil**: That, to me, is one of the hallmarks of a true educator. Never stop learning, never stop synthesizing information, never stop bringing it and delivering it to your students.

**John**: Yes. I will say this too. The B.F.A. and the M.F.A. that I got from those two great schools was amazing. However though, all of the demos that I ever had in my courses at that time doesn’t applied to anything that I'm doing now. Because Photoshop and all those different softwares were so different back then. Design education and design in general has changed so much over the years, that what’s been taught back then has changed it’s course. And as a designer you have to keep learn different softwares and you have to learn different ways of designing. But what is most important above all is the timing and scopes, the way you think about the design problems, decisions thinking behind this, the typographic principles. Those are the things that should be in the forefront of the work that you're doing.

**Neil**: I couldn't agree more. After graduating, I want to ask, how did you get to where you are now at the University of Minnesota, Duluth?

**John**: Well that is a long story. [laughter] More time than what we have. I graduated in 2004 and it took me awhile to find a job. I did not go to working directly into design education at that time. The job that I got just happened to take me back to Richmond, Virginia. Where VCU is and I worked for a local design firm. That didn't work out so well. And when I left that job I decided to open my own freelance design business. I had no clients. The only thing that I had was a small Apple laptop computer. No printer or anything like that. All I had was software and my computer.

**Neil**: Oh wow! Humble beginnings.

**John**: Humble beginnings. So one of my professors that I had when I was in school was still teaching there. And I asked him, "I want to ask you about teaching. What can I do to get my foot in the door?” At that time, a professor by the name of Matt Woolman, he was the department head, he was one of my teachers as an undergrad. He said, “yeah that would be great. We'd love to have you. We think it's good that you're coming here and you got your undergrad degree here, but you got your master's degree somewhere else. That can give us a different point of view.”

*(30:06)*

I taught one class. One class became two. So on and so forth. I got an opportunity to teach at different schools after that. Right after I -- actually while I was teaching at VCU, I also began to teach at Virginia State University. So one day I taught at VCU and the next day I taught at VSU, Virginia State University. And that was a great experience. And then I got a part-time teaching job at Chowan University in North Carolina. That was a temporary, part-time appointment. And when that got done I moved on to a find a different teaching job and I just happened to make my way to Duluth.

**Neil**: Interesting. So that was a nice little arc.

**John**: Yes. So when I took the job, when I interviewed for the job, when I came for the interview, that was the first time I had ever been to Minnesota.

**Neil**: And what did you think?

**John**: I remembered, you know Duluth is right next to Lake Superior. So I was pretty excited to see it with my own eyes. So when the airplane was coming down to the airport in Duluth we flew over the lake. And the lake was frozen. I thought wow, that's ice down there. And then I saw tons of snow when I came here. That was in April, I came in April, like April 24 or something like that -- almost May when I came and there was ice on the lake. But I took the leap of faith and I came up here. Not only has it been great for my career, but if I'd never came here I'd have never met my wife.

**Neil**: Aw, so it's a love story too.

**John**: She's a B.F.A. grad of the department where I teach.

**Neil**: Is that where you all met?

**John**: No, we met online. Like most people these days. But it just happened to be that she graduated with a B.F.A from UMD. And she got her B.F.A. before the department was called Art and Design. At that time it was called the Department of Art.

**Neil**: I assume that you are working toward tenure and promotion.

**John**: Yes. I am, Every day.

[laughter]

**John**: Every minute, every second.

**Neil**: It's a marathon.

**John**: Yes, it is.

**Neil**: What has been your area of research and scholarship as you're working toward tenure?

**John**: The main theme of it is disability rights. In addition to my design work that I do, and teaching that I do, I'm an advocate for people with disabilities. Not just because I want to; Because I am a person with disabilities. Everything that I do in that regard I can relate a great deal to. To narrow down to the specific aspects of disabilities is what is called inclusive design. I look at how to design for the greater society. But also keep in mind that people have different abilities. These different abilities come in multiple forms. And to execute designs that considers that. And that would be principal in how to use that. So somebody with a different ability can use in the same way that everybody else can use it.

*(35:40)*

**Neil**: Inclusive design has definitely become a bit of a buzzword over the past... Decade I want to say.

**John**: Yes. Absolutely. There are three terms. There are three terms that relate to one another, but they're kind of different. That is accessibility, inclusive design, and universal design. A lot of times people ask me what are the difference between the three. The best way I can describe it is inclusive design is the process that we go through. Accessibility is the outcome that you hope for, that you want to achieve. Inclusive design principles are the things that you use in the inclusive design process. If I can elaborate on that even more.

**Neil**: Please…

**John**: I have come up with a term that keeps it all together. I call it Abilities Design. The main thing that we try to do is design for multiple abilities. So there are three different things that I just mentioned, for me come together, what I call Abilities Design.

**Neil**: So are you presenting on this anywhere, or writing about it anywhere?

**John**: Yes. I am in the process of writing people about it and the presentation I was going to give at the UCDA Design Educator Summit -- I'll also talk about that.

[laughter]

I'm making my way to different vendors and different people to talk about that. Because I think that there is some confusion about what each of those things are and how they relate to one another.

So I think that's the best way to describe it. I should say that the idea that inclusive design is the process and the accessibility is the outcome -- I did not come up with that. There is multiple people that are coming up with that. But what I have done, I have put it into a packet, which is called Abilities Design, of ways to talk about that. And the difference between those terms.

**Neil**: I would love to be in one of your classes when you're talking about this.

**John**: Well, my classes in the fall is going to be online. Maybe you could hop on.

**Neil**: So there’s a possibility.

**John**: So my presentation, I want to talk about that.

[laughter]

**Neil**: It looks like we're nearing the end of our interview. When are you heading up for tenure and promotion?

**John**: Had not the COVID-19 come about I would have gone up next fall. This is 2020. It would be the fall of 2021. However, because of the Coronavirus all the people on the tenure track at the University got the option of going one more year. I decided to take that. So it'll be two years from now.

**Neil**: So to everyone who's listening, this podcast was recorded in late June of 2020 after the spring semester of 2020, where half of the semester was online at most universities in the United States.

**John**: I'm afraid that won't make a difference of professors on the tenure track to ask them to do that. Because of just the fact that, for the time it's going to take to do the course prep to teach online. I had different conferences I was going to go to that were canceled. A lot of those things, if they could have happened, would definitely help my case for tenure. But since they didn't happen, through no fault of me, I'm just thankful that the University of MN system is doing that for us.

**Neil**: Absolutely. And kind of a nice thing now is that, hopefully, is that most of the conferences might still happen but you won't have to travel for them. All you will have to do is record your presentation and just upload it.

**John**: Yes. Yes. I definitely hope that the four conferences that will do that. It's kind of sad too, though because one of the best things I like about conferences is going to different places and meeting different people. So I know that's how you and I got to meet.

**Neil**: Yes…

**John**: I was going to go to your university this past spring and that got canceled and that is disappointing.

**Neil**: You're telling me!

[laughter]

**John**: I know it is even more disappointing that you were so involved in that and you were trying to get a group of people to come.

**Neil**: And this year's SECAC conference was going to be at VCU, which would have been a nice place to get together again and for you to visit your alma mater too.

**John**: Yes. I was going to be part of that. But it might not happen now. We'll see what happens.

**Neil**: Yes we will. Do you have any parting thoughts or any upcoming projects you'd like to talk about in the last couple of minutes?

**John**: Yes. I would like to talk about a very exciting project that I'm working on now. It's my focus of inclusive design and accessibility. And so as I mentioned before, that in addition to graphic design I also do photography. A lot of my photography is images of the urban landscape. A lot of my photographs are brick walls and cement ground and so on. And so they have a very rich and textural aspect to them. So I've been trying to find ways these past few years to blend my graphic design, my inclusive design, book design and my photography coming together. I want them to come together.

So I have the greater portion of a grant that I received a grant this past spring to make a photo book of my photography. But it's not going to be just any photo book. It's going to be designed so that person, or people who are blind can also experience this photography.

So the way that is going to happen is the photos are going to be printed in a method that they will be tactile. You can hover your hands and touch the surface of the photograph. You can feel the different bumps and lines in the photograph. And in addition to that, one of my friends is writing poems for each of the photographs. And in the book the poems are going to describe the themes, the ideas behind the photographs, the motive of the photograph. So the person who is blind can use the braille to read it. They will get a good understanding of the photograph. And so in the design process in the brainstorming of the project they recognize, the printer, my friend and myself we realized there are people who are blind, but they can read braille. So we will have my friend read out loud the poems that she will write and we’re going to record that. And we’re going to save the recordings on a thumb drive. They're going to make a pocket in the book, so that someone can take the thumb drive, put it into their computer and they can hear the poems being read out loud to them as they go through the book and when they feel the imagery with their hands.

**Neil**: That is a brilliant way to experience a book and to make it universally accessible.

**John**: Obviously because the book is going to be tactile, the person who is blind or has low vision can benefit from that the most. But persons who have sight can also experience the book in their own way. They can take their hand and feel the imagery with their hands. They can put their hands on the braille and feel what that feels like. It’s really about user experience. Trying to make the best experience possible for everybody, regardless of what abilities they have.

A lot of the times when you think about accessibility you think about web design, web accessibility. Everyone knows now that the experience on the web is one part of life. We come into contact with physical things. People are blind, people who have disabilities of all kinds. They have to go out. They have to buy food. They have to buy… They have to survive outside of the web. So I'm very interested in trying to make other forms of web design accessible.

**Neil**: Well I'm hoping, or, well I know that you will be a trailblazer in that area.

**John**: The one thing I can say is, regardless whether it's me or anybody else, it needs to be done. We need to talk more about disability rights. We need to talk more about accessibility. Not just for people with disabilities, but for people with all abilities. Now I think given that things are beginning to be more online, like classes, and conferences are going to be more online. So accessibility is very, very important good work, and this needs to be done.

**Neil**: Agreed. 100%. Alright. Well we're at the end of our interview. Thank you very much John, for spending time with me today.

**John**: Yes, thank you for having me.

This concludes Season 2, Episode 9 of Tell it to Neil. If any of the facts or information included in this episode are incorrect, please feel free to get in touch through our email, hello@tellittoneil.com. If you would like to get in touch with John please contact him through e-mail at jloneill@d.umn.edu.