ALTERNATIVE MODES OF TEACHING FOR A CRITICAL DESIGN PRACTICE IN GRAPHIC DESIGN

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Topic(s): From the arts and culture into design education

Keywords: Criticality, Emancipation, Alternative Research

ABSTRACT:

Education has moved significantly into service-driven teaching – numbers of students and staff reflecting this development. However, besides seeing this discipline as a problem solving facilitator for various industries, design as a practice is also critical commentary, independent production or even programmatic resistance. The paper seeks to show, how graphics education can cater for the development of critical capacities. The author's practical experiences leading the unit "System-Design Class" at the Academy of Visual Arts Leipzig, Germany, form the basis of this critical assessment of potentials and strategies in graphic design education, set up to develop a "community of learning". Cedric Price's "Doubt, Delight and Change" is emblematic for this experimental and discursive approach: engaging with the full capacities of (graphic) design in as a non-affirmative mode of practical responses to our environment and how they can and must be developed in the implicated institutional framework of a college or university.

Why, one wonders, seems to be there such discrepancy between the enormous potential of graphic design in its educational mediation – and the reality of its mainstream institutional practice? In the following paper I will first be sketching out some contextual points that underline the capacity of design to transform and produce powerful cultural impulses for any society. And after a short assessment and critique of the shortcomings of recent educational practices I will outline some concrete policies and strategies that could prove instrumental in improving graphic design education into an emancipatory programme that creates a "new community of learning". In

that I will be drawing from my own experiences of setting up an experimental design-teaching unit at the Academy of Visual Arts Leipzig, Germany.

Graphic design is a great profession. It is flexible, since it doesn't share the sometimes stifling complexities and hindering timeframes of related disciplines, say, architecture. Its tools require less investment and are now imbedded (both positively and negatively) in a shared pool of democratic amateur practice. What practitioners in the mid 90s were lamenting (that standards would drop and well-trained professional expertise would be lost forever) proved only to be true in very few minor sectors. But it did produce a greater awareness of the wider public for graphics and its elements. Of course, most of this contact is based on decorative graphics coffee-table-books, and yet, since design D-I-Y and participatory devices have turned out so popular in the cultural sector, and self-publishing for instance, it most certainly has popularized basic knowledge about typography and layout. Unlike art, graphics can also interact with us very directly (and everywhere) through its manifestations, such as its many forms of analogue and digital publication or narrative environments, like exhibitions or commercial and cultural spaces in an often non-elitist manner. It can speak to us in a problem solving way that helps us to navigate in a world that seems often overtaxing – and by the same token can make us think and question our perception of this world through the odd twist in the use of graphic codes, a criticality that is not the mere potential of fine art. This enormously widened scope for graphic design practice and its discourses is only beginning to be recognised by the educational institutions. New forms of jobs and professional profiles have been worked into new courses – although, most of them have not allowed the appropriate depth and level of critical reflection as part of the courses – because of the commercial mindset and the disconnect of college management level with educational and discipline's vital academic and practical discourses.

1. ALTERNATIVE FUTURES:
Educational programmes are per se concerned about the future (because of their youthful attendees and the idea of preparing for years and situations

that are still to come) – but design schools are connected to the future even more so, since the practice to design, to conceive, to project and imagine beyond existing and established realms is one of the foundation for its instrumental role in civilisation.

In a strictly consumeristic sense: its power to innovate and, therefore, create new markets with new customers, is explaining its rise amongst cultural techniques in today's late Capitalist Western world. However, also its critical capacity to comment and imagine, as a tool of practical speculation, is pivotal. It can form either a "Utopian impulse" or "Utopian programme", as Fredric Jameson has distinguished between. Not only were graphic forms vehicles and expressions of great Utopian projects, like Thomas Moore's 1516 Utopia that came for instance with a new and different Alphabet (!) or Edwin A Abbott's futuristic satire "Flatland" (1880) that was set in strange worlds of different dimensions, some only inhabited by lines, or triangles – speculative graphics in their own right can power our imagination, too! By blurring the lines between reality and possibility, they can make us believe. Graphics for objects that do not exist, or messages that have not yet been authorised, become portals to worlds that might yet be ours soon. "It will turn out that the world has long dreamt of that ¬– of which it had only to have a clear idea to possess it really." (1) Design is immediately future and its very manifestation. This grey area of Utopian or Dystopian potential, Uchronian (Alternative-History) alternative or propagandistic / commercial mirage is a fascinating field that still needs more research and exploration. When I was a student, "unrealized" projects seemed, of course, utterly undesireable – and today, the stigma of dead thoughts and visuals sitting in a plan-chest still prevails, for understandable reasons. Nevertheless, one must change the perspective on "unrealised" projects. And develop, also in non-corporate realms, ways to utilize speculative (graphic) design in the capacity of "Visual Thinktanks".

2. COURSES: COMMODITIES WITH SHORT 'SELL-BY-DATES'

Sadly, though, the focus in many developments in design education in the last decades has been on very different matters, not long-term strategies but short term exploits of Angst of unemployment. If one takes a look at arts education in the UK and many of the Anglo-Saxon developments have often

filtered down to other parts of the world, too, a few years after) there are plenty of reasons to be concerned. Yes, of course, there are occasionally innovative exceptions. And there are passionate teachers at work. However, the nature of the agreement between teacher and student, the nature of their complicity, has been altered significantly. The relationship student to teacher – a delicate relationship anyway – which should be characterized by trust, rapport in the exchange of knowledge and an accompaniment during a "becoming" – has been broadly replaced by a business relationship between teacher and customer – the relationship has basically been turned into a financial transaction. Joint exploration with some Spiel, a quest coupled with a sense of community, has been replaced by a purely service- and short-term-skills-driven idea of education. Since I got seriously involved into teaching myself, since 1999, most colleges have taken the direction of higher fees, less available teaching hours for tutors, higher number of students, often reduced availability of facilities, increasingly precarious contractual conditions for teaching staff (only on 1-term-contracts), just to name a few aspects. Also the recruitment of students has taken a frivolous turn. And it is important to point out, since we are here in Hong-Kong, that the practice of UK-based design colleges to recruit specifically in the Asian region, not at least because oversee fee-rates, has taken it's toll on educational ethics and principles, too. And it is not because of the abilities, or non-abilities, of the students that sign-up for the courses (!), but the solely mercantile reasons and the methods of recruitment that have become very questionable in parts. However important I think it is to mention these economical (and hence political) circumstances of educational conditions and that we need a debate about the fee-based model and the consequences the accumulation of enormous dept is having programmatically on the course programmes, I like to focus on another point. I'm keen to return to the effects precisely these developments have had, not on the economical situation of students, but on the contents of design practise within and outside design education. Because the hyper-modular structure of courses has produced an efficiency-focused, result-driven work-process. To an extend that other forms of design work that are crucial to produce non-repetitive, innovative and original output needs are subsequently phased out in favour of a project-management orientated work ethos – which, of course, is an important aspect that should feature in the skill development, but not dominate in the way it does

currently. Ironically, it is exactly the management of time, or rather the protection of time, that is pivotal in securing not-result-driven but research-driven (theory and practice) from frequent assaults by cutters. These rather "in-effective" phases are instrumental. However, even more often in the daily routine of professional studios, the risk-taking phases that are set up to truly explore venues beyond variations of reliable, decent and professional formulas are the first victims of most practices, when they start dealing with an increased number of projects – and become victims too: victims of their own success. Only if a reflective yet speculative method with a certain level of risk-taking has become a familiar part of one's own process through college education, graduates will consider this a normal and necessary, not negotiable beyond a certain point, part of their work, not a mere fancy luxury item with connotations of playfully-romantic college life. We have re-address this, build these components as reflective practice into our curriculums and designers' minds, even if their effects will not always be immediately visible. Most of us have grown up – or even have been educated in design schools ourselves, when some inspirational examples included practitioners, that were able to sustain a very long successful career over numerous decades, i.e. English graphic designers like Alan Fletcher of Pentagramm, the typographers Ken Garland and Richard Hollis. However, it seems rather doubtful, that the structure of the current course structures will promote the development of individual approaches that could replicate some aspects of these long-lasting success stories as model. Because speculation is in a post-Modernist (in the literal sense of the word) more needed than ever to establish new visual and strategies for "staying in business as trouble-makers" (Norman Potter).

Alternatives to art and design schools must not only be thought in a political paradigm, although political aspects are always implicit. There is the curious case in which, in the not so far away history joint efforts were made to demand improvements to schooling without falling into ideological traps: the extraordinary rebellion of the students of Hornsey-College in North London in 1969 stands, in times of political upheaval in the rest of Europe, for a interestingly-self-centred fight for plainly a better art school with a better and more sincere programme. Students had occupied the college over a period of three weeks managing – and learning – a wealth of discursive

practices and activities that would even enable them to communicate their aims to the local and wider public and the press, besides organising simply the survival of them in the main building. The impressive record and various reports and diaries were even published in a book by Penguin – and a film by John Goldsmith (Granada TV), both a year after it had been closed down, conveniently not re-admitting students to their college after the summer vacations. The film's title does reflect the true emancipatory spirit of the activities: "Our Life Experiment Is Worth More Than Three Thousand Textbooks!"

3. ACTIVATING A "COMMUNITY OF LEARNING" IN DESIGN

So how can one develop concrete what I would call "educational situations" or formats, in which programmatic statements aim to produce insights, affects and effects? Since my appointment to head the Klasse System-Design (System-Design Class) at the Graphic-Design-Diploma course in Leipzig, Germany, I've been testing and refining a set of alternative forms for a "Community of Learning" in this class. I will try to introduce you to a few of these formats. In my unit about twenty to thirty students from the 3rd, 4th and 5th year are studying together – not separated by years – on a range of projects various nature, before they start with their final project and thesis, which they would eventually graduate with. One can perhaps define three fields that encompass the various practices in my class:

1 Permanent Change
2 Design as Self-Reflexive Methodology of Practice
3 Learning through Teaching

1 PERMANENT CHANGE

In my unit we have a fluidity of students and, hence, of experiences. We do not distinguish between students who just joined the unit and students who are already with us for a year or two. Furthermore, in each academic year and semester, new topics and, most importantly teaching formats and idea for knowledge production and transfer are used – and tested. It is a programme of permanent transformation that challenges the students to be an active part, the teacher even more so, since it requires permanent renewal of programme. I consider the class an environment of change, in the

sense the great architect and educator Cedric Price spoke of: "Doubt, Delight and Change." This precisely is a guiding motto of the class. It is about an engagement with the full capacities of (graphic) design in as a non-affirmative mode of practical responses to our environment and how they can and must be developed into our institutional framework.

2 DESIGN AS SELF-REFLEXIVE METHODOLOGY OF PRACTICE

We combine work that one could describe as academic, or even artistic, in Lifeprojects, projects that are realised together with external cooperation partners, companies or institutions. We mix the sublime with the filthy, if one wants to put it with a touch of irony. That of course, is intensive if not exhausting. In a recent project, for instance, we have engaged in the parallel development of two visual identities for two different institutions over the period of the last 1 ½ years. These identities are implemented as we speak. One is for the regional museum of art and history in Görlitz with a collection of national significance, a German town at the Polish border, the other one for a top government-funded scientific Tropospheric research facility, the Leipzig Leibniz institute that researches particles in clouds. Both institutions couldn't be more different from each other, in their fields, in their professional profile, the personalities of the staff, their location and visual output and communication. Cultural History vs Science. But it is precisely that dialectic relationship that is producing a permanent fruitful exchange and comparison of practice for us as their collaborators. Of course, the practical and professional requirements to produce an innovative and progressive, visually stimulating high-quality visual identity programme for these institutions are already rewarding for an educational unit to work on. However, it is exactly the speculative research component, I have explained previously, that is also a key part of our approach. More research, more going side-ways, more explorations into the unknown – in an altogether substantial proportion. A complete necessity for the development of an identity – but as we know, it is a more regular occurrence to skip this and go straight to a practical graphic response and concentrate on formal variations of established themes. Our more in depth and more speculative approach as a "Visual Thinktank" I have communicated and also negotiated with our partners, as there are also financial implication to an extended project. And

it has been accepted and implemented. We're challenging proportions of professional standards and are setting new rigorous standards in our practical work that can and should be extended into the graduates' professional lives.

3 LEARNING THROUGH TEACHING

The component of our unit that is perhaps the most decisive, if not the one with the most radical potential, is the frequent experimental use of teaching through students themselves. It is based on the premise of emanzipation of learning, and on an idea of the equality of minds. It takes inspiration from the famous story of the French teacher Joseph Jacotot (1770–1840), as told by the philosopher Jacques Ranciere in "The Ignorant Schoolmaster – Five Lessons in Intellectual Emancipation", in which he uses Jacotot's case to discuss alternatives to hierarchical structures in education. Jacotot, a French instructor who is teaching his Flemish students he cannot understand. It is a promise that one can also teach a subject that one is not in control about, one doesn't know about (yet). It is the Utopian and yet practical idea that through alertness and complicity, not hierarchical knowledge distribution. It fundamentally challenges the Idea of the teacher, replaces it with the equality of minds. Because a distinctly hierarchical situation takes place even in, say, the dialogical 'questions instead of answers' Socratic approach! I have turned my students frequently into teachers tapping into their knowledge and making them understand their own practice, the mediation of it and the political and social power and mechanics of teaching. I have developed projects in which a group of my students were teaching school children about design and were doing workshops together with 15-year-olds. This experimental contact I consider vital.

The project, which perhaps sums up my approach best is "Speed-Teaching". Developed in Leipzig, I have used and varied the format also at workshops at the non-institutional Artschool/UK project in London and in Malmö. I had initially devised and realized the set-up with my students for college-internal sessions with students from the 1st year. These were intended to introduce the new students to the senior-tutors and Professors, who would usually give a talk about their own professional practice. However, I decided to make my

class part of this conversation, consider them and our class-community part of my practice. The tables of teaching were turned – and hierarchies altered. We called it "Speed- Teaching" since it borrows the key mechanics from the speed-dating format: my students (3rd, 4th or 5th years) would have the newcomers sitting opposite them. One-to-one, face-to-face. At this occasion tables, and chairs, would be arranged in either a long line, or alternatively, in a circular setting. In 5-minute intervals each student would talk to the person facing him – about his chosen and very specific topic, teach a method, devise an exercise. Then a sound would highlight the end of each 7 minute-session and the 1st-year-students would move in clockwise direction to the next seat. One of the key purposes of this project is the transfer of knowledge from person to person, from student to student. Transfer of really useful (!) or insightful things about design, graphics, the internal workings and the players of the college. In short: pieces of information, it takes each student a couple of years to accumulate. The topics are developed by the "student-teachers" and prior to the event jointly adjusted to produce a diverse and inspirational selection of different approaches for the guests to encounter. Some of them are of a contextual nature, supplying insider information about the college or in-official workshops opening times or idiosyncrasies of the staff and technicians, others offered unashamedly practical advice to a precise micro-typographical situation – which are for instance the right quotation marks to use in which situation? – or technical IT skills, or introduce a personal selection of key literature in visual culture, or offer a quick exercise on a manual or vocal skill, or facilitate a chat about a specific topic between "teacher" and "student". Teaching material, props to demonstrate or other devices are prepared prior and be used in each mini-session, been handed out. Since the set-up involves only student-to-student-teaching the strategy is to, occasionally, make good use of the fact, that we did cut out the middle-man, the "official" tutor, and teach things a member of teaching staff wouldn't know too much about, but the students would. What useful information could take a guest with him after that session? What comes across as an entertaining and "emotionally-intelligent", socially-driven format of student interaction is at the core a purposefully self-edited "publication of knowledge" through the frame of design (students). The charming multiplicity of the offering is only superseded by the utter resourcefulness of this setting. The "teacher" must permanently assess his

potential – and his shortcomings: a light-hearted attempt towards Ranciere's equality of minds (2).

MORE HARD WORK – AND DELIGHTS

Despite the heavily contested area that is design education, it is not only a crisis of economical and political conditions it is also a crisis of ideas. However, to develop sustainable alternatives it is necessary to provide departments with teaching positions, in which designers / teachers can operate and develop concepts and formats that invigorate a "Community of Learning", that includes all members of staff (!) and students! That explicitly involves members of staff that are not teachers but who are important contributors and supporters of students work and activity. Schools are not only places to network with future decision-makers, that provide students with c.v. material that promises the right argument at a interview or customer-based, user-centred skills-transfer. They're also the places and laboratories where all participants must explore the discursive and social components of design, that are the newly discovered integral parts of this discipline. Not only art has discovered the transformative power that is inherent in participatory strategies and real research of real situations though imagination, speculation and risk-taking. Design, because of its popular approach is much more able to bring it to realms and people that fine art struggles to reach. Yet, to paraphrase Karl Valentin, "Design is wonderful, but it's a lot of hard work." We need a closer connection of teaching and practice, and visual think-tanking with non-result-driven design work. By doing so we might be able to re-connect this discipline with notions, that could be considered intrinsically entrepreneurial yet critically sensitive to dilemmas and necessary conflicts. These frictions are part of a practical design discourse that needs the speculative to find back either to a Utopian impulse, or at least to the gesture of active creative citizenship.

REFERENCES

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