

STUDENTS AS AGENTS OF CHANGE

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ABSTRACT:

This paper will explore the value and educational significance of a project based curriculum model drawing on my experience as director of a Graphic Design program at Malmö University in Sweden. Over the past seven years in cooperation with students, academic colleagues and employers we have developed and delivered a project based approach which builds on industry identified assignments undertaken by groups of students who work together to respond to the assignments provided. The assignments feed on collaborative openness and require students with support to interpret the brief and come up with viable responses appropriate to all parties. As well as exploring the value of this approach for learners, employers and as a HE curriculum model the paper will also consider the benefits it offers students in negotiating the transition from HE to employment.

Keywords: Cooperation, Transition, Reconfiguration

1. INTRODUCTION

In his book *Together*, Richard Sennett talks about the decline of cooperation. He then goes on to talk about the necessity of cooperation and the importance of cooperation being “an earned experience rather than just thoughtless sharing” (Sennett, 2012) the reason being that in life “we prize what we have struggled to achieve” (Sennett, 2012). Since this takes some effort, rehearsal is necessary in his view and we rehearse by going through motions of ritual. Ritual makes way for cooperation since “ritual enables expressive cooperation in religion, in the workplace, in politics and in community”. I would like to add: in education.

As teachers in HE we are trained in constructive alignment but holistic assessment is often neglected (Biggs, 2003).

The aim of this paper is to apply Sennett’s conceptual framework to a practice-based course given at Malmö University. A step-by-step exploration of what dynamics are at play and how the students experience continues to develop understanding of their role in a design project and what role they play in society. I want to suggest that students occupy a dual role. By being both Agents of Change as well as graphic designer the students are stretching the traditional view of what a designer is. Cooperation is a skill and like any other skill it needs practice and repetition. In this paper I suggest a model of

working with students and clients that offers an arena for negotiating transition from HE to industry and the practice of cooperation skills.

Rhythm and ritual are important factors for Sennett and this gives me the framework for experiences I have had, in my role as course director, over the last seven years. Further, I would like to argue that this educational setting contributes to widening participation since the experience is new to all the students and therefore it is an equal starting field (Sellar and Storan, 2013). No one brings prior knowledge to how this is done even if several students have top academic grades when applying to the program. Nothing in earlier training or education has prepared them for these kinds of assignments when it comes to cooperation. They stand firmly in their field of Graphic design but can lack skills in cooperation.

During the project the necessity for cooperation forms and it has been helpful to link the design process to the concept of repairing which Sennett refers to. Repairing he explains, takes place on three levels: restoration, remediation & reconfiguration (Sennett, 2012). I will further elaborate on this model of thought when I discuss Sennett's ideas in the section on this theoretical framework.

2. TRANSITION TO THE INDUSTRY

In order to survive in the industry a graphic designer needs skills far beyond the subject of the field. Today you do not apply for work instead you take part in creating it. The subject graphic design is nothing in itself. This realization emerges slowly in the students. The first year is color, typography, illustration etc. This is all good and well but in order to truly become a graphic designer in collaboration with society you have to use your creative skills to say something. By this I mean, use negotiating skills and take part in a project while it is still forming so that design thinking can have impact.

3. COMMUNICATION, MANIPULATION OF INFORMATION

Graphic design is first and foremost communication. By this I mean manipulation of information (Flusser, 1983). When this understanding rises in the students, the next question is what are we to communicate. It is now that education becomes interesting. What kind of situations can you expose your students to in order to foster critical thinking and problem solving at the same time. Traditionally this has been looked upon as two very different approaches the first being scholarly and the second being the professional approach. In order to think and act this way the students need exposure to industry reality. As teachers we need to show them how to navigate, spot obstacles and think on their feet as problem solvers. This is very different than traditional assignments with a clear task. Research precedes the actual design process since the subject matter is unknown territory. The students are guided through this process and a methodical and systematic approach is encouraged. They train in the field and in real time, with clients in society and use the classroom as home base for reflection and guidance. Through this they play a role in society and rehearse their professional role. Critical reflection becomes a necessity if they want to play the part of creative partner rather than the hired help. During the process the students become more comfortable with change, and become less

hesitant in terms of taking action. They do not await instructions instead they start to create instructions of their own, the brief. By this, the curriculum becomes a negotiated curriculum.

4. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

According to Sennett (2012), there are three ways to perform a repair: making a damaged object appears just like new, improving its operation, or altering it all together. He translates these three strategies in to what he calls "technical jargon": restoration, remediation and reconfiguration (Sennett, 2012).

The first is governed by the objects original state. The act of reconstruction requires certain modesty, the designer think of him and her-self as an instrument of the past, restore to what was (Sennett, 2012; 212-214).

The second substitutes better parts or material while preserving an old form. In remediation the presence of the craftsman is there, this is to say that remediation challenges the craftsman to consider different means to achieving the same end. Remediation requires inventory skills, which is knowledge of the alternatives available. For substitution and the ability to insert these possible applications into an existing object (Sennett, 2012; 212-214).

The third re-imagines the form and use of the object in the course of fixing it. Technically, reconfiguration is the most radical kind of repair. The broken objects serves as an occasion to make the object different than it was before, in function as well as in form. Improvisation is key to radical repairs of this sort, they often occur through small, surprising changes which turn out to have larger implications. Improvisation occurs in exploring the connections between smaller repairs and their large consequences (Sennett 2012; 212-214).

In his writing on cooperation he refers to the ritual aspect. In exploring the practice of letting students meet critique in a public place, I have come to realize that the ritual of the displacement, the transition from classroom/school to a public setting creates a transition. This transition that facilitates the grooming, the transfer from student awaiting instructions to Agents of Change creating well-grounded instructions for their own work. The ritual aspect comes from setting a stage, creating an arena where this can take place.

5. THE PROGRAM: GRAPHIC DESIGN AT K3, MALMÖ UNIVERSITY

The Bachelor program, Graphic design at K3 uses real client assignments as a pedagogical method in various ways. Our students go into the industry after graduation and this can be seen as an indicator that this approach is working. Graphic design is a young subject as an academic field and faculty originate from the industry background for the most part. It has been important for us to point out similarities rather than differences when it comes to research methods and theory as used in design practice and scholarly work. One of the arguments in this paper is that the design process is very similar to research work and as a consequence there are transferable skills and knowledge to be realized which can aid the transition from HE to employment.

6. THE COURSE GRAPHIC DESIGN 3, GD3

The course is given in the fall semester, 2nd year when the students return after summer break. The first ten weeks they are occupied by the project. They have parallel courses so they have to balance and administer their time well. The level of the assignment is crucial. It has to fit the timeframe and be complex enough. It has to have a clear aim and yet, it must be open for interpretation and negotiation. The complexity allows the students to create, through cooperation, their own brief rather than being handed one. The problems they are asked to solve, communicate by graphic design, have no given solution and here in lays the complexity and learning opportunity.

It is important to point out that I undertake this journey together with my students. I do not know what the end result will be. The difference between me and my students is that I have been down this road before, I do know that if they put one foot in front of the other, do their work and research it thoroughly, the design process will take them there. To tell students to trust the process does not reach very far. But if they can in fact experience what trusting the process mean they are less frightened next time they are asked to enter unknown territory. It is this complexity that the students initially experience as very frustrating and confusing. At the end of the course they have overcome their doubts and present solutions beyond both their own and the clients expectations. Over the years I have presented a wide range of projects to my students but the course structure remains the same. I start out by explaining the structure, a structure that is meant to guide them through the design process. Every year I get the same question:

But, what is it that you expect us to do?

7. CRITICAL ENGAGEMENT

In Sweden, graphic design has, traditionally been taught as an artistic subject but with a strong concern with the needs of industry. Up until twenty years ago graphic design was confined to private schools. It is only during the past ten years that graphic design has made its way into public HE. Therefore it is academically a new subject with all that that entails. In order to make students see the parallels with scholarly work we stress method and theory and try to instill a clear sense of why. It is fine to rely on feeling and intuition as long as you can take a step back and analyze, backtrack what you have done and document the choices that you have made. This is how knowledge is created and training to do so comes via the design process. It is the responsibility of each designer to identify the decisive moments of the design process. When this is done you have your map.

In a larger perspective this corresponds with the demands on HE to be a stakeholder in societal change. In Sweden where HE education is funded by taxpayers it is of importance that a program can show proof that such work actually takes place.

8. THE MODEL

This is a model that can be applied on very different subject matters and it will take the pressure if it is thoroughly introduced. It is a mixture of what I have picked up over the years as valid components for group work. It is in it self a way to navigate through the design-process, to create a feeling of taking one step at the time even if you are actually all over the place.

8.1. THE LAYOUT AND STRUCTURE OF THE COURSE IS PRESENTED.

Just by going over the practical things of when and where, gives the students a framework of what is expected of them. This framework will scatter once the assignment is given and confusion and frustration sets in.

8.2. THE CLIENT PRESENTS THE ASSIGNMENT.

Depending on the project, a long period of planning precedes the actual introduction of the assignment. The pre planning is already in place, performed by the course coordinator. The more effort you put in to pre planning the more value you can create for your students. That way you have minimized the surprises when the actual client enters the room to let every- one know what the assignment is. Surprises will come along the way anyway.

8.3. THE BELBIN TEST IS PERFORMED

The Belbin-test, created by Meredith Belbin, is widely used in many ways and forms when group work is introduced. The benefits are that focus is transformed from skills to behavior. How to act in collaboration with others is a skill in it self as stated by Sennett. In order to come to grips with your own behavior in negotiating what to do by when, the team roles created by Belbin is a useful tool (Belbin, 2003).

8.4. THE GROUPS ARE CONSTRUCTED BASED ON THE TEST.

According to the Belbin instructions you then form the groups. In design classes you will have a lot of plants and shapers therefor it is essential to put a great deal of effort in to creating the groups.

8.5. THE GROUPS FORMULATE A CONTRACT AND A TIMELINE

Each group then analyzes the roles and decides what parts to play in creating a solution to the problem delivered by the client. This is also the time to draw up a group contract, and by doing so discuss what is expected behavior. A timeline is constructed and is shaped by dates of completion, tutoring sessions and client meetings.

8.6. TUTORING

Tutoring in this context is very much like a meeting with a project manager rather than a person who will bring answers. The tutoring takes place to help the group come up with answers and is performed

in a coaching manor. Depending on the timeframe of the project, x-number of sessions will be planned ahead of time and these dates are kept.

8.7. CLIENT MEETING WITH CONSTRUCTIVE FEEDBACK

Midway there is a client presentation and constructive critique by the client. This is the first opportunity the students have to test, read between the lines, and actually negotiate where the final presentation will land.

8.8. TUTORING

Again, depending on the timeframe of the project, x-number of tutoring sessions take place to finalize the concept and the presentation.

8.9. FINAL PRESENTATION TO CLIENT

This presentation is not as final as it might appear in the student's minds; a lot of negotiation takes place in a final presentation if vigilance is performed to everything that is being said. In Flussers terms this is communication in the shape of dialogue that enriches the information with new information.

8.10. THE PROJECT HAS A PUBLIC DISPLAY

The public display can be a book, an exhibition, a campaign, an action or a public presentation. The difference from an examination in a classroom is that the public setting has its own rules. The discussion has its own life and the comments are not following prewritten criteria, as a classroom examination is likely to do. 8.9 and 8.10 secures that the students undergo a holistic and analytic assessment (Biggs, 2003).

8.11. DECISIVE MOMENTS IN THE DESIGN PROCESS ARE IDENTIFIED

Throughout the process each student keep a logbook. It is of great importance to document every design decision. This is now analyzed and each one can identify decisive moments in their own process, the process that the group has gone through and how this coincides with collaboration.

8.12. EXAMINATION

Since this is a course with learning outcomes an examination takes place with each group, their work and a discussion about the presentation and the public display.

The logbook again plays a crucial part. Process and collaboration is being assessed not only the final product.

9. ANALYZING THE RESULTS

So how can we make use of three aspects of repair that Sennett is talking about: restoration, remediation and reconfiguration? As Sennett has indicated, in restoration the designer thinks of him or herself as an instrument. In graphic design terms this would be: taking the clients assignment, solving

it in a fashion that assignments like this are usually solved. Looking at your graphic design as the channel. You take the message, the product, the service on the one hand and the target group at the other. You channel the message in a graphical suitable manor choosing color, typeface and maybe images. This is how the first year classes are taught and good practice, design history, color theory and visual communication is the toolbox. This is all well and good but in todays industry you need a whole lot more to survive. You have to present something to the client that he or she could not have envisioned before your presentation. You have to take your thoughts and your action to the next level, what Sennett calls remediation.

In remediation the presence of the craftsman is there, this is to say that remediation challenges the craftsman to consider different means to achieving the same end. For a graphic designer today the means to an end are limitless. You no longer have to rely on the printed material; there are so many ways and channels to communicate today. But you do not simply choose a channel even though your client might press for one. Remediation requires inventory skills, which is knowledge of the alternatives available.

What I really like to see my students do is to re-imagine the form and use of the object/message or service. Sennett identifies reconfiguration as the most radical kind of repair. The broken objects serves as an occasion to make the object different than it was before, in function as well as in form. Improvisation is key to radical repairs of this sort; they often occur through small, surprising changes that turn out to have larger implications. Improvisation occurs in exploring the connections between smaller repairs and their large consequences, he argues. For a graphic designer this is to understand the effect of what you are doing. What a certain campaign may put into motion and what it really is that the client envisions. A client may have a vision of the final product/service but very seldom any idea of the effects that are produced by this.

The course where this can take place becomes the arena for the transition to take place.

The hands on approach does not make it less scholarly, instead it creates a grounded scholarship, grounded scholarship that grows out of a negotiated curriculum. This aspect of education is under-theorized and the discussion on cooperation presented by Sennett has created a framework for my thoughts and experiences made by my students and I. Some parts of this has been discussed by others, Kenneth A. Bruffee, for example, talks about iterated social imbrication. Bruffee describes in Collaborative Learning, Higher education, Interdependence and the Authority of Knowledge, the process that occurs when authority is transferred from the teacher to collaborative groups that has a clear assignment so solve. This is related in many ways but the main objective: a clear assignment to solve creates an illusion of there being an answer just waiting to be found. Therefore the writings of Sennett is much more applicable on a course like the one described in this paper.

10. CONCLUSION

In this paper I argue that the students become Agents of Change. They take part in events and construct questions and ideas that have effect. In order to reach this goal it is necessary to create

assignments that are open enough, complex enough so that they do not stop at the first level of fixing. Solving a problem of communication by graphic design by researching underlying question why this needs to be done in the first place. Analyzing what effect can come from this. Since the assignments in this course are vague and the same frustration surface in the beginning of the course, every year, it is of important that whoever gives the course has a firm belief in the design process and/or scholarly work. The similarities between scholarly work and a more professional approach are being stressed.

An education in graphic design produces graphic designers. Also important is the ability to act and cooperate with fellow designers, experts from other fields with the competence that you lack. Skills to read your client comes from listening, an important part of cooperation as described by Sennett. By the reconfiguration the students start to believe that they do have knowledge, that they know how to research and analyze and therefor are more confident when presenting a solution to a client. The client is impressed by how things have evolved and is very likely the repeat the contact. Some students go on to cooperate with clients long after the course is finished and relations to build on are formed.

In putting the examination of the project on display, letting it take place in a public forum students encounter the opportunity to meet all kinds of comments and critique. The gains are many. As an educator you put yourself on display and by necessity the process of assessment becomes transparent. The unexpected will happen. All the above mentioned are gains and benefits of the model:

- Creating questions and ideas that have effect and societal impact
- Through open and yet complex assignments students acquire negotiation skills
- A familiarity of the design process by identifying decisive moments
- Understanding of the similarities between scholarly work and professional approach
- Cooperation with co-designers and/or other fields
- Network is being built
- Displacement of examination creates transparency
- Students take active role in society

If you are aiming at reconfiguration in Sennetts terms this is what to be expected. The work presented by the students goes beyond the client's expectations. I would dare to say that what the students do is exercising critical thinking transformed to visual statements. In that they go beyond their subject, graphic design, and take an active role in society. The transformation that occurs, the feeling that they possess knowledge and can communicate it in a new form, gives them self-confidence. The fact that the course evens the starting field, since none of the students has experienced this before, gives everyone equal opportunity. In order to educate students that will have an impact in the world we need to realize that we may in fact educate Agents of Change.

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