# A FRUITFUL CONFRONTATION:

# REPORT FROM AN EDUCATIONAL EXPERIMENT COMBINING THEORY AND PRACTICE

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## ABSTRACT

A competitive global market and research based product development has made it necessary for the designer to cooperate with scholars from other fields and take part in a written discourse. The methods of the academic disciplines are unavoidable. The question at stake is how to adapt and teach them.

The paper gives a survey of a teaching project with the intention to expand the limits of the profession's existing traditions. The exam consisted of a practical project and a written task, which should be related to each other. The majority of the students found it a positive challenge. The main success factors have been cooperation between teachers with different competence, discussions with the students, and openness to new approaches.

Design practice builds on different ways of acting than academic methods. The project has shown that a fruitful confrontation might serve to transform the latter into a helpful professional tool.

Keywords: Teaching methods   Adaptation of academic methods   Written discourse

# 1 BACKGROUND

The requirements to a designer's competence are in a state of transition. Working globally and for a world market has made it necessary to know and understand different cultures and values, and to reflect critically on the role of the designer from various perspectives. The increasingly competitive situation has led to a strong emphasis on innovation and research. This has enhanced the need for research competence, and the ability to cooperate with scholars and professionals from other fields. It has become necessary to possess the competence to work and communicate not only by ways of concrete product development, but also by linguistic terms, and to take part in a written discourse. This is contradictory to the profession's traditions, which are mainly based on learning by doing and a discourse via making products (Dunin-Woyseth and Michl 2001).

The altered situation has put great demands on the institutions of higher education, which have not yet been fulfilled. During the last decades many of them have been amalgamated with academic institutions and been rather brutally academizised, due to political demands of larger units and international standardization, according to the Lisbon Convention (Lisboakonvensjonen 1997). Additionally, it has been stated that all teaching in higher education should be based on research. In many instances this has led to academic practice of low standard and a marginalization of practical knowledge and skills. It has also caused a certain opposition in the design community towards the academic world.

Most importantly, the situation has created an awareness of the specific values of the designer profession's own practice based traditions of development (Cross 2011). They are regarded as contrary to those of Academia, associated with non practical, so called theoretical approaches. This has caused the establishment of a professional stance opposite to that of the academic world. It is claimed that the theories and methods of Academia constitute a hindrance to creative and artistic practice, which by many are regarded as the basic ingredients in a designer's competence (Frayling 1993-94). The stance has solid philosophical foundation from the times of Antiquity, and has been renewed in our time by among others John Dewey (Dewey 1934), Susanne K. Langer (Langer 1953) and Theodor Adorno (Adorno 1970). The concept of so called tacit knowledge, coined by

Michael Polyani in 1962, has been embraced and said to be of a kind that is not possible to express through linguistic terms. It is being used as an argument for developing research methods based on these traditions as a discipline on its own terms, thereby constituting an opposite pole to the regime of academic knowledge. In Norway this view has even been recognized by The Norwegian Association of Higher Educational Institutions (UHR), which has worked out a particular definition of so called artistic research that also comprises design (UHR 2007). Several methodological approaches have been introduced in the last couple of decades, and many have proven to be successful. However, theories and methods of the academic disciplines attached to the skill of presenting analytical discussions in written terms, have turned out to be unavoidable. They constitute necessary tools in the research process as well means of critical discourse and communication.

Although much has been achieved, we are still in the beginning of a long development process. In higher education there is a great need to find ways of developing as well as teaching academic methods in a way that can transform them into an expansion and enhancement of the designer's competence at the profession's own benefit and conditions. Both the question of adaptation and development, and the way of teaching them, constitute research fields of their own. Dealing with a topic concerning opposite professional stances, this is also a matter of controversy.

# 2.0 THE PROJECT

## 2.1 INTENTIONS

The education of product design at the University College of Oslo and Akershus is essentially practice based, with craft methods and workshop experiments as basic learning tools for further studies in the design process. It also has some academically related traditions kept from its origin as an education of teachers of woodwork. In 2004 several study units had to be amalgamated in order to meet official standards of larger units. Among these was, rather incidentially, a practical course in lighting design and a theoretical unit on cultural identity at BA level, as well as a practical product development project and a theoretical unit of the culture of objects at MA level. Their

common denominator was the topic of product aesthetics. As a matter of outer and formal requirements they were mainly continued as previously.

As a newcomer in 2007, an academic engaged to take care of the theoretical parts, I was generously invited to have a close cooperation with my colleague, the experienced artist and design teacher Gunnar H. Gundersen, who was responsible for the practical parts. We decided to take a fresh and more active approach to the situation, regarding it as an opportunity to explore the relation between theoretical and practical learning and their possible positive effects. The goal was to try out whether a stronger connection between the two might contribute to a better overall result and a heightening of the level of the education, according to societal needs s well as the standards of ECTS and the Bologna framework (Bologna Working Group 2005). In this way we were challenging both the harmonistic and rather passive way of placing separate theoretical units between the practical ones without further relation, and the denial of them because of their presumed incompatibility with and irrelevance to this kind of studies.

Our experiment was founded on societal conditions. In the new paradigm of an aesthetic economy the creative industries are considered to play a crucial role (Lash and Lury 2007), and it has created an era of aesthetizication (Welsch 1997, Böhme 2001). The paradigm is accompanied by a new understanding of aesthetics built on a reinterpretation of Kantian philosophy, as an activity integrated in everyday life instead of being regarded as a matter of fine art with a separate sphere of evaluation (Friberg 2005). This makes it evident that designers need a competence that can make them able to take part in the critical discourse in the field of aesthetics and its social dimensions. Secondly, there is an emergent tendency to regard crafts as an intellectual activity, a viewpoint that exceeds the one of tacit knowledge (Adamson 2007). This brings up new perspectives on its relation to academic theoretical approaches that need to be further investigated. Due to these conditions' high societal actuality and their relevance to design we found it necessary to upgrade the contents of our teaching program accordingly. Having two units at various study levels study levels to our disposal, the first with the fixed theme of lighting fixtures and making a ditto product  as contents, the second with a more general and abstract theme of product aestheticsa and with higher demands of conceptualization, we could even try it out at increasing levels of difficulty.

## 2.2 EXECUTION

In respect for the profession's existing traditions of development and discourse we intended to establish courses that in no way hindered these. Rather, we wanted to enhance them and expand their methodological limits. We also wanted to make them open ended projects with focus on the investigation of the relation between theory and practice and their potential mutual positive effect. Therefore a certain distance between the two parts was maintained. The results of the various components of the student's exam works were to be brought together in a common evaluation and a mark that equally reflected the different aspects of the course and the connection between them. This was to be achieved by a common research theme of high actuality, changing every term. It was accompanied by a curriculum consisting of a reading list, academic lectures, excursions, technical courses and courses in writing. The MA unit started with a workshop which introduced the theme an gave the students' work a kick start. For both units the exam consisted of two parts. One was a practical design project that should end up in a prototype (BA level) or model (MA level) followed by a documentation of the working process. The other was a written task that ought to meet basic academic standards and contain theoretical knowledge, critical reflection and personal professional viewpoints. This meant that the solutions of the practical and written tasks, however different in their working method, had to be related to each other. As my colleague Gunnar H. Gundersen has formulated it: "The difference between the two [parts] ought to be as big as possible, the relations between them are what make them a unity." (Gundersen 2011).

In order to keep track of the students' working and learning process, "milestones" in the form of the submitting of drafts and sketches for the tasks, group tasks as well as class meetings were included in the program in addition to personal tutorship. The meetings constituted important arenas of discussions, and particularly the MA students were encouraged to take an active part.

The grading process was divided into two steps. At first the practical and the theoretical hand-ins were considered separately by the teacher responsible for each of them. At a following meeting both teachers went through all hand-ins together and gave one mark to each student. The mark built equally on both hand-ins, and also took into consideration the relation between them. After

the grades had been announced, feedback was given by ways of a common review and discussion followed by the opportunity to have personal feedback. In this way the feedback became mutual, and the teachers were secured direct viewpoints from the students in addition to the anonymous Questback forms.

## 2.3 RESULTS

The first time the program was executed it was met with a certain skepticism, particularly among the BA students. It turned out to be a challenge to critically reflect on and discuss an aesthetic and cultural theme within a designer's frame of reference, and in particular to connect it to their personal work. Although being used to writing as an isolated matter the students were surprised, some even provoked, by being obliged to make a relation between the two. Some expressed that they regarded themselves as practitioners with neither need nor talent for writing, which was understood as an activity of its own and in no way as a potential method to improve professional results.

The hand-ins were of various quality, but showed high personal engagement and inventiveness. For many it had been a difficult task to focus on aesthetical and cultural matters instead of solving practical and technical problems, or rather to use these to enhance the aesthetic performance of the product. The research theme was also crucial for the result, tending to be better when it was relatively concrete and oriented towards practical function. Attention from the outside world and the opportunity to exhibit own work results also mattered (Gundersen and Skjerven 2011, Skjerven 2009). One of the most successful courses was the one of the MA unit in 2008, "Aesthetic Diversity", where the students were to write about and design a funeral coffin for a multicultural society. The models were exhibited at the Stockholm Furniture Fair and also got positive attention in the media (Høydal 2009, Skjerven 2009).

The response to the Questback forms being less than 50% and the questions of a general kind, they did not make up sufficient material to draw up solid conclusions. They mainly showed that

most of the students were fairly satisfied and had experienced good learning outcome. The personal feedback conversations following the announcements of the marks turned out to be very popular. They constituted a much more substantial and detailed source, although of a subjective kind. A few of the students expressed annoyance with having to combine and being given a common mark for two from their point of view separate activities. The majority found the unit to be particularly demanding, and qualitatively different from the other parts of the education. To most of them it had been a stimulating challenge and a fruitful confrontation that had given them a new perspective on their future profession. They were, however, insecure or confused about exactly what the learning outcome had been. They also expressed that they, due to their own disposition of time, had got too little time for the written task. The reactions were slightly more positive at MA than at BA level, when their competence and maturity had grown.

As for the results of the grading process the level of the handouts reflected the whole scale of marks. It turned out that with a few exceptions the students were equally strong in both areas. Those who had been provoked but had chosen to take the challenge of reflecting and writing seriously, showed almost remarkable progress, however poor the start may have been. This indicates that what was experienced as difficult or irrelevant was rather a matter of mental attitude than talent or professional usefulness.

An indication of having achieved the intentions of the units is the acceptance of some of the students' works in the professional world. At the exhibition 100 % Design during this year's London Design Week one of them received Blueprint Magazine's award for best new product for her lighting fixture developed at the BA unit (Olsson 2011). Reflecting the other pole of competence, another student achieved the acceptance and publication of an article in the journal Lyskultur (Fjærli 2010, Skjerven 2010 2). It was based on her written task of the same unit. Both students had submitted equally good hand-ins of both written and practical tasks.

What effect the learning outcome will have on the professional practice of the graduated students remains to be seen, due to the short time of existence of the units. It ought to be subject to

investigation. As a preparation a query was sent to two of the graduated MA students, now working as designers. They both expressed that they had experienced the unit as something special, even personal, and had enjoyed working practically with questions of aesthetic matters and in an analytical way. They repented on not having used more time on the written part, which would have enhanced their learning outcome. In their professional activity it had supplied them with the ability to contextualize their work and to realize the significance of aesthetics in the development of products and corporate identity. It had also made them able to find solutions to problems of this kind (Huseby 2011, Mørk 2011). None of them have yet worked in any research based project. Having both belonged to the students with a positive attitude and achieving high marks the outcome might have been otherwise for those with negative attitudes, which necessitates a broad and more neutral survey.

For the teaching of two different, but interrelated subject fields within the same unit the solution had limitations. The students' skills in each of them could probably have been enhanced if the units had been kept separate. But that would have been at the expense of the learning outcome at a higher and more general level. There was also not only a tension, but a competition of attention among the students between the practical and the theoretical part that tended to have a negative effect. In this duel the practical and most familiar one naturally won. This made it a particular challenge to explore the relevance and significance of the theoretical part for the practical one. On the other hand, the contents of the practical part had to undergo many seemingly sacrifices in order to adapt itself to the many demands of reflective and normative character created by the theoretical part and had to be answered by ways of the concrete design of an object. A solution to the problems of competition would be to interrelate the two parts more strongly, which also has been done. The tension as such constitutes a crucial component in the pedagogical strategy and should not be removed.

When the BA and MA plans were revised in 2009 and 2010 respectively, it was decided to establish the project scheme of the units as permanent, with a few minor alterations. To meet the level of the students' maturity it was decided to give the mark of the BA unit 60% emphasis on the practical part and 40% on the theoretical, and the other way round for the MA course. The main

responsibility for the respective courses was divided accordingly among the two teachers. For the MA unit it was decided to integrate practical and theoretical parts more strongly. In this way the unit serves as a basis for the students' MA projects, and potential PhD studies. Additionally, a new study unit of Philosophy of science and design research, equally adapted to the needs of a designer, has been incorporated in the MA plan in order to strengthen the students' theoretical and methodological competence.

# 3 CONCLUSION

On an overall basis the Faculty has evaluated the project as successful and has approved of its contents, although not yet fully internalized it. The main success factors have turned out to be a close cooperation and good confidence between two teachers with competence in the respective subject fields, discussions with the students during the process, and openness to exploring new approaches among the faculty staff.

A crucial question is what impact the competence will have on the professional activity and the working performance of the graduated students. Will they become more competitive at the job market, will they achieve positions which enable them to define conditions for the work process and its results, and will they become better scholars? Or will they become end up as useless hybrids or boring consultants unable to find inventive solutions? The questions are many, and there is surely more than one right answer. In the future there will obviously be demand for a great variety of skills. Still, one has to realize that our era's need for an expanded designer's competence comprising critical discourse by ways of linguistic terms is a fact of increasing importance. The demand has to be followed up by the educational institutions. Creativity and design practice build on different ways of acting than academic theories and methods. The project has shown that a fruitful confrontation between them might serve as a driving force to transform the latter into a helpful professional tool.

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