

REFLECTING ON BEING A DESIGNER

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ABSTRACT

By designing products and services for people and putting them in the world, designers have a big impact on our environment, behaviour and well-being. Designing products is not only a matter of finding the right solution for a specific design challenge, but also about formulating a personal stance about 'what is right' in the context of this future impact. Design Education should offer students a platform to be able to discuss and develop this personal vision and design attitude [1]. This paper presents the results of the course "Reflecting on designing", developed at the Delft University of Technology, to support and stimulate the students critical reflection on their societal role as designers and on their own vision in designing.

Keywords: authenticity, personal development, reflection in design

1 DEVELOPING AUTHENTICITY IN DESIGNING

The education of a design student follows different stages of design expertise, from the naïve, to the novice, the advanced beginner, the competent, the expert, the master, to result in the visionary [2]. These stages fundamentally differ in their way of looking at design situations, varying from following strict rules to redefining the rules of the game, thereby inspiring the domain of design practice as a whole. Although these stages seem to present a clear development in the one following the other, Dorst emphasises that in design projects, these stages may actually co-exist. Yet, he argues that each stage comprises its own kind of reflection.

The design exercises in our design curriculum offer a multitude of moments to reflect on the rules of the design practice, but lack the reflection on the visionary level, thereby neglecting the development of the visionary aspects of designers. This paper presents an initiative to support the development of a student's personal and authentic design vision.

2 THE COURSE REFLECTION ON DESIGNING

In Delft, we developed the course Reflecting on Designing for the students of the master Design for Interaction, to stimulate the students critical reflection on their societal role as designers and on their own vision in designing. The main objective of this course is to contribute to the development of a critical, conscious and authentic design philosophy and design attitude. The course consists of a series of inspiring guest lectures and concludes with an assignment to write an essay.

It is our conviction that what designers create and how they do it is rooted in who they are and where they come from. By inviting 'designers' from various disciplines to talk about their vision/starting points, to indicate what they are based on, and to show how these are translated to the forms determined by the discipline they work in, we want to make our students aware of these underlying processes. The students are presented with

ethical, philosophical and societal ideas about design, through several guest lectures by designers and design researchers from different design fields, such as architects, graphic designers, photographers and film directors. These lectures are presented from a personal perspective: what were the designers' personal motivations and beliefs while designing? The assumption is that the development of such a personal design vision is embedded in the personal development of the design student as a social being. It is therefore best stimulated in contact with professional designers from different disciplines, who show an authentic and personal vision on their design projects, based on their personal beliefs and motivations.

To develop their reflections, students write an essay in which they explicate their personal vision on themselves as designers. The purpose of the essay is to go beyond the obvious clichés. To transform superficial statements such as "I want to make this world a better place" and "I want to design products that fulfil people's real needs" into meaningful statements about what *is* a better world, and about what *are* real needs.

Possible questions that are addressed during the essays are:

- What are your values, your goals, your dreams?
- What is your role in society, what are your responsibilities towards people?
- Do you have a method, do you need one?
- What inspires you, how do you keep inspired?
- How are these ideas reflected in your design projects?

This essay can take any form deemed appropriate, such as a movie, a written essay (with images), or a computer presentation, as long as the form relates to the content or message.

3 REFLECTIONS ON THE ESSAYS

After the assessment of the essays, the course ends with a plenary session consisting of feedback of the teachers on the reoccurring themes, and of a personal presentation of the essays that were considered most authentic and inspiring.

The essays show a wide variety of form and content. Design students seem to differ strongly from each other on this personal, motivational level, and show to be curious about each others reflections. During the final session, the presented personal reflections and statements exceed the urge to argue about their truth, rather, they tap into the desire to know each other and thereby inspire each other.

3.1 The effect of the guest lectures

The essays are written after a series of lectures by designers from different disciplines, presenting their personal motivations and aspirations through their design practice. These lectures proved to be valuable as starting points for the formulation of one's own reflections. Moreover, the bolder the statements in the lectures, the more students commented on them. For example, one of the architects stated that he never listens to users, because they are no experts, and a successful product designer stated that he does not use a design method because they proved to be useless. These statements may be shocking to our students, but offer food for thought when presented by successful designers and thereby provoke strong reactions. Therefore, we ask our guest lecturers to clearly make their personal statements, and to already start the discussion with the students during their lectures.

3.2 Structure of the essays

The essays show a variety of form and structure. Next to plain text, we saw jigsaw puzzles, gift wraps, memory games, computer animations and essays structured along Wittgenstein's *Tractatus Philosophicus*. But it is rare to encounter essays presented in a form matching their content. A big pitfall of creative forms derives from the inconsistency of the essay because of the inconsistency of form. Students tend to generate statements on different themes that cover their personal vision (often structured along the questions we proposed as starting points for the essays), without integrating them into an overall coherent vision. At the start of this course, we encouraged students to create mind-maps of their personal reflections, but these mind maps seem to encourage fragmentation rather than providing building blocks for a coherent vision. Throughout the years we therefore show the pitfall of a loose structure and emphasize on the importance of coherence between form and content, to allow for the development of more in-depth insights.

3.3 Tools for reflection

To most students, having to write an essay about oneself as a designer comes as a surprise and one does not know where or how to start. The most successful essays are written by students who developed tools and techniques to create their own vision. For example, one student created two collections of products: products she really would have loved to design and on the other hand products that she would be ashamed of if they were her design. Next, she analysed these collections on emerging themes and on the visions underlying these designs. This analysis allowed her to create her vision on product design, and to get insight into her personal motivations and aspirations.

Another group of students decided to sit together and to discuss each others statements, having to speak up, to explain and to try to inspire the other proved to be a good tool to deepen one's thoughts and to make them consistent.

Another type of tools to start a personal reflection is offered by the wide variety of personality tests that are available through the Internet. Several students used such tests to give insight in themselves as a person, and used the results to reflect on their design practice.

Finally, creating a portrait of oneself as a child seems a good starting point as well. Most students who start their essays with reflections on their early childhood discover that their development as a designer started at birth, and never actually stopped. Reflecting on one's motivations and aspirations as a child seems a fruitful source of inspiration to get insights in one's actual situation.

3.4 Defining 'designing'

Many essays struggle with the question about what designing actually *is*. As one of the students comments: *'I am in my fifth year and I still don't know how to explain to my family what I am actually learning, or what I will be once I am a designer'*. Students reflecting on the core of their experience of design, tend to describe designing through metaphors. They see themselves as chefs, putting the right ingredients together to create a delicious meal, as movie directors, telling a moving story through the right images, as composers, trying to get different musicians to work together into a symphony, and so on. These metaphors focus on designing as a productive process, and try to describe the experience of designing. On the other hand, some metaphors are more oriented towards the outcome of the process: *'being a designer is like being a politician: we try to change the world according to our insights and to convince others to allow us to do so'*.

In any case, the use of a metaphor seems a strong mean to deepen one's insights in designing, and should be considered as a fruitful starting point.

Other students try to describe design through the emotional aspects of the design experience: *'to me, designing is the beauty of seeing all the possibilities, it is a way of looking at the world: not only seeing it as it is, but seeing everything that could be possible'* Or as one of the students simply stated *'when I design I smile...'*.

The pitfall of this uncertainty about what designing actually is, lays in the fact that students tend to try to describe what designing is in general, trying to come up with a definition covering the whole design discipline. This attempt drifts them away from the development of their personal view on what designing means *to them*. We therefore try to discourage attempts to define design in general in this exercise.

3.5 About 'Me'

One of the challenges of this assignment is to bridge the gap between one's personal world and one's design practice. This is achieved by writing the essay from a personal stance: writing about 'me designing'. But for some students this seems difficult to accomplish. Although the assignment is explicitly about 'me', students still tend to write about design in general, its benefits and obstacles, thereby missing the point of working on what makes one authentic. The question is why do these students beat around the bush? It is a challenge to tempt students to dive into their own world of experience, and to discover its potential as source of inspiration for their design personality.

The question about one's sources of inspiration seems to offer a starting point to develop a more personal point of view. Students report being inspired by nature, by their passions such as dance or computer gaming, and from there on find a way to come to an authentic design personality. Yet, to some even design inspiration is still a domain to be discovered, as reflected in the statement *'to me, inspiration is everywhere...'*.

3.6 Who needs a vision?

Not all students are enthusiastic about the assignment as presented to them. *'Why do we need a vision?'*, and *'Can't we just be designers and make things, without the fuss of all this personal reflection stuff?'* Are some of the comments some students start their essays with. Our answer to this is clear cut: whatever you design is, it is always designed from a vision. If students think they do not have one, they are just not aware of their own assumptions and motivations. Discussions about these resistances to make these assumptions explicit lead to the insights that to some, such attempts might seem pretentious. This turns out to be a valuable insight: once students are convinced that a vision does not need to be something big, but that they are allowed to be humble, they find their own track.

3.7 Deepening one's thoughts

Although the students are asked to go beyond the clichés of 'making people happy' and 'making this world a better place', many essays offer a personal view that does deepen these thoughts. The students who did develop this statement into a personal stance seem to be students who are already in the process of developing personal thoughts on these topics. These students have travelled, participated in social initiatives, are politically active, are strongly religious, or have strong passions such as making music, dancing or practicing a particular sports. The essays show that this cultural baggage is needed to be able to formulate deeper thoughts on one's design personality.

Some students are aware of this interplay between the development of cultural interests and design personality, and see their personal development as a design responsibility: *'As a design student I want to develop myself as a broad oriented person. I made a list of movies I consider important to see, and I try to watch at least one movie every two days. Besides, I try visit art exhibitions as often as possible'*. Obviously, this pursuit for cultural development reaches beyond the responsibility of the course Reflecting on designing, and should be an overall mentality in Design Education.

3.8 Me, the user and the environment: responsibilities and ethical issues

User-centred design is one of the design directions our students are often confronted with during their design education. It is often considered and promoted as a matter of good practice in design. The underlying assumption is that design should address people's real needs and latent dreams. Therefore, not surprisingly, this motivation to address *real* needs is one of the most reoccurring themes in the essays. *'I don't want to develop the next superfluous product nobody is waiting for, but something people really need, like products that contribute to the comfort of the world of disabled people'*. But most students fail to describe how they define what real needs are, and how they think they could contribute to a better world. Within the domain of user centred design, one still needs to take a personal stance in relation to the user: does the designer see himself as the one who knows best (the paternalistic point of view), or does he take a servile role in relation to the user? Who is responsible for the user's well being, and what how is does this well being defined? Some students are general about it: *'I want to see people smile'*, and some have well defined aspirations: *'I want to make people conscious of the fact that they are living, to contribute to a conscious life'*.

The topic of ecological responsibilities in design is treated likewise. Most students do not reflect beyond the statement that they want their designs to be environmentally sound, but fail to give content to it.

Finally, some students are very clear about not having any other motivation or aspirations in design than *'to become rich and famous, as quick as possible'*. And some students provide us with a solid overview of how they plan to achieve this goal. Although these statements may be valued for their honesty and soundness, they are experienced as provocative and irresponsible by most students.

4 REFLECTION AS AN ONGOING PROCESS

Writing an essay about who you *are as a designer* turns out to be an impossible task if *being a designer* is considered as a fixed state that one has already acquired and could reflect on in retrospective. Most of the students conclude their essays with the comment that they were pleasantly surprised by what they discovered about themselves during the writing of the essay, but that the essay feels more like the start of a reflection process rather than its result. This leads to the insight that, because personal development *is* a continuous process, reflecting on it should be as well. As some of the students commented: *"this is how I think about myself as a designer right now, but it might well be that when reading it again next year, I might completely disagree with myself. And that's OK too"*. Moreover, we believe that considering reflection as an ongoing process throughout the designer's development is crucial to its value, and *should* show changes of insights. Because personal *development* is embedded in the occurrence of these changes.

Considering reflection as an ongoing process caused many students to comment on the timing of this course: although they appreciate the course during their masters, it is

considered as a valuable process that should start right from the beginning of the design education curriculum. And we couldn't agree more.

5 CONCLUSIONS & RECOMMENDATIONS

In Design Education, reflecting at the end of a design exercise on the design process and its outcome proved to be valuable for the of the design students' development. These practical reflections form an integrated part of our bachelors and masters design exercises. But so far, in our curriculum the reflections required from the students mainly concern the first stages of development described by Dorst. Students reflect on the development of personal competences, such as creative thinking and mastering design tools and methods, and formulate what they will do next to improve these competences. But these practical reflections on the design process itself are not sufficient to support the development of the design student into an authentic designer. Moreover, to limit the reflections to these practical aspects of design might strengthen the assumption that design is a matter of 'problem solving', thereby of 'finding the right solution'. The present paper proposes that in addition to these practical evaluations and reflections, the design curriculum should offer the student tools and methods to reflect on the students' personal motivations and aspirations as a designer right from the start of the curriculum. To support the integration of these reflections on authenticity and personality, new tools and methods need to be developed. Because reflecting on oneself as a designer is not just a matter of looking back on what was achieved and formulating next steps about what should be done. Reflecting on authenticity and personality is a creative process, contributing to the construction of a consistent self-image. The development of a design personality becomes a source of inspiration. Therefore, the building of such a design personality should become visible throughout the design education process. The development of a students design portfolio offers a possible platform for the development of these tools, provided the content of these portfolios is extended from design results to the presentation of oneself as an authentic designer, and one's vision on one's role in society. Therefore, future courses will try to look for an integration of essay writing into the building of the designer's portfolio.

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