SHIFTING FROM PRACTICE TO RESEARCH IN DESIGN EDUCATION: AN EXPERIMENT WITHIN THE FRAMEWORK OF AN MA COURSE

Svetlana USENYUK[1] **and Nickolay GARIN**[2]
[1]Aalto University School of Art, Design and Architecture, Helsinki, Finland
[2]Ural State Academy of Architecture and Art, Ekaterinburg, Russia

ABSTRACT
Whilst experiencing a paradigmatic shift towards critical, conceptual, immaterial domain, the design discipline still demonstrates an essential gap between practice and research. The need for developing educational methods that can positively influence students and help them cope with the uncertainty of the research/practice dichotomy in the design profession is ever-present in design education.
The paper aims to contribute to the development of a new design education paradigm by suggesting an experimental 'Artistic Reading' assignment for first-year MA students. This experiment is based on the hermeneutical approach. Hermeneutics, as the 'art of interpretation', may be applied to the entire design educational process. Because symbols imply both 'forms' and 'words', the hermeneutical methodology provides a universal toolkit for the cognition of objects of different types. The authors argue that hermeneutics can be used to enable students' research activity.

Keywords: Design education, hermeneutics, experiment

1 INTRODUCTION

While the shift towards a more conceptual and discursive design discipline has been widely recognized by professional community without questioning [1], it is becoming increasingly clear that it also entails significant changes on all the levels of design education [2]. More precisely, as Keinonen points out, the material and product category based expertise is gradually losing its ground as the only proper foundation of design competence [2]. Indeed, designers, by their professional virtue, usually have to deal with ill-defined problems, which seldom fall solely within the boundaries of a concrete subject matter [3–5]. Thus, rebalancing the equation between spaces of *research* and *practice* in design education implies the requirement to nourish skills of conceptual thinking and research competencies [6] to accompany this shift.

Formally, the mission of satisfying the need for linkage between theory and practice in design is entrusted to the postgraduate courses (especially to MA course) [7]. However, at practical level, the suggestion to move beyond the mainstream model of studio-based education [8] encounters a number of difficulties. The main one, perhaps, is rooted in the art/science dichotomy of the design discipline. Historically, applied arts have provided a ground for cultivating a professional mindset of designers [9–11].

On the other hand, design as a science forms its field of inquiry and theoretical framework mostly from well-established ones in humanities. Asserting a designer's essential ability both to 'read' and 'write' in the material culture, Nigel Cross [5] has implicitly admitted the 'textual focus' of this basis. Since all cultural and social phenomena are widely treated as 'text', it obviously leads to the necessity to have a good command of textual means. Textual signs, unlike material ones, operate in some kind of abstract field. This, in turn, requires another kind of professional thinking.

These two types of professional attitude were distinctively defined by Wassily Kandinsky as *virtuosic* and *compositional* ones. The first one – 'virtuosic'– refers to external and concrete aspects; while the second one – 'compositional' – is oriented to operating inner and abstract categories [12].

Far from being a subject of special consideration of design educators, this mind-related dichotomy is clearly recognized by design students. Whereas practice and research are associated with the different

levels of the design education system (i.e. Bachelors and Masters), students usually find it difficult to mentally 'shift' from one way of professional thinking to the other.

This problem, in the authors' opinion, deserves particular attention and, therefore, makes up the subject matter of this paper. It is an attempt to make a contribution to the development of a new design education paradigm by suggesting an experimental 'Artistic Reading' assignment for first-year MA students.

2 THE 'ARCTISTIC READING' EXPERIMENT

The assignment was developed by the authors within the framework of the Master of Design program at the Ural State Academy of Architecture and Art, Russia [7]. The experiment was conducted twice, in the fall semester of 2010 and 2011, with first-year students (12 in total) of the Department of Industrial Design. It served as an introductory part of the half-year course 'Introduction to Design Studies'. This course focused on classic literature in the area of design, particularly on the system of abstract design knowledge developed during the Soviet Era by significant researchers from the State Research Institution of Technical Aesthetics (VNIITE in Russian abbreviation).

The need to immediately immerse themselves into academic texts provoked some kind of stress among students. As they put it, 'it was hard to follow the main thread of narration', 'to understand the author's expressions' or even 'to grasp the meanings of otherwise familiar words when they are placed next to each other' (informal interviews). In most cases, students got stuck in specific 'language games' and 'impossible word juggling' of research articles. Some of the students were additionally stressed out by the strict requirement to write their own texts in the same manner, in the near future[1]. Overall then, does it imply that the task of academic reading and writing, in most cases, is not equal to the baseline ability of design students?

In fact, the first and foremost problem for students is how to deal with a considerable amount of textual information. Another problem they usually face is that of how to 'extract' relevant knowledge from academic texts, considering the different contexts of classic theorists of the Past and today's readers (e.g. different philosophy as well as political and economical environment).

Once the problems become evident to educators, it also becomes clear what they need to do to avoid them.

The initial inspiration came from the outer field of social sciences: in the history of walking, Rebecca Solnit compares abstract activities of reading and writing to real-world ones of travelling and path-making. As she describes, 'readers and writers walk in the common terrain of the imagination' and particularly 'to read is to travel through that terrain with the author as guide' [13]. Following Solnit's analogy, Tim Ingold indicates that writing and reading are essentially visual practices [14]. Thus, this suggests considering the written text (verbal medium) in the same way as the visual medium; the common image for both of them being the *road*, i.e. a linear graph of 'travelling' with the author.

As Merleau-Ponty claimed in his influential "Phenomenology of Perception", the mind is not merely abstract, but is embodied [15]. Moreover, the world of 'doing and making' is usually ahead of the world of understanding [5]. Considering all the above, the core idea of the experiment was formulated as follows: to engage students' virtuosic background by giving them an assignment to visualize the text with familiar means of formal artistic composition.

2.1 Goals and Objectives

Thus, the main goal of the experiment was, generally, to serve as a 'buffer' for students and, therefore, make the 'mind shift' between practice and research easier for them. Following this goal, the teaching and learning objectives were defined as follows:

- to enable students to apply the well-known methods (especially methods from the theory of formal composition) to the new kind of activity (scientific reading and writing) and to realize a step-by-step transformation of 'virtuosic' methods into 'compositional' ones;
- to equip students with skills to ensure easy transition from visual to verbal communication and vice versa;
- to make sure students are able to revitalize 'forgotten' knowledge (i.e. by classical design theorists), update and enhance it according to changing contexts; and

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[1] In Russia, Master's Degree students must have at least two publications in conference proceedings, for successful graduation.

- to make a step-by-step process of 'shifting' clear and possible for further evaluation and development.

2.2 Hermeneutics as a 'Transfer' Methodology

The educational experiment is based on the hermeneutical approach. With regard to our assignment, we understood hermeneutics to be an *art* of interpretation rather than just an interpretation methodology. To argue this, we appeal to a theory of 'interpretation of dialogue', with reference to Mikhail Bakhtin [16].

As the 'art of interpretation', hermeneutics is defined as both art and science, which corresponds with the dialectic essence of design as *making* and *thinking*. More specifically, hermeneutics may be applied to the design educational process. Because symbols imply both 'forms' and 'words', the hermeneutical methodology is considered as a universal toolkit for the cognition of objects of different types.

Bakhtin emphasized the importance of dialogue between the researcher and the text for gaining knowledge and understanding. The process of dialogue, as he put it, implies two specific sequential situations: 'being-outside-of-oneself' [Russian: vne-nahodimost'], and 'being-inside-of-oneself' [Russian: vnutri-nahodimost'] (or the stage of being 'back-to-yourself' enriched with a new experience) [16]. Therefore the hermeneutical interpretation is the deepening of meaning via the expansion of external contexts: in our case, the 'remote' contexts of design classics.

2.3 Step-by-step Process

The topic of the experiment was called 'Les Maitres of the Russian System Design Theory'. This title was derived from the remarkable debate that was going on in the leading journal of design in the USSR 'Technical Aesthetics' in the period from 1979 to 1981. The debate was devoted to the systems approach to design practice and design research, and included six articles written by outstanding Russian (Soviet) researchers and practitioners.

Students were given an assignment to choose one author (on the basis of 'love at first sight ') and then proceed with him through a number of stages, as follows:

Stage 1: General analysis: exposing the text composition

The students read the text and make an evaluation chart for the purpose of visualizing the 'road' that the author followed whilst writing that text. In other words, it should be their first perception of the text (every part of the chart, a peak or a curve, means the amount of emotional reaction of the reader (positive or negative) to a particular part of the text). After revealing the structure of the text, they produce a formal composition (in the form of a 3D paper model or 2D sketch) of it. The 'mind-shift' is enabled by looking at the text as a *composition of words organized in accordance with certain rules and principles* so that it becomes clear to the student to 'translate' into the more familiar language of lines, shapes, colours, etc.

The output of this stage is a graph and a formal composition of the *Maitre*'s text (see Figure 1, 2 and 3, original notes and quotes are kept in Cyrillic letters. The purpose of these pictures is to emphasize the visual variety).
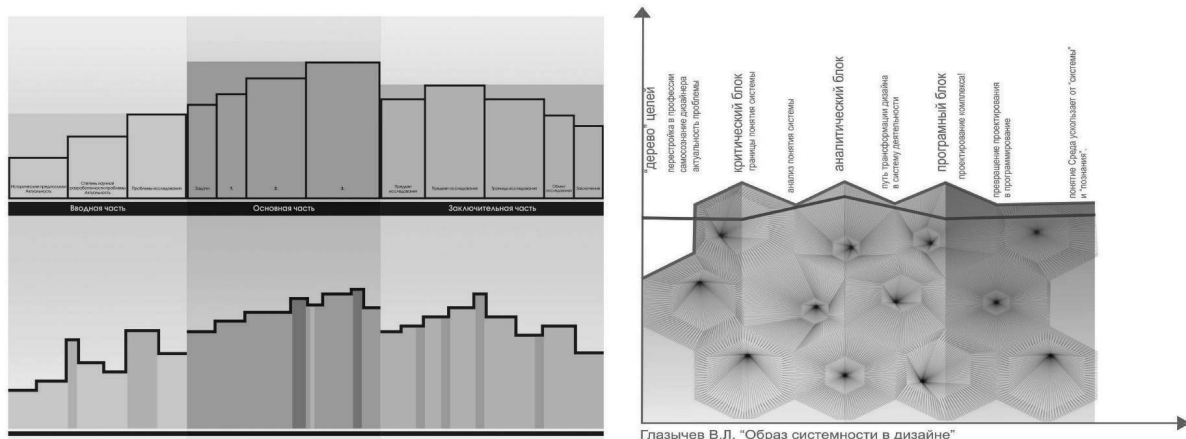

Figure 1. Examples of graphs of theoretical articles
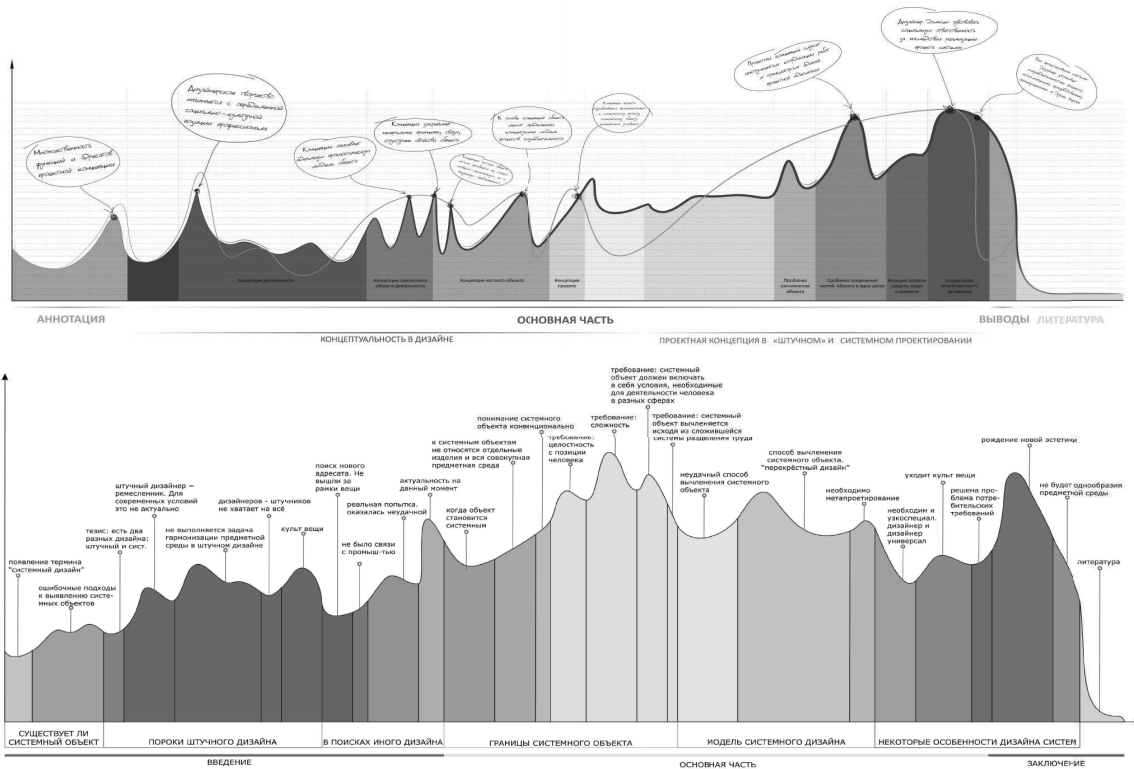
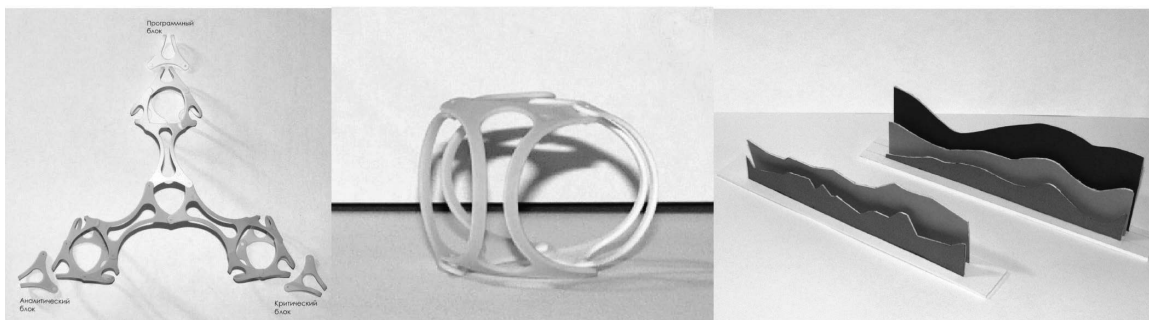Figure 2. Examples of graphs of practice-led articles

Figure 3. Examples of 3D models of articles

Stage 2: Hidden dialogues: addressing distant contexts

The main task for students is 'going-outside-of-themselves' (leaving behind the today's context and their own personalities) for the purpose of understanding the ideas in the authors' original context. The main related event is a workshop (a role-play) called 'A Round Table Discussion of *Les Maitres*', organized in the form of dramatization. Each student acted out his/her chosen *Maitre* for the purpose of presenting his ideas on his behalf. This kind of action draws student's attention to the author's personality: distinctive features of appearance, manner of speaking, etc. This, in turn, inspires students to search for additional information, i.e. to go beyond the text of the article.

Stage 3: Co-authorship: anticipating the future context

This is the stage of being 'back-to-yourself' enriched with a new experience. It starts from evaluation of the visual compositions of the text: 'how can we make this "picture" look more attractive, in my *personal* artistic point of view?' or, more specifically, 'what should be emphasized as the main message for modern-day designers?' The output of this stage is a transformed artistic composition. In other words, the student becomes the *Maitre*'s co-author by commenting and refining his paper according to the new context.

It is interesting to note that both presentations of transformed graphs and formal compositions (in 2010 and 2011) were organized at the students' initiative, in the form of another open discussion, the so-called 'A Round Table of Co-Authors'. In fact, the educators recognized this tendency as a successful

experience of transition between textual and verbal means: provoked by artificial restriction of the role-play, the students suddenly discovered their 'own voices' and desire to 'say something'.

But the most unexpected consequence of that experiment, for the educators, was the students' self-motivation to 'write my first personal text', i.e. 'a letter to the *Maitre*'. This initiative emerged twice, without any hints and asking from teachers. This may be considered as the most positive and significant outcome of the experiment. In 2010, the students performed their self-assigned task in the form of a collective article and then presented it at the Academy's internal conference 'Contemporary Issues in Design and Architecture', in the spring of 2011. The current year students agreed decided to present their 'collective essay' during the public procedure of reporting progress with their Master's Degree dissertations at the end of May 2012.

2.4 General Results

The 'shifting' methodology facilitates the gradual development of a research mindset by involving the 'inner matter' and linking together textual and visual media. Also, this approach helps students achieve the following:

- they are able to use verbal communication;
- they are able to generate personal methods which they can apply in their MA research and in their future work (this point follows from the actual contents of the articles);
- they start developing their personal research and writing style.

3 CONCLUSIONS

The need for a more conceptual and discursive design thinking stems from the essential gap between *practice* and *research*. Within the scope of design education, the need for developing educational methods that can positively influence students and help them cope with the uncertainty of the research/practice dichotomy of the design profession is ever-present.

It can be certainly concluded that initiating and successfully conducting a creative 'in-between' experiment within the framework of a postgraduate design education course requires a significantly greater effort than a narrow focus on research or practice.

During the experiment, it was established that the process of artistic interpretation of a text intrinsically differs from a rational scientific interpretation in that it brings together 'remote' contexts (i.e. the author's reality and the reader's one). It was made feasible through the use of the hermeneutic approach, which bridged the gap between the domains of art and research.

This approach seems to have several advantages in case of design education. First, it leads to a deeper understanding of the content and provides insights into a student's personal research activity. Understanding the text implies re-thinking the content based on the reader's personal circumstances, adding new meanings, enriching the original text and finally creating a new text (students' willingness to 'answer to the Maitre').

Next, the interplay between words and images as revealed by the student produces 'anticipated context'. Thus, the creative power of design paves the way to 'anticipating the Future' on the basis of imagination rather than that on scientific or technical rationality.

Finally, this version of hermeneutics provides a unique and effective means of generating personal concepts and research methods: it is literally a tool to 'carve a new path through the terrain of the imagination'[13].

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