DESIGN STUDENTS AT THE CROSSROADS OF ADAPTION AND SELF-WILL

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ABSTRACT
One challenge in design education is that design students should develop a deliberate personal stance. Recent discussions on design education appear to be focused either on the provision and adaption of methods and toolboxes or on issues of apprenticeship. In this paper we argue that theses perspectives entail rather simplistic ideas of the designer´s agency. We therefore outline a third perspective that highlights the transformative nature of practice in educational settings and provide a relational concept of style as a dynamic expression of a personal stance. Educational situations are not confined by the interactions between the student and the teacher but inevitably also mirror the articulated or presumed expectations of other actors, be it users, clients, fellow students, future employees, and other stakeholders. As a consequence the student has to find a way to cope with the polyphony of expectations and act on multiple playgrounds simultaneously. To illustrate how the quest for style might materialize in an educational setting, we present examples from a field study. Based on these examples we discuss implications for design education.

Keywords: Design studio, student-centred, reflexive fellow player, style.

1   INTRODUCTION
Becoming a designer requires more than the acquisition of reproducible knowledge, competencies, and skills. Furthermore, becoming a designer is more than the practical capacity to create viable solutions in response to a design challenge. Taking up a holistic view of design, designers not just respond to existing needs with and through their products but envisage and shape future usage scenarios (cf. [16]). In doing so they are unavoidably engaged in transformative transactions with the social and material world. Hence design students should develop a deliberate personal stance on the potential impact of owns actions and the resulting responsibilities.

Even though the societal impact of design has been broadly acknowledged in the design community, recent discussions on design education however appear to be focused either on the provision and adoption of methods and toolboxes or on issues of social participation, apprenticeship, and enculturation. While both of these directions provide essential input for the field of design education, they do not fully account for the transformative and transactional nature of design as a socio-cultural endeavour. Even though methods are to some extent generic in that they are supposed to be of use in a variety of situations they are by no means neutral, as they always have to be enacted and made sense of by the actors involved. The conception of design education as a form of social participation and enculturation into a particular professional community on the other hand easily tends to present professional practice as a given rather than a continuously evolving nexus.

Against this background, the intent of this paper is to outline a student-centred perspective on learning and personal development, aiming to provide an answer on how students might develop a professional yet also personal stance towards design. Rather than foregrounding the acquisition of particular skills or being able to engage in established practices, we state that the primary challenge for design students is to develop a viable stance with respect to the polyphony of expectations they see themselves and the products of their work confronted with. The students are not only confronted with their teachers' expectations, already reflecting a certain view of design, but also with the articulated or presumed expectations of users, clients, fellow students, future employees, and other stakeholders. Furthermore, students anticipate expectations of their educational institution as well as the design community at large. The students cannot accommodate all these, potentially conflicting, expectations by conformation but have to advance a personal stance.

The contribution of this paper is meant to be threefold. On a theoretical level we introduce a practice-oriented concept of style, accounting for its stabilizing and disrupting effects. On a more practical level, our intent is to make the concept of style operational for design educators and provide empirical examples. Finally, we hope to encourage students to rethink their own role and become reflexive fellow-players.

In the following we critically discuss two currently prominent perspectives on design education, the one focused on methods and toolboxes and the other geared towards the mastery of established or best practices. Based on the identified shortcomings, we then introduce a practice-theoretical position and the notion of a reflexive-fellow player [8] and advance a relational concept of style as a dynamic expression of a personal stance. To illustrate how the quest for style might materialize in an educational setting, we present a series of case examples from a field study on the practices in a design studio course in the field of interface design. Finally, we discuss the implications for design-education.

2   TWO PERSPECTIVES ON DESIGN EDUCATION

In recent discussions on design education two main perspectives can be identified. The former puts emphasis on the purposive utilization of methods. The second positions design education as a form of apprenticeship aimed at the mastery of established practices. In educational practices both perspective are enacted in a variety of ways and often even combined. Below we try to pinpoint some of the inherent problems these perspectives are facing when seen in isolation. This separate description is used as a strategy to emphasize blind spots in the two perspectives from a practice-oriented view.

The first perspective is driven by the idea, that design in essence can be understood as a methodological endeavour, which favours certain methods and ways of thinking. Respective methods can be taught and are generic enough to be of use in a variety of situations. Consequently there is an interest in teachable methods designers can make use of in the design process. Respective approaches can be focused on the management of the overall process (cf. [11]) as well as on the particular methods used in the course of the design process (e.g. [9]). While in fact methods and tools provide crucial resources for those engaged in design, the perspective tends to blur the inherently situated nature of design, as methods and tools are conceived as context independent means at the designer's disposal. As pointed out by [3], the paradox of this perspective is "it that it relies upon the articulation of methods for work but those very methods are never a complete or accurate description of work practice" (p. 45). Hence an overemphasis on methodology downplays the fact that respective commitments shape the discourse on design and the relationships between the different stakeholders involved. The idea that methods could be invoked arbitrary and transferred from one context to another and that they are just neutral means to an end is misleading as it ignores that these are always enacted and made sense of in the light of the on-going practice.

The second perspective emphasizes the disciplinary aspects of design as a profession drawing on notions of apprenticeship and mastery. This perspective is closely related to the design studio model (cf. [10]), which is at the core of architectural education [1] and also prominent in other fields of design education. The relation between teacher and student in these settings often resembles a master-apprentice model. This implies that the teacher as an expert and representative of the professional community has the knowledge the student is supposed to acquire and incorporate him/herself. The respective design knowledge is conveyed, among others through various forms of feedback, such as recurrent design crits. The conception of design education as a form of enculturation gives room for implicit forms of knowing and the contingent nature of professional practice that develops over time. However, the model involves the danger to cultivate asymmetric (power-)relations between teachers and students (cf. [5]) and to hand down professional practice as a given rather than a continuously evolving nexus of doings and sayings that is itself shaped by and shaping social order. Putting emphasis on established professional practice blocks sight for the different ways design is and could be practiced as well as the question of how to critically reflect and improve professional practice.

Our main concern with these perspectives is that both of them entail rather simplistic ideas of the designer's agency. While the first perspective locates agency primarily in the person of the designer and downplays social and cultural contingencies, the second perspective locates agency primarily in the community of professionals providing no direct account on how individuals contribute to the advancement of practice. In the following, we therefore outline a third perspective that highlights the transformative nature of practice and puts the student at centre stage.

3 TOWARDS A STUDENT-CENTRED PERSPECTIVE

To allow for a more dynamic understanding of agency in the design process we build on a practice-theoretical understanding of human action and especially the idea of a reflexive-fellow player as suggested by [8]. We then use this notion to advance a relational concept of style and outline its educational implications.

3.1 Practice Theory and the Reflexive Fellow-Player

Following what has been called the "practice turn in contemporary theory" [14] the notion of practice has been suggested as a basic unit of analysis in the field of design (e.g. [15]) as well as in education (e.g. [7]). Practice theoretical accounts differ from both structuralist and individualist accounts of human action in that they assume both social phenomena such as science, power, organizations, and social change but also psychological phenomena such as reason, identity, learning, and communication to be bound to practice. They assume "practices to qualify as the basic social phenomenon because the understanding/intelligibility articulated with them (perhaps supplemented with normativity) is the basic ordering medium in social life" ([12], p. 284). In providing a non-intentional account of human action, this perspective transcends the dichotomy of subjectivism and objectivism. Meaning from this perspective is inherently bound to the nexus of doings and sayings the actors are engaged in.

Practices are inherently social, as their very structure emerges from repeated interactions among the participants involved (cf. [12]). Yet, these structures are not static, but constantly evolve, as they are re-enacted in concrete doings and sayings of participants somewhere in objective space and time (ibid). Due to their evolving nature the canonical practices of certain community always coexist and are potentially challenged by non-canonical ones (cf. [2]). From a participant's perspective established practices entail certain rules that help to form joint expectations regarding what is appropriate or inappropriate in a certain situation. However, these rules do not provide a fixed set of admissible moves but require the participants to actively interpret and realize them in light of particular situation they are facing. Being able to engage in a practice together with others and to act in a way that others can understand is therefore more essential than simple compliance with the rules [6]. As a consequence, the aptness and viability of a certain move cannot be fully assessed based on pre-established rules but essentially depends on its uptake in a particular situation.

If we apply this perspective to an educational scenario such as the design studio, the prerogative of interpretation cannot be simply attributed to the teacher or the student. From a practice-theoretical perspective the situation is similar to a game in which the rules are constantly re-enacted but also altered by the very moves the teacher AND the student are making. The educational situation hence brings forth its own practice. Yet, the educational situation is not confined by the interactions between the student and the teacher but inevitably also mirrors the articulated or presumed expectations of other actors, be it users, clients, fellow students, future employees, and other stakeholders. As a consequence the student has to find a way to cope with the polyphony of expectations and act on multiple playgrounds simultaneously. The situation hence is of a kind where the student cannot simply draw on a method or established practice but has to position him/herself in all these games. S/he can neither act in compliance with all these expectations, as these are potentially conflicting, nor can s/he simply dictate the rules, as s/he cannot step out of the game.

Against this background [8] has introduced the figure of the "reflexive fellow player", an actor oscillating between adaption and self-will, between adjustment of actions towards circumstances and restive scepticism. The "reflexive fellow player" is aware of the fact that s/he is inevitable involved in a variety of on-going practices, but also recognizes that the rules of the respective games are not fixed but can be challenged and bent by every new move that is made. The "reflexive fellow player" provides an alternative model for the becoming designer. S/he is neither a trainee primarily aimed to get proficient in the tools and methods of the trade nor an apprentice aimed to master a set of established practices, but a person that has to develop a personal stance towards the practice of design. From an educational perspective the figure of the "reflexive fellow player" shifts focus towards moments in which students challenge and advance their own practice. This process starts when students realize that their own doings and sayings are constitutive for the situations they are facing, when they realize that their actions are shaped by but also shape the social context there are engaged in. This kind of reflexive practice is constitutive for the concept of style we develop below.

3.2 Style as a Relational Quality

The concept of style has a long history in the fields of arts and design. It has primarily been used to differentiate certain works of art and design, either by period and region, by groups and brands, or by particular individuals. Depending on the perspective chosen, style has been seen for example as an expression of societal and cultural values, economic forces, or personal traits. However, irrespective of whether style is attributed to a certain culture, brand or person, it usually conceived as a function of the amount of common features in a set of works [3]. In this sense style is understood as a form of repetition and constancy.

However, Walker [17] already argued that the concept of style as something that is primarily rigid and closed tends to lose sight of the fact that style also provides a means of communication and identity formation created and reproduced in social contexts. In a similar vein Wenger 0 pointed out that style is closely linked with discourses "by which members [of a certain community] create meaningful statements about the world" (p. 83). If we assume that the social contexts and discourses in which the participants find themselves in are constantly evolving and inherently polyphonic, a conception of style based on repetition and commonality appears limiting, as it provides no account of the dynamicity of practice and personal development.

Therefore, we suggest reconceptualising style as a particular quality of the relation between an actor and the practices s/he is involved in. More precisely we understand style as reflexive practice, as a reflexive exploration, appropriation, and transformation of situations, resources, and discourses. The development of style hence can be seen as a deliberate and on-going engagement and confrontation with one's own practices in and through which the actors develop a personal yet dynamic stance. Style is neither a competency, a quality of the product nor the process itself, but a reflexive response to the situations the actors find themselves in. Style in this sense signifies a relation between an actor and a practice that is neither dogmatic nor arbitrary. It is not dogmatic in that it is sensitive to the particularities and dynamics of the situation and it is not arbitrary in that it does not relativize value dispositions and the strive for a worthwhile future.

Conceiving style as a relation provides a new perspective for design education, as it transcends both the acquisition of methodological know how as well as the mastery of established practices. Rather it calls for settings that provide fertile soil for the development of style, prompting students to realize the ways in which their practices and the products shape and are shaped by social and cultural context out of which they arise. The development of style thereby relates the students not only to their products and the educational setting, but also to the envisaged users and their practices, to peers, clients, stakeholders, as well as to the professional community at large.

4   CASE STUDY

The above-introduced concept of style can be used by practitioners to shed light on the various ways in which students engage with similar situations. To illustrate how the quest for style might materialize in an educational setting, we present case examples from a field study. The primary intent of the examples is not to assess a particular practice as good or bad, but to raise awareness and sensibility for different enactments and how these shape the educational situation.

The case examples are taken from an extensive field study in a design studio course on interface design at the Muthesius Academy of Fine Arts and Design, carried out by the authors in spring 2013. As part of the study, more than 90 individual feedback sessions held by 17 students, the instructor and a research assistant, have been followed throughout a period of 14 weeks. Under the overall theme "simulation/simulator" the students were asked to define and carry out individual projects.

These feedback sessions in the design studio setting recurrently required the students to update the instructor and the research assistant on the progress made since their last meeting and to pinpoint the issues the students wants to discuss or get feedback on. Furthermore, the sessions typically required the participants to synthesis the results of the discussion and plan for the next steps.

Example 1: The student is trying to make synesthetic phenomena tangible for the user. She is experimenting with combinations of acoustic colour, smell and movement patterns. At the time of the feedback session the project is already well advanced and the concept idea has materialized in an interactive prototype. As the feedback session starts, the student provides no introduction. Neither does she explain the steps that led to the realization of the prototype, its mode of operation, nor does she utter any themes or questions she would like to discuss. Instead, the instructor immediately starts to try out the prototype in order to test the experience provided. Afterwards the instructor goes on to

ask the students how she built and programmed the prototype. The conversation finally turns to the planned project presentation at the end of the term.

Example 2: The student is working on a simulator for the bonding of atoms to be used in chemical education. For the feedback the student has brought in a mind map, a couple of hand drawn sketches, a paper-mock-up of the input devise as well as digital 3D renderings visualizing the bonding process. The student updates the instructor on what he has done the last week, referring to the various design artefacts he had created along the way. Following up on the introduction, the student and the instructor engage in a discussion on the scalability of the concept in a classroom setting and interactively play through a hypothesized educational application scenario. After about 25 minutes the instructor takes a look at his watch and starts to summarize the issues he deems most important. The student takes note in the meanwhile and closes the session by summarizing the upcoming tasks to be carried out.

Example 3: The student is working on an interactive installation aiming to engage two users in the joint creation of a soundscape. At the beginning of the feedback session the student provides the instructor with an overview of the topics he would like to discuss. Drawing on the metaphor of a menu, the student presents these topics as a multi-course dinner, he would like to go through with the instructor. As suggested, the session starts with an overview on the recent accomplishments of the student and then moves on to a try-out of two prototypes by the instructor. Afterwards the student and the instructor, to identify potential directions for the advancement of the student's project idea, discuss the prototypes. At the end of the session the instructor notes to the research assistant that this has been one of the most beautiful introductions to a feedback session, ever.

Even though the educational arrangement is quite similar in all the examples, the three students frame the situation quite differently. While the student in the first example is rather passive and reactive, in that she provides not account on what she has done or would like to discuss, the student in the third example is quite proactive and actively sets up the feedback session. The student in the second case provides an update to the instructor and also identifies those issues that he would like to discuss, but also invites the instructor to comment on and add to the suggested agenda.

With the way the students open up the feedback session they, at least implicitly, indicate how they expect the session to be enacted. They also assume or refuse responsibility for the situation. In leaving the floor to the instructor, the first student to some extent refuses responsibility while the third student explicitly claims responsibility both for the contents as well as the procedure of the feedback session. The second student, in turn, positions the session rather as a joint endeavour in which he is interested in the instructors contributions.

However, even though the students frame the situation quite actively, even when acting passively, the actual enactment of the feedback session inevitably also relies on the instructor's responses to the students' moves. He is neither forced to take the lead in the first case, or be guided in the third one, nor does he have to accept the role of an active contributor in the second case. Rather in the way he responds to the students' moves he signals it to be an appropriate or inappropriate move or even declare it to be an exceptional one.

The examples provide a glimpse into the variety of ways in which students might respond to and engage with the feedback sessions in a design studio course. It becomes apparent that, rather than being a static container predefined and orchestrated by the instructor, the educational situation is a joint performance of the students and the instructor. As such, it provides an arena in which the participants constantly learn about but also probe into what are deemed to be appropriate moves and what are not. The instructor allows the students space to explore style as a reflexive response to the feedback setting rather than predetermines certain methods or establishing best practices.

5   IMPLICATIONS FOR DESIGN EDUCATION

We have argued that style is not a static attribute but a quality of the dynamic relation between an actor and the practice s/he is involved in. The development of style is an open-ended process emerging from on-going practical engagements. Based on a set of example cases we have shown that one and the same educational setting can be enacted in quite different ways, enactments in which students' personal stances take shape and evolve.

As a relational quality, style cannot be traced to a single situation, but at best becomes apparent as a transforming pattern across a series of situations. Yet, in each situation we can spot the expectations the actors bring to bear and how others take these up. Turning focus on how students stick to or reinforce particular framings of a situations and whether they urge for canonical or non-canonical

practices we can get some idea on whether students insist on some established practice, whether they accept any external demands without resistance or whether they try to broaden their scope of action in response to the particular situation they are confronted with.

The concept of style, as introduced in this paper, has several important implications for design education. First, it forces us to reconsider the prime objectives of design education. Neither the skilful command of tools or methods nor the mastery of established practices can be an end in itself. Rather, design education needs to empower students to become "reflexive fellow players" and engage in the constant advancement of design as social and political endeavour. Second, the educational situation has to be reconsidered as a performative encounter in which students and teachers (re-)negotiate the appropriate moves to be taken. The question hence is less on what it takes to be an excellent teacher or which approaches are most suitable to train a particular skill, but how can situations be created that enable students to engage in both canonical and non-canonical practices. Finally, it also calls for a shift in research on design education from generic models and best practices towards the situated nature of educational encounters that are not only framed by teachers and institutions aspirations but also by the students expectations and understandings.

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