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Learning through experience and teaching strategies outside the classroom at design university studies

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Abstract

Working outside the classroom, immersed in a professional and/or everyday setting, generates a tension which results in a kind of learning experience, which, for certain disciplines, is more complete and engaged than the “simulated” knowledge provided within an academic environment. Knowledge acquired through experience is deposited as part of the subject actor and therefore becomes part of an indelible remembrance in a person's memory.

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Keywords: Outside classroom; Exercise; Learning by doing; Participatory teaching; Generative teaching; Systemic approach

1. Introduction

This is a research and reflection article on the teaching benefits of moving teaching actions to non-academic contexts, outside the classroom. Apart from taking into account the effect caused by interactions with professional and everyday world, it also focuses on the conception of a university class as a research area. University learning understood as a research activity leads to a learnt through experience knowledge, not only in practical classes but also in theory classes.

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The hypothesis focuses on the practice of university teaching of design, even though it can be easily extrapolated to other disciplines. Following this approach, the unifying thread of the discourse is based on study cases experienced by the author herself and on observations deriving from her teaching practice. In addition, all this is decontextualised with examples from other teaching initiatives belonging to the same medium and show converging point of views.

This essay-study has been developed within the Research Group investigation program Design Processes. Advanced Practices in Art and Design, EINA, University School of Design and Art attached to the Autonomous University of Barcelona. Narrative discourse and the theoretic referents used are part of the Culture of design perspective that predominates in the Research Group.

Working outside the classroom, immersed in a professional and/or everyday setting, generates a tension which results in a kind of learning experience that may be more complete and engaged than the “simulated” knowledge provided within the academic environment. Knowledge acquired through experience is deposited as part of the identity of the subject actor and therefore becomes part of an indelible remembrance in a person's memory. Consequently, academic content is not seen as external information with which contact is made on certain occasions, but it is interiorised so that it becomes part of the student's personality as an individual experience.

In terms of the teaching that learning through experience requires, teachers must give the teaching side of their work a “generative” objective, where the main challenge is not conveying their knowledge but helping students generate their own. For example, facilitating procedures instead of determining formalisations. In this text, the “educational teaching / generative teaching” duality comes from the analogy made of research types. In effect, “generative research” can be distinguished from “educational research” because its objective is to generate knowledge for society instead of expanding that of the researcher (Sanders & Stappers, 2013).

2. Experience and systemic vision

In situations outside the protection of academia, teachers relinquish some of their responsibilities and transfer them to the students giving them autonomy and self-responsibility, as here the decision to defer a submission or accept bad work in exchange for a lower grade does not lie with them. Therefore, the decisions that are taken become more transcendent and engaged and the attitude of thoroughness in all phases of the project becomes an inescapable exercise.

On a Visual Arts Workshop that I run (until 2014) as part of the Design Degree at EINA, University School of Design and Art attached to the Autonomous University of Barcelona, we develop an exhibition project in all its stages, from content creation through to installation. When inaugurating the exhibition at an artistic centre, for example, the weight of reality is imposed on the project and there is no room for delay. To resolve last-minute problems, students need a critical eye, be able to react and show formal flexibility that would not require the “simulated” project being submitted to the class. The exhibition content creation process is also continuously being tested with/for “real” contexts by working in collaboration with agents outside academia. For example, during the 2013-2014 academic year, with the team from the Can Castells Sant Boi Arts Centre (culture technicians, exhibition room managers, audiovisual creator, maintenance manager), the “Street Artists” group of interns from the Benito Meni de Sant Boi mental health centre and their teacher, suppliers, visitors to the exhibition, the people in charge of budgets, etc.

Finally, students do not only work to fulfil the requirements set out in the subject programme, but with a view to how visitors to the exhibition will assess their work and the possibilities of curriculum continuity or acquisition via the project.

The exercise, therefore, is not an isolated unit, but is viewed from a systemic vision, in other words, as an integral part of an interdependent whole of actor agents and contextual circumstances where academic and professional methodologies merge. Immersion in this complex system is part of learning by doing, as not only do the students study how to do things, but they do them directly. In the book entitled, *Design Education. Learning, Teaching and Researching Through Design*, Philippa Lyon devotes a chapter to “Learning Through Doing”: “Although they are learning how to be fashion designers by being fashion designers” (2011:81).

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