

Viewpoint

Philosophy applied to design: A design research teaching method



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From September 2005 to June 2013, I was in charge of several philosophy courses at the well-known school of art and design, called École Boulle (www.ecole-boulle.org), in Paris, France. One of these courses was part of a 2-year postgraduate programme in design called in France ‘Diplôme Supérieur d’Arts Appliqués’ (DSAA), which awards a degree equivalent to the first year of a Master’s Design course. Within this programme, students are split into two groups corresponding to two disciplines: product design and what we call in France ‘spatial design’ (which includes various design disciplines such as interior design, landscape design, exhibition design, environment design, architecture, etc.)

During the second and final year of the programme (what we call ‘année de diplôme’ or graduation year), all courses were organised around a central curriculum, i.e. a personal design project (what we call ‘projet de diplôme’ or graduation project). Overseen by two design professors who were often

former professional designers, students had to choose a topic (design theme), identify a realistic context for their project (a place or a building, a market segment or a sector of usage, etc.), define the commission and specifications of the project (possibly based on a real client within an actual partnership), and individually prepare a complete design project resulting, at the end of the year, in a presentation to a jury of professors and outside professionals. In parallel with this work on the design project, students were asked to write a dissertation of approximately 10 000 words (60 000 characters) with the main requirement being that it had to be linked to their design project. This thesis, developed and undertaken during the first term, was given to the members of the jury several weeks before the final presentation.

Such a pedagogical environment will probably not surprise anyone as it is in no way exceptional: apart from a few details, it is in line with the current global educational standards of a Master’s in Design. However, it differentiates itself through a remarkable feature: the dissertation that students had to write was a philosophy thesis and therefore had to be supervised by a professor of philosophy. The reason why the students were required

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to write a philosophy thesis came from the French national design education policy (led by the ‘Inspection générale d’arts appliqués’). The motivation for combining philosophy and design in this unconventional way was to stimulate students ability to connect theory and practice, to develop their capacity to create a personal and original theorizing approach of their design project, and finally to make them think about their social responsibility as designers.

This was my role for 8 years, until the official rules of this programme changed because of a new design education policy¹ (and, in the same time, I moved to the University of Nîmes). During this period (2005–2013), I oversaw the philosophy theses of more than 220 students, both in product design and spatial design. To do this, I gradually developed a design research methodology, which I called ‘philosophy applied to design,’ and which is an attempt to answer to a series of methodological issues (teaching research questions) and epistemological issues (theory research questions) on the association between philosophy and design:

- 1) Methodological issues: How to create a philosophy thesis relating to a design project? How to approach such a relationship so that it can make sense for both the philosopher (anxious to develop theoretical concepts) and the designer (anxious to design practical solutions)? How to create a philosophy thesis applied to design?
- 2) Epistemological issues: How to approach the juxtaposition of design and philosophy? How to define a common understanding between them? How to get them to create knowledge together, but a knowledge that does not belong more to one than the other but that is the result of their coming together?

I do not pretend today to have answered these questions. Nevertheless, it is while trying to answer them *under the pedagogical pressure* of my daily teaching with students that I have

gradually started to create a methodological model, of which I argue today that it is a first educational response to the epistemological issues that I have just raised and, hopefully, that it can be a useful tool for teachers interested in this kind of interdisciplinary approach.

I Pedagogical organisation

To better understand the organisation put in place, it should first be noted that I had to supervise 2 groups of about 15 students (one group in product design and the other in spatial design) every week for three hours during the first term only. Courses started at the beginning of September and ended in February.

First, I divided the work into 3 stages corresponding to 3 main objectives:

- 1) *September-October*: choose a thesis topic, that is to say, define a title, a theme, an issue and a bibliography (these being understood to be provisional and subject to continuous revisions);
- 2) *November-December*: develop the plan of the thesis and write a short synopsis comprising of an introduction, a plan divided into three parts and an updated bibliography; the first part of the thesis had to be informative (taking stock of the subject), the second had to be reflective (addressing a contemporary issue); and the third had to be prescriptive (promoting an idea);
- 3) *January-February*: fully write the thesis in the form of a typed text of approximately 10 000 words (60 000 characters) respecting the typographical rules in use in French publishing and the editorial standards in use in the French academic world; the thesis had to include a cover page, an introduction, three parts, a conclusion, and a bibliography.

Second, for each of these periods, the course took the form of a research seminar, which included a form of group maieutics. Each week, for three

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