

CREATING INSPIRATION IN DESIGN EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT

In design education the topic ‘sources of inspiration’ is strongly related to the search for inspiration in the context of a specific design assignment. Yet developing oneself as a designer also asks for a search for inspiration on a more personal level: to be inspired *to be a designer*, to develop oneself as a creative person. Design education should acknowledge the importance of this search for personal inspiration, and stimulate, facilitate and reward this process. To do so, we need insights in this process; we need to understand what being inspired actually means, and what tools and techniques we could develop to support the development of it. This article explores the concept of personal inspiration, by unravelling the concept in different themes. These insights will serve as starting points for the development of tools and techniques to create inspiration in design education.

Keywords: Sources of inspiration, engagement, personal development

1 INTRODUCTION

To become a designer is not only a matter of learning design skills. It is to develop oneself as a creative person: an authentic personality with a strong drive to explore new paths and to create new possibilities [1]. This personal development needs to be supported and nurtured by inspiration from different sources: people, projects, environments, role models and so on.

Yet, despite the awareness of the importance of inspiration in design, design education mainly focuses on the development of design *thinking* and design *making*, offering tools, techniques and methods supporting inspiration *in the design context*. It seems that these approaches take the process of ‘being inspired’ on the level of personal development for granted. Our position is that to support personal development of designers as creative people, design education should acknowledge that ‘being inspired’ is a process that needs to be actively nurtured and encouraged.

The question is: how can we support design students to actively seek for sources of inspiration, especially on a personal level of developing oneself as an authentic design personality? To address this question, we need to gain insight in what the process of being inspired actually consist of.

Next, we need to understand how this process is perceived and experienced by design students.

This paper will present the results of three different studies on inspiration in creative development and the resulting implications and recommendations for design education. These three studies are a first explorative attempt, to set the stage for further research on the topic.

2 RESEARCH APPROACH

To explore and create insight in the phenomenon of ‘being inspired’ in one’s development as a creative person, three studies were carried out, each addressing the phenomenon from a different perspective. First, the domain of artists of different disciplines was explored, assuming that designers may learn from the artistic domain. 70 interviews with creative artists were collected from a series of weekly articles in a Dutch newspaper, published from July 2009 till December 2010. The core question addressed in these articles was “which artist inspired you in your artistic development?”. The interviews were analysed from a grounded theory perspective: What themes emerge from these interviews? How do these themes describe the phenomenon of being inspired?

Next, to explore the world of inspiration of design students, we asked the students participating in the class Reflection on Designing to give an overview of what inspires them as designers. Not in a specific design context, but in general. To do so, they had to create a small mind map of ten branches. The students had 10 minutes to complete their mind map, the maps were handed in right after the class. To get an overview of these sources of inspiration, the results were analysed on type of category that were

mentioned, on frequency of occurrence of these categories, and on ways in which these categories were described.

Finally, to assess the usefulness of actively searching for other persons as sources of inspiration in design education, students were asked to write an essay about 'which person inspired them in their development as a designer'. Again, the essays were analysed on categories of people that were mentioned, and on what themes emerged from the description of these people.

3 RESULTS

3.1 Interviews with artist

A first observation from the interviews with artists from different disciplines is that artists are often most inspired by an artist from another discipline than their own. Sculptors may be inspired by composers, composers by theatre directors, painters by writers and so on. All combinations are possible. One of the key issues in being inspired seems to be the fact that one is not only an admirer of the other artist, but one is also stimulated to *do* something with the work of the other. Being inspired is *being triggered* to consider how the insights gained from the other may be translated and *used* in one's own domain. And maybe this is less likely to happen within one domain, because using the other as a source of inspiration may feel too close to copying. The following paragraphs describe the different aspects that characterize the phenomenon of being inspired.

3.1.1 Strong experiences and emotions

All interviews start with a description of the strong emotions involved in the encounter with the work of the artist. "It was love on first sight". These emotions do not necessarily need to be positive, one may initially experience discomfort, but it eventually becomes admiration, fascination, and the longing for more.

3.1.2 Characteristics of the artist, his work and his working style

In the interviews, artists take great trouble to define what it is exactly that fascinates them in the one who inspires them. These characteristics may concern the specific work of the artist, but also his character, his life style, his struggle, and so on.

3.1.3 Recognition of a soul mate

A prerequisite for inspiration seems to be the experience of recognizing oneself in the other: of recognizing a soul mate. It is this recognition that starts of the whole process: one feels acknowledged that one is not alone, that what one is doing is actually meaningful.

3.1.4 New perspectives on shared topics and challenges

Being inspired by somebody combines the experience of recognition, of being soul mates to the experience of new perspectives and new possibilities to explore. Being only a soul mate is a mere 'feel good' experience. Vice versa, seeing new perspectives without feeling connected is alienating. It is the combination of recognition *and* of new perspectives, which triggers inspiration. Artists emphasize that other artists are able to articulate what they are trying to achieve themselves. This aspect of inspiration asks for an open mind, a letting go of one's own fixed thoughts.

3.1.5 Engaging with the work of the artist

The relationship with the work of an inspiring artist is a story that evolves in time. There is always a first encounter, and this encounter may be coincidental, but once the artist is triggered and fascinated, true inspiration comes from a deepening of the understanding of the other. This deepening asks for an active and engaged approach. One 'follows' the inspiring artist, by visiting exhibitions, performances, by reading, by actually encountering the artist, and so on.

3.1.6 Feeling encouraged and supported

Finding one's own path as an artist is a difficult process, it takes courage to do so. Inspiring artists are experienced as sources of *strength and encouragement* in the process of personal development, of doing the things your own way, of leaving behind the safety of conventions and of well-known paths.

3.1.7 What can I do with it?

Inspiration is only experienced as true inspiration when one is able to formulate how one can incorporate the new insights in one's own work. The most important question is: how does this relate to my own work? What insights does it provide me for myself to go on with? Without this step, admiration and fascination do not lead to inspiration.



Figure 1. The work of the sculpture Giacometti is an important source of inspiration for the theatre director Hans Croiset. The sculptures show the search for pureness, for the essence. Leaving out 'the flesh' is exactly what Croiset is trying to achieve in his plays

3.1.8 Concluding on artists being inspired by artists

Most importantly, the artists show that to be inspired by other artists is not just something that happens to you. To be inspired by an artist may start with a spark, but most of all the process asks for an *active, open-minded engagement*: one needs to invest time and effort to become inspired, and to be able to incorporate the gained insights in one's own work.

The themes derived from the interviews with artists offer starting points for design students to formulate questions for their own search for inspiration, such as: whose work gives me strong emotions? Whose work feels familiar to my own? Who is my soul-mate? Who opens up new spaces and perspectives? Who gives me strength and self-confidence? And so on.

3.2 Mind maps of design students

Once we have a first insight in the aspects that seem to be essential for artists to be inspired by other artist, we move to the domain of design students themselves, to explore their world of inspiration. First, to get an overview of sources of inspiration in general (thus *not* in the context of a specific design exercise), 56 design students of the course 'Reflection on Designing' completed a mind map with the assignment to name 10 sources of inspiration for them as designers. The results were categorized by 'type of source'. The motivation for this exercise was to get insights in the world of inspiration that go beyond the cliché "inspiration is everywhere". The results show that inspiration can actually be found everywhere, yet one has to focus and to name it to actually experience it as such. Figure 2 shows the 7 most prevalent categories of 18 in total, and the percentage of students that named these categories.

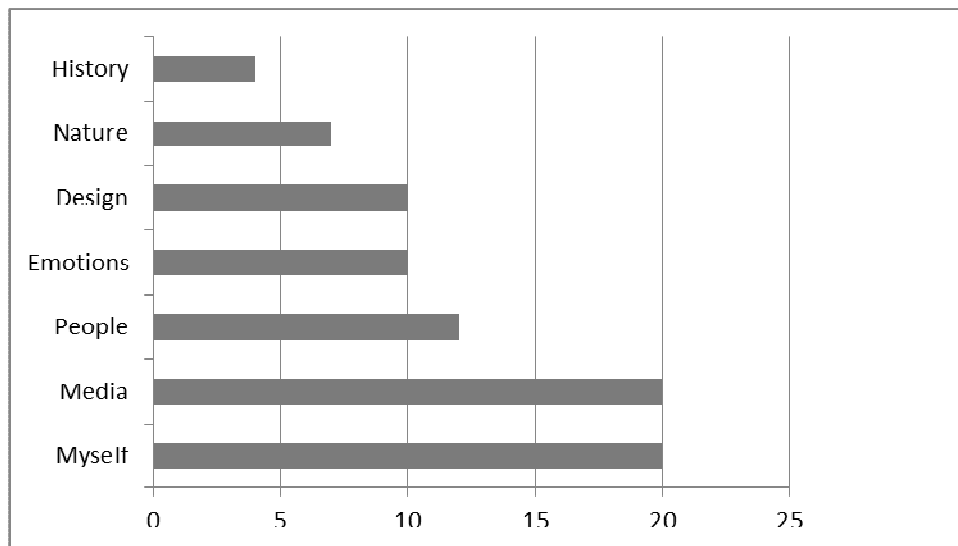


Figure 2. Categories of people who inspired design students in their development as a creative person, and percentage of students reporting in that category

It is surprising that 20 % of the students reported themselves as a source of inspiration. Moreover, many sources are described as active and engaged behaviour of the student: walking in the street, meeting people, going to places, listening to music, and so on, thus underscoring the insights obtained from the first study. Inspiration derives from a personal and engaged attitude.

When classifying the results, it became clear that within one category, for example 'People', the results reported in the mind maps differed in level of abstraction. Some students would only report 'people', others would state 'people in the street', or would name specific people such as 'my friends', or very specific such as 'Rebecca' (see figure 3 for other examples). Again, these levels of abstraction reflect the level of engagement that is involved. Just mentioning a domain such as 'Art', may give a direction of where to look, but it is only once one is engaging in art by following the work of an artist, by visiting exhibitions, etc, that inspiration actually occurs. One could say that to make a domain actually a rich source of inspiration, one needs to look for ways to engage with this domain. Inspiration is not only about *where* you look but *how* you look.

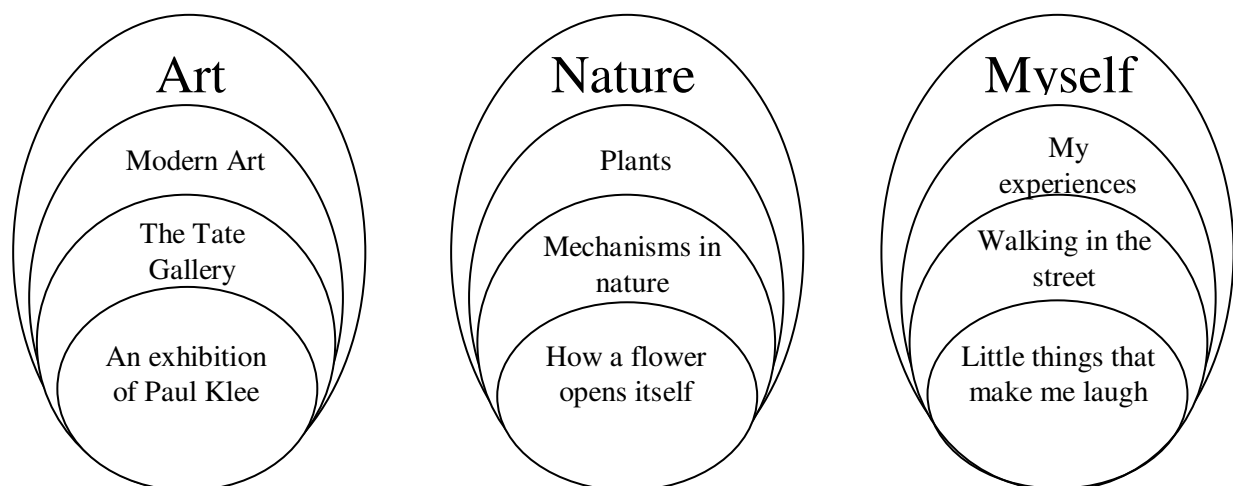


Figure 3. The different levels of abstraction in descriptions of sources of inspiration

3.2.1 Concluding on sources of inspiration for design students

The findings underscore the previous insights that inspiration involves active engagement. Moreover, they show that sources of inspiration are not abstract concepts 'out there' to be encountered; inspiration occurs in the *situated interactions* with these sources of inspiration. Moreover, inspiration

is therefore as much to be found within oneself as in the other. This offers refreshing starting points for exercises to encourage students to develop inspiration: what is inspiring about yourself? What do you do that inspires you? This starting point will eventually lead to a more abstract overview of possible sources of inspiration and of ways to interact with these sources.

3.3 Essays of design students on ‘inspiring people’

During the course Reflection on Designing, the students wrote an essay of approximately 800 words about who inspired them in their development as a creative person. 97 students completed the assignment. The students reported that they initially experienced great difficulty to find such a person, because they were not aware that people may play such a role in their lives. But once they became aware of the phenomenon, and once they found such a person, deepening the insights in the relationship with such a person proved to be very rewarding and inspiring indeed. Students reported to be thankful that they were asked to actively explore this phenomenon. Figure 3 shows the categories of people that were described, and the percentage of students reporting in this category. A surprising result is that 60 % of the students are inspired by a person from their personal environment (a family member, a friend, a teacher in high school), a person that has nothing to do with the design domain. Only 10% of the students reported being inspired by a designer. In addition, the essays reflect the themes explored in the previous section on artists being inspired by artists. The most dominant themes are: ‘being stimulated and encouraged to undertake creative activities, to go on, to dare to do it in your own way’ and ‘seeing new perspectives, new possibilities’.

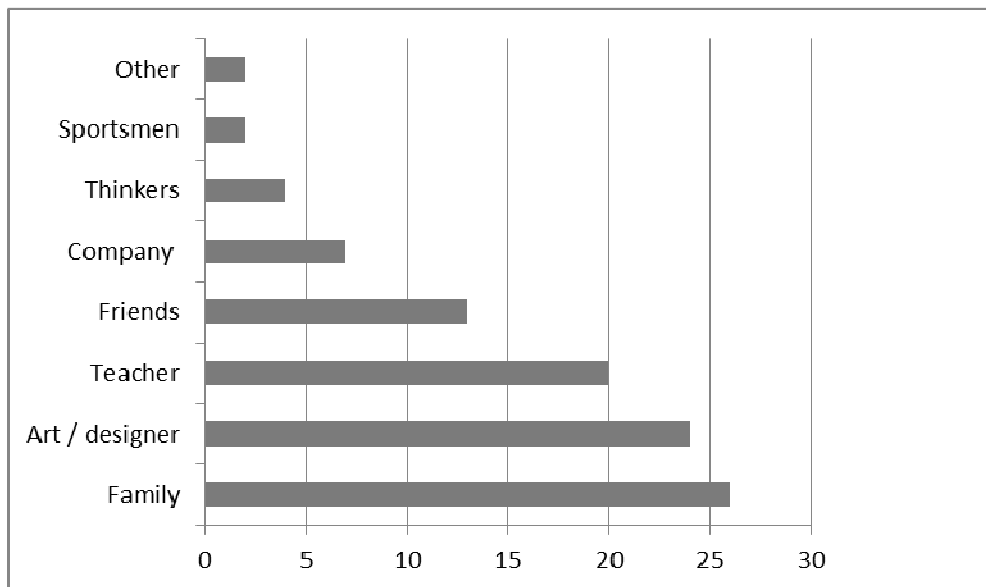


Figure 4. Categories of people who inspired design students in their development as a creative person, and percentage of students reporting in that category

3.3.1 Concluding on design students being inspired by other people

The students show that to actively search for people who inspired them as a creative person is eye-opening, rewarding and inspiring in itself, despite the initial troubles to be able to look at oneself from this perspective. The fact that most students describe people from their direct environment could be incorporated in the brief in future exercises, to facilitate this search.

4 IMPLICATIONS FOR DESIGN EDUCATION

The studies presented in this paper offer refreshing starting points to put the development of “Inspiration” on the agenda of design education. To start with, the studies show that ‘being inspired’ is not a passive state of mind, but an active state of being engaged with one’s environment. To be inspired is a competence that one needs to develop. The encompassing conclusion is that searching for sources of inspiration is an active process combining discipline and spontaneity, mindlessness and mindfulness, receptive waiting and active searching. These findings were taken as a starting point to

formulate implications for the design domain: creating awareness, showing role models and stimulating an active and engaged behaviour.

4.1 Awareness: Inspiration is created through active engagement

Students tend to report that “inspiration is everywhere”. Yet, when asked to be more concrete, students report that to describe what and who inspires them is a difficult task. Not because they are not inspired, but because they do not look at themselves and at the people around them from that perspective. Making students aware of the importance of nurturing one’s capacities to be inspired proved to be an inspiring event in itself. Design curricula should provide such eye-openers.

4.2 Behaviour: continuous engagement of the student with different disciplines

To look for inspiration is a continuous activity of being engaged with one’s environment, of being nurtured with what one encounters. This is a broader perspective on inspiration than merely looking for sources of inspiration in a specific design context (that is: looking for design solutions). In addition, it is clear that encountering creative people from other disciplines than one’s own largely contributes to one’s creative development. Design education should address this level of inspiration by showing role models from different design domains (architecture, graphic design, fashion, and so on), and by offering activities that feed the student on this level (such as: excursions, lectures, exhibitions and documentaries).

4.3 Tools & Techniques to stimulate, facilitate and reward the search for inspiration

In the creative industries, it is demonstrated that supporting and encouraging the search for sources of inspiration empowers the design process and increases the quality of the resulting design. It is acknowledged that to stimulate the search for sources of inspiration, companies should *encourage* designers’ continuous research by exploiting designers’ private *enthusiasms*, and by setting aside time for research and *rewarding* designers for doing it. The present paper suggests that design education should be likewise: stimulating, facilitating and rewarding inspiration as a process per se, taking the student’s enthusiasm and curiosity as starting points. Future tools and techniques need to be developed to support such processes. For example, nowadays, we encourage students to work on their design portfolio; likewise, we could encourage students to work on their ‘inspiration portfolio’. To start with, by offering them exercises based on the insights as described in this paper.

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