

HUMANISTIC PERSPECTIVES ON DESIGN EDUCATION: TOOLS FOR REFLECTION

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ABSTRACT

Designing is not merely problem solving or facing challenges. It is also taking a personal position and responsibility about what a *good* solution to the problem is, and about what challenges are to be addressed. Designing therefore touches on our personal values. Design education needs to support design students in becoming aware of these ethical aspects of designing, and support them in creating their own world view: what are their personal values? What responsibilities do they take? How do they make their choices? This paper describes a set of tools for reflection, to support students in this process of personal development. The tools are based on a humanistic perspective on education.

Keywords: Design values, personal design positions, tools for reflection

1 INTRODUCTION

The underlying values of humanistic education are that people are responsible for the development of their own world view, their own set of values to live by, and their own sources of inspiration to support them in this development. Applying these humanistic values to design education, implies that designers need to develop their own vision on their position as designers in society, and moreover, to develop a set of values that guide them finding and developing this position. Values to design from become thereby strongly related to personal values to live by.

With this humanistic perspective in mind, several courses at the faculty of Industrial Design in Delft are offered to support the student in the development of his personal position in designing. For example, The master course Reflection on Designing offers inspiring guest lectures of professionals from different creative design fields to present their position and the personal values they design from. Next, the master course Graduation & Career planning offers several workshops in which students explore what they stand for and how they can find their position in the design world starting from this personal aspiration. Both courses support this exploration of personal values through the creation of ego-documents: essays about oneself as a designer, personal profiles, roadmaps to graduation and career, etc.

During these courses it became clear that students experience difficulties in formulating these positions in one attempt. The question "Who am I as a designer?" is too vast and complex to be addressed at once. Moreover, asking students to create ego-documents may suggest that a personal position is an end result, finalized and frozen in time. This neglects the fact that developing a personal position is a vital process, continuously changing throughout one's life, inspired and fed by the circumstances and experiences one has and reflects upon.

Therefore, to focus the student's attention on *the process of reflecting* rather than on the end result of reflection, a series of weekly exercises is developed to break down the complex question about design position into different aspects. Moreover, these exercises allow the student to discover how, through reflection, one can use different sources of inspiration to develop one's own position, to discover one's own values, these exercises are presented as *tools for reflection*.

The development of the tools for reflection is inspired by the humanistic domain of the 'art of living', a perspective on life developed by Michel Foucault[1], who proposes the perspective of 'life as a work of art'. Again, not as an end result, but as an ongoing, vital and growing process. Within the tradition of the 'art of living', humanistic trainers offer several assignments to support their course participants to explore their own set of values, their aspirations, and their possibilities and responsibilities to develop one's life to actually meet these goals and values (see for example the site of the Humanistic Organization in the Netherlands www.humanistischverbond.nl).

This paper describes the tools for reflection developed for design students to explore their personal design position and gives examples of student's results in using these tools. The paper describes the effects of these tools on the process of the design students to formulate a coherent reflection on the development of their design vision.

2 TOOLS FOR REFLECTION

For the Master course Reflections on Designing we developed a set of weekly exercises to support Design students to discover their values, their sources of inspirations and aspirations, their talents, and thereby discovering the themes that construct their design vision.

2.1 'Inspiring people' reflection

The first assignment is based on the insight that developing one's personal set of beliefs and values is not an internal, individual process disconnected from the outside world. It is a process developed in contact and relationship with others, through inspirational encounters. One needs to be aware of this mechanism, and take responsibility to actively look for these sources of inspiration, to 'feed' oneself with inspiration. Like for food, one cannot do without.

To create this awareness for the importance of taking care of seeking one's sources of inspiration, the first assignment asks students to explore who has already inspired them in their development as a creative person.

Assignment

Who inspired you in your development as a creative person?

Often, this first assignment elicits some initial resistance, because it is taken literally in the context of design: "I don't have such a person in my life". After a while, when reflecting on what inspiration actually means, students discover that they *were* inspired, supported and encouraged, particularly by the people most close to them: their parents, grandparents, high school teachers, etc (Fig. 1 a). Next, some *do* already have heroes from the design fields, and because of that other become aware that they need these heroes (fig 1.b), and start looking for them.



Figure 1 . Inspiring people. (On the left): "My grandmother always came up with ideas about creating something together: jewels, drawings, baking cookies. She is the one who awakened the passion for creation in me". (On the right): "Philip Star was my parent's favourite designer, our house was full of his designs, he created the world in which I grew up

2.2 'Inspiring events' reflection

The second assignment is based on the insight that to be able to develop a personal position, one needs to feel connected to the world and has to feel that one can make a difference. One has to have a sense of being able to have an effect.

Assignment

What did you encounter this week in the media, in the street, at home, that triggered you as a designer? When did you think "This is where I, as a designer, can make a difference"?

The results show that this is a refreshing assignment, it is often experienced as an eye-opener: “my education *is* about the real world around me and not something abstract”. The exercise is highly motivating. At the same time, it shows that people are designers *because* they have an eye for what, according to them, could or should be changed in society. In that case, the assignment deepens their insights in what kind of effects they are after.

2.3 ‘Inspiring pieces of art’ reflection

During the course Graduation & Career planning the students are asked to bring to the class an image of an art work that particularly inspires them. In class, the students, in groups of 3, describe to each other what aspects of the work of art inspires them. Next, together they try to discover how these aspects represent design values that matter to them, and explore how these values can play a role in finding an appropriate graduation project. The assignment shows that art can be inspiring on a deeper level than the level of the meaning it represents. Art allows discovering what personal values are touched and resonate. Using art as source of inspiration rather than examples of well-designed objects allows students to explore and deepen values from a more poetic, subtle perspective (figure 2).



Figure 2. Examples of inspiring art work. On the left, a student presented the work of Escher, and discovered that to her it matters that a design is thoroughly thought through, in every detail, but with a playful twist, as if playing with the extreme possibilities of technology seems to touch the impossible. On the right, a student presented land art of Richard Long, and discovered a specific aspect of sustainability: the humbleness of not wanting to last forever, of allowing nature to erase

2.4 ‘Scenario’ reflection

Discovering where one stands for, and what one wants to achieve, can be explored by imagining the future. What scenarios are attractive? What happens on a regular day in the future?

Assignment

Describe a day in your life in 10 years from now. Your description will start with ‘ I wake up’, and ends with ‘ and I fall asleep’. You may choose any format you want: text, storyboards, animations, etc. The goal is to make you aware of what topics come to your mind when you think of yourself in the future.

The results show that this kind of exercises make students aware of the fact that professional and private life are intertwined and developed simultaneously. Again, these worlds are not disconnected. Most students, in 10 years from now, imagine waking up next to a loved one, with some little kids running around the house. Professional life in most cases is very busy and complex. Most students dream of a life as an independent designer with a design agency. The value of this dreaming is two-fold: first to discover *what* one’s dreams are, what values they stand for, and next, to reflect on what needs to happen to make these dream come true. The later gives direction to the way they do their master projects and in the choices they make regarding their graduation project.

2.5 'Alternative lives' reflections

Students have more than one talent and more than one aspiration or dream to live for. Possible alternative lives are pleasant to explore, and offer insights in talents that are not yet explored, values that are maybe not lived by. Reflecting on these alternative lives offers the possibility to give meaning and direction to one's personal development as a designer.

Assignment

Currently, you are doing a master at the faculty Industrial Design in Delft.

Describe 5 possible other lives that you could be living right now, lives that would 'fit you'.

Maybe you could be studying journalism, be a midwife, an actor, etc.

There are no restrictions, as long as this parallel life really resonates with who you are.

Give a brief description of these 5 lives, and how they connect to you.

The results show a big diversity in what other lives may have been lived instead of the design path, indeed revealing a student's personal talents and dreams. Yet, some alternatives are mentioned more frequently than others. This may represent a shared experience of the values and needs of a designer. Examples of such alternatives are: being a teacher, being a researcher, being a journalist, and last but not least: being a traveller or adventurer.

This assignment, next to giving energy, also caused some negative effects. As one student wrote: "after doing the exercise, I felt sorry for myself. All these beautiful options that will not happen". It is important to emphasize that the exercise is not meant to discover what you are *not* to become, but to understand what your talents and aspirations are, and how to incorporate them in your personal development as a designer.

2.6 'Creative achievements' reflection

Designing is a broader domain than doing design exercises at the Faculty for educational purposes. One may consider every creative act as a design act. Yet, design exercises at the faculty are often entangled with restrictions and formats that may limit the experience of designing something really great, that one is really proud of. These entanglements in turn may blur a student's feel for what he is actually proud of, what he considers as design that really represents himself as a designer.

Reflecting on creative acts, outside the educational setting, that one is really proud of, gives insights in what makes design valuable, and develops the sense of *being* valuable as a designer.

Assignment

Describe three creative achievements, that you were/are proud of and made you happy: 1. When you were a little kid, 2. When you were a teen ager, 3. During your education as an industrial designer.

It may be something you made (an object, poem, tree house) or that you organized (party, diner, political manifestation) as long as it is something that shows your creative thinking.

What makes you proud/happy of these achievements?

What do they show about you?

The results show that students have no difficulties in finding these examples and the red thread that they represent. Often these examples shed new light on the student's design talents and values, by broadening their understanding of design thinking as creative thinking.

2.7 'Conversation with oneself' reflections

We talk to ourselves. Often without being aware of it, but we do have many internal voices, representing different perspectives on ourselves. Creating a dialogue between the self and the self, sheds light on the characteristics of these voices and the content of these conversations. These dialogues often represent dilemma's one is struggling with, and thereby represent conflicting values.

To explore these voices the following assignment is developed. (Because of its more intimate character, handing in the assignment is optional).

Assignment

In this assignment you will have a conversation with yourself.

Describe a theatre scene in which you are miraculously duplicated into two: you and yourself. First, describe the setting in which the conversation takes place: are you at the beach, walking in a forest, washing the dishes together? Etc.

Next, describe the conversation in the format of a dialogue:

Me: ...

Myself: ...

Me: ..

Etc.

Feel free to include bodily gestures or other behaviour. This is a free-flow assignment. Just start writing the conversation and see what comes up. DO NOT have a plan on forehand. The scene should be approximately one A4, but don't stop if you still feel in that flow.

The assignments that are handed in show that the voices do have a very different character, often one voice represents 'authority' or 'common sense' as opposed to a more deeply felt voice of the 'longing'. Some students actually managed to resolve their dilemma in this assignment. But when this is not the case, at least the assignment supports the student to unravel what voices are talking, shouting, or timidly whispering inside of him.

2.8 Conclusions

The assignments presented in this section are developed to support students in their exploration of the question about who they are as a designer. The results show that the assignments are energizing, students like to do them. Several asked "Do you have more of such tools for reflection?"

The collection of tools is endless. Once one is familiar with their characteristics, mechanism and effects, one can use any input to reflect on, by discovering what values and aspirations are revealed through that particular input. Eventually, one can create assignments of one's own, that fit one best.

Regardless of discovering what assignments fit one best, the overall conclusion is: tools for reflection are to be used continuously. Students actually discover that reflection is a process, and, maybe paradoxically, that the result of what one is reflecting on is also a process. "I would like to do this course again next year" is a comment frequently heard, and "It's a shame we do not have this kind of courses earlier in the curriculum". "Never stop reflecting" is the overall conclusion that students discover. No matter how you do it, as long as you do it.

3 DEVELOPING PERSONAL VALUES & VIRTUES IN DESIGN

"A personal value is a belief, a mission, or a philosophy that is meaningful. Whether we are consciously aware of them or not, every individual has a core set of personal values. Values can range from the commonplace, such as the belief in hard work and punctuality, to the more psychological, such as self-reliance, concern for others, and harmony of purpose. Roy Posner [2]."

Eventually, all tools for reflection lead to the overall and underlying goal to discover what values one has to live by and to design from. Contrarily to what students expect, these values are not abstract to explore by mere abstract thinking, but connected to one's life, showing in one's behaviour, as one's virtues. The different assignments described in the previous section allow students to explore their values from these different 'lived' perspectives: from different sources of inspiration, from different aspects of their lives, from different events they envisioned and realized in this world.

Yet, one does not want to end up with a mere collection of individual values. In the end, this collection of values becomes meaningful when to be combined into one coherent story, to discover how they are related to each other, how they strengthen or weaken each other, how they create dilemma's and tension fields. To start with, students are asked to make an overview of the values that emerged from the previous assignments. Next, they are asked to explore how these values show in their personal lives and designing. Eventually, students are asked to compose an essay where these values and virtues are brought together in relation to each other.

Assignment:

Create an overview of your personal values. For your most important values (the ones YOU like best, not necessarily the most important for society!), briefly describe situations in the world around you, where you observe the dynamics of these values: where they are met or where they are not met at all.

Personal values become personal virtues when your own actions show these values. Create an overview of your most important virtues (again, the ones YOU like best), and briefly describe situations in your own life where your actions showed these virtues.

The results show that although the tools for reflection are supportive, students still find this overall assignment on personal values difficult to complete. Students need support in structuring and creating the overview, support in seeing the relationships, tension fields and mutual effects.

4 FUTURE DEVELOPMENTS

For future editions of the course we will focus on the development of tools for reflection that will support students in the creating of the deeper layers and the overarching story. The work of the students already points towards some possible structures for such tools. For example, some students developed a credo, a manifesto, a set of ‘rules’ to live by, which seems a fruitful approach, when not fixed in time, or written in stone. Others were more pragmatic and turned their values into checklists to consult when designing.

To come back to ‘the art of living’, where this paper started with, the work of Alain de Botton may serve as a source of inspiration for such tools. Alain de Botton [3], who may be considered as one of our contemporary humanistic philosophers, developed 10 commandments for atheists (Table 1). Similarly, one could think of the development of one’s personal ‘ten commandments’, as a designer.

Whatever the tools will be, the overall humanistic perspective is that they should support the students in coming up with their own personal views, rather than adopting the views of others without reflecting on them. Again, personal reflection remains the core of personal development.

Table 1. Alain de Botton: 10 commandments for Atheists

1 Resilience	Keeping going even when things are looking dark.
2 Empathy	The capacity to connect imaginatively with the sufferings and unique experiences of another person.
3 Patience	We should grow calmer and more forgiving by getting more realistic about how things actually tend to go.
4 Sacrifice	We won't ever manage to raise a family, love someone else or save the planet if we don't keep up with the art of sacrifice.
5 Politeness	Politeness is very linked to tolerance, the capacity to live alongside people whom one will never agree with, but at the same time, can't avoid.
6 Humour	Like anger, humour springs from disappointment, but it's disappointment optimally channelled.
7 Self-Awareness	To know oneself is to try not to blame others for one's troubles and moods; to have a sense of what's going on inside oneself, and what actually belongs to the world.
8 Forgiveness	It's recognising that living with others isn't possible without excusing errors.
9 Hope	Pessimism isn't necessarily deep, nor optimism shallow.
10 Confidence	Confidence isn't arrogance, it's based on a constant awareness of how short life is and how little we ultimately lose from risking everything.

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