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# Art and Design Schools in Transition: The Uncertain Future of the Workshop Model

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**Abstract:** *Recent reforms in higher education promote standardization and comparability. However, the academic disciplines set the standard that the art and design schools are expected to adapt to. This new and more theoretical approach can come in direct conflict with the traditional way of teaching at the art and design schools. These schools have traditionally been teaching in accordance with a workshop-oriented method, where theory is more related to and part of practice than in the academic sphere.*

*Keywords: Art school pedagogy, Workshop model, Reforms in higher education.*

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In this paper I want to take a closer look at the modern transformation of art schools and the effect this process has on pedagogy in art and design disciplines. My argument is that the Bologna process and its counterparts in Norwegian school reforms combined with the emergence of a postmodern disapproval of authority and bureaucratic management regimes pose a threat to the traditional work shop based pedagogy which has been the traditional base for art schools for centuries.

Initially, I would like to give a short background to the recent development, with Oslo National Academy of the Arts as my primary example. Today, five national institutions for higher art education are merged and relocated on a new site in a refurbished sail-making factory. The changes, however, are not only formal and geographical. The new National Academy of the Arts also has an ambition to be a specialized University institution with research positions and PhD approval. In addition, Norway has implemented the Bologna declaration, which is part of a process within the EU to standardize all higher education in Europe. One of the chief ambitions of this process is to enable students and research staff to move between different countries and institutions.

The backdrop for the Bologna process was the realization that traditional industry was in full retreat. The European Union was of course interested in retaining and improving its competitive advantages towards the rest of the world, and wanted to strengthen European knowledge-based institutions. This point is emphasized in the EU treaty from 1999:

(...) the objective of increasing the international competitiveness of the European system of higher education. The vitality and efficiency of any civilisation can be measured by the appeal that its culture has for other countries. We need to ensure that the European higher education system acquires a world-wide degree of attraction equal to our extraordinary cultural and scientific traditions. (EU, 1999)

From the late 1990s several Norwegian reforms were constructed along the same basic principles, of which the most prominent is the Norwegian official report made by Ole Danbolt Mjøs, NOU 2000: 14. These reforms were developed in line with the Bologna process, and in many ways constitute its implementation in Norwegian higher education. They involved strict requirements for standardization and effective reporting to the government institutions in order to enhance control and promote efficiency, along the lines of the dominant New Public Management ideals. The term, New Public Management is used to characterise the programs implemented in the public sector since the 1980s aimed to modernize public organizations through the implementation of more market orientated management. A central hypothesis is that a more market-oriented public sector will insure a more effective and cost-efficient government. A concrete effect on the institutions in question was the implementation of measurable aims that should be reported on in formats that are comparable. As Marilyn Strathern, who have studied these processes in the academic sphere, found: Like other public service providers, universities were simultaneously exposed to market discipline and subjected to stricter and more transparent systems of accountability and audit (Strathern 2000).

The dilemma for the national art institutions is this: The reforms following the Bologna process affect all higher education and as most higher education is academic, the new standardization is naturally based on the academic institutions, not on the more marginal art schools. The result is that the academic teaching model is rapidly emerging as a prominent part also of the art schools. A theoretical curriculum and

written assignments have in the later years become the standard. A critique of this trend is by no means new. The most striking feature of modern bureaucracy is, according to its Max Weber, the introduction of a formal examination system (Kvale 2004, p. 156). Additionally, the art schools that traditionally have aimed at the unique and the development of the individual artist or designer, are now subjected to the same standardization. Instead of emphasizing the uniqueness of the disciplines, the focus is now on what they have in common.

So, what characterized traditional art disciplines and how were they taught? I have chosen to refer to the theoretician on professional learning Donald Schön. In his influential work "The Reflective Practitioner" (1983) he describes how practicing professionals in a whole range of practical disciplines have far more knowledge than they can verbalize. Or more correct: they possess *another type* of knowing. His book was an attempt to understand this type of knowledge and its place in the education system. And I think that his theories of practice-based knowledge offer a good description of art school pedagogy – a model I will elaborate on in order to show the differences between the workshop model and academic teaching.

[Universities] are institutions committed, for the most part, to a *particular* epistemology, a view of knowledge that fosters selective inattention to practical competence and professional artistry ... we are in need of inquiry into the epistemology of practice. What kind of knowing in which competent practitioners engage? How is professional knowing like and unlike the kinds of knowing presented in academic textbooks, scientific papers and learned journals? (Schön 1995, p. VIII)

A professional violinist can learn a lot through reading theory, but the main details of how the fingertips touch the strings, calls for another type of learning. Schön studied schools from a wide range of disciplines, from health care to architecture. He found that when a professional worker is faced with challenges within their profession, they base their reaction on a type of unconscious improvisation that they have developed through practical experience. This unarticulated and experimental process is what Schön calls *reflective practice*. When practicing professionals base their approach on unarticulated knowledge to such a large extent, their respective educational institutions are faced with specific pedagogical challenges.

... competent practitioners usually know more than they say. They exhibit a kind of knowing-in-practice, most of which is tacit. (...) Indeed, practitioners themselves often reveal a capacity for reflection on their intuitive knowing in the midst of action and sometimes use this capacity to cope with the unique, uncertain, and conflicted situations of practice. (Schön 1995, p. IX)

My argument is that schools that want to succeed in practical education have to realize that these disciplines are fundamentally different from their academic counterparts. The students have to experience the different situations they can meet as a professional. Schön is also convinced that this type of pedagogy has to be based on an experimental model, with the testing of different approaches in close dialogue with professionally trained teachers. Students have to practice continuously in order to understand and master the professional improvisation of their discipline. Schön also places his findings in a larger context, and warns his readers that fundamental knowledge can be lost in an education system that to an increasing extent it based on written knowledge. This is not only a problem for the disciplines in question, but also

for society at large, which relies every day on the services of a wide range of practical professions.

For Schön, reflection is an integrated part of practice, something the practitioner does parallel to practice. He explains this with his concepts of *reflection-in-action* - a situation where our thinking to reshape what we do while we do it and *reflection-on-action* - thinking back on what has been done to examine how one's knowledge-in-action may have helped to provide an unexpected outcome.

Schön's description of practice-based education offers a good account of the methods that has characterized the traditional art schools – according to Karen Jensen it has been dominant in formal European craft education for over thousand years (Nielsen and Kvale 2004, p. 15). Modern design, arts and craft have emerged from workshop-based pedagogy. Students have worked with concrete practical assignments under supervision and in dialogue with a teacher or master of the trade. Student and pedagogue have worked in close cooperation, discussing and experimenting, in order to find satisfactory solutions.

This is also in line with John Dewey's thoughts on the basic principles of pedagogy. As Dewey saw it, experience is the key for all learning. Learning is first and foremost an activity, rooted in the personal experience of struggling with a problem. Students are not empty containers ready to fill with information packaged and pre-digested by teachers and textbooks. Students needed to *experience* in order to understand and develop (Dewey 2004).

In the art context, Schön's approach is commonly referred to as *learning to perceive*, and is prominent in drawing and graphics as well as ceramics and glassblowing. Tutors all have a background as practicing professionals in the disciplines and were only very rarely trained teachers. Teaching has up to very recently seldom been based on a written curriculum or theoretical training.

This form of learning ensures deep-rooted knowledge and experience, but since this type of knowhow is rarely articulated in words, but through what Schön calls *experience knowledge*, this method has difficulties in defending itself in our day and age. Art schools in Europe are stepping aside from the traditional, practice-based teaching practice and instead embrace a more standardized and documentable scholastic tradition. Not because they see the need to do so by professional standards, but because it is expected as part of the ongoing changes in education politics. The art schools are moving away from a workshop-based method and instead use an increasing amount of time on theoretical training, as also noted by Nielsen and Kvale (Nielsen & Kvale 2004, 17).

The quality of the apprentice model is however seldom questioned, and Kvale refer to an interesting anecdote to illustrate this point: Within the natural sciences experimentation and testing in a workshop-like situation is one of the most common method. A study by Harriet Zuckerman of 92 Nobel Prize winners in physics, chemistry and medicine found that more than half had worked in workshop-like situations. She describes the Laureates' education to be in line with the main elements of the traditional craft apprenticeship learning (Nielsen and Kvale 2004, p. 150). Paradoxically, even academic institutions have their roots in apprentice learning, if we go far enough back in history. European universities in the middle ages were organized as craft guilds and some of the oldest universities were organized as craft schools (Nielsen and Kvale 2004, p. 149).

Today, however, the theoretical approach is the most distinct feature of many academic disciplines. Nevertheless, even though the law of higher education put equal

emphasis on practice based science and theory based science, the Norwegian Qualification Framework issued by the Ministry of Education and Research – the very tool the schools use to construct their curriculums - promotes theoretical knowledge on behalf of practice.

However, the transformation of the art schools is not only characterized by a distinct academic influence. At the same time, there is also an increased emphasis on interdisciplinary practice, although the result often is the same: distancing from practice. As the traditional disciplines merge they are substituted with a more general body of aesthetic, critical and cultural theory. The students acquire knowledge of a vast amount of subjects, but achieve less disciplinary depth. The general idea is that a designer or artist of any discipline today has to manoeuvre separate and often at a distance from production. My theory is that this is a result of the actual moving away of industrial production to distant countries in low-cost regions, but I will not dwell on this in this paper. It is significant, however, to see the effect of interdisciplinary practice on art education and pedagogy. It stresses, for example, similarities between different disciplines that really only have a theoretical framework in common. This is in direct opposition to the general principles of apprenticeship, where learning is situated in practice and not written theory.

Of course, textbooks and a written curriculum are also in use in art schools, but up to now only as a supplement to the more practical approach. Studies in art history and critical and social theory have its place in art and design teaching. Nevertheless, the new trend of emphasizing theory and ideas instead of and often at the expense of apprentice learning can prove problematic. And this development is taking place not because the art and design schools saw the need for it, but because the authorities have agreed on standardization as part of the reforms in higher education.

Therefore, academic teaching with hardly any relation to practice today occupies an increasing amount of time, especially at master levels. This is necessary because the new master programs contain far more theory - so that the students can qualify for the new PhD programmes. The guidelines for employment at the art schools still place an emphasis on practical professional background. However, this is problematic as an increasing amount of what is taught is theory. Consequently, the teachers end up teaching in a form and tradition he or she is neither trained in or part of. Does this ensure increased quality to the teaching method or profession? This question is essential to consider for anyone interested in the further development of higher education pedagogy in the arts and design.

One alternative is of course to employ personnel with a mainly theoretical background. But by doing so workshop pedagogy is diminished furthermore because the newly employed academics lack the disciplinary practice or any wish to teach it. Another and in many ways paradoxical effect of this development is this: Instead of, and often in opposition to, the modernist inheritance from the Bauhaus School which has been a characteristic of the European art schools, the academically influenced teaching brings with it a recognizable post-modern influence. Typically, this can be seen in the general discredit of authorities. Jean-François Lyotard defined the post-modern condition as *scepticism towards the grand narratives* and he describes how these narratives have lost its power (Lyotard 1984).

One of the great narratives of the art school now being questioned is the belief that quality does exist and can be crafted, acclaimed and discussed outside of a mere linguistic discourse. A discussion of quality is integral to the particular professional area, how it is constructed and how to articulate appreciation or critique of it is one of the

most important didactic discourses in art and design. Traditional workshop pedagogy is based on the transference of knowledge from more experienced professionals to trainees of the trade. From a post-modern perspective this relationship might be viewed as authoritarian and ready for history's dustbin. Furthermore, the mere existence of quality is viewed with outspoken scepticism.

I think this trend must be met with examined critically. Is the apprentice model really that authoritarian and outdated? Within pedagogic theory these aspects of workshop-based learning is questioned. According to Lave and Wegner it is the community that form the most important part of apprentice learning – what they call *a community of practice*. The teacher – or master in this terminology – is only one component:

... a decentred view of master-apprentice relations lead to an understanding that the mastery resides not in the master but in the organization of the community of practice of which the master is part. (Lave & Wegner 1991, p. 94)

Communities of practice are furthermore driven by negotiations between its participants, and by dedication and dilemmas – far from the stereotype of the general authoritarian model described by critics.

The workshop model is, if we view it along the lines of Schön's reflective practice theory, in tune with the very nature of the arts. The question is whether the art schools should build on *and develop* their workshop tradition instead of striving towards a more theoretical and academic tradition. I think this is the crucial question for the art schools. They need to articulate a pedagogical platform that is in line with the nature of their disciplines. For example: At the The Oslo School of Architecture and Design the PhD programmes are mere theoretical exercises, in line with the national requirements. I would argue that practical disciplines also should have PhD programmes that are mainly practical. This approach challenge the National Qualification Framework, but is in line with the nature of the arts. Furthermore, the art schools can argue that this is also in line with the law for higher education. The problem today, as I see it, is that the art schools do not have enough self-confidence when it comes to its pedagogical heritage. Instead, they have been influenced by the same pedagogical trends as the bureaucrats who govern higher education. Instead of developing a theory of their uniqueness, these schools have envied the theory-based tradition and sought to copy it. Today, the art schools need to take one step back and simply ask themselves: What makes a good designer? What do we expect the best ceramicists to master? I propose that Schön's description of reflective practice and knowledge of the well-established and successful workshop model is a good place to start. Accordingly, I think that the art schools should articulate a defence strategy that is in tune with the disciplines they are set to safeguard and nurture. They ought to raise awareness of the benefits of the workshop model, so that they can ensure a wider appreciation of the distinctness of their disciplines – both within higher education as a whole and among themselves. There is no guarantee that the reform wave we have witnessed in recent years is slowing down, and a conscious and deliberate strategy is needed if the art schools want to influence its future educational basis.

To conclude: Art school pedagogy is well established and has proved very effective. Today it faces considerable challenges as a result of reforms and mergers in higher education. Few articulate arguments for the relevance and importance of workshop-based teaching, neither in the art schools nor among professionals and politicians. As I see it, this transformation of the art schools poses challenges that need to be

addressed and reconsidered at length: It changes the very bases of the disciplines. This discussion is, however, not developed at the art schools or in the corridors of the responsible government. I await a wider discussion of this topic, and hope to contribute to it.

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