

# ‘Being Cultural’ Versus ‘Cultural Beings’ – general design education

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The design and design education professions—also known as the ‘making professions’—have a short history of conducting research, which can be understood as the process by which they establish their professional identity. There seems to be a shift in both the content of design and studio practice from solely creating products to thinking about design as a step towards improving society as a whole. This change is also seen in design education in primary and secondary education. The design professions’ justification of purpose, which is that design is a driving force in the development of an inclusive and sustainable society, is mirrored in the debate about the content and justification of design education in schools. However, schools across Europe outsource art and design education to external artists, which has led to culture and creativity programmes. The decision to utilise outsourcing can be questioned in terms of how research shows that it can erode the national repertoire of values and impact the evaluation criteria and collective considerations attained through the knowledge, skills and attitudes formed in teacher-led workshop practice in design.

*general design education, culture, design pedagogy, citizenship*

## 1 Introduction

The field of design education and design professions has a short history of research, which Nilsson & Dunin-Woyseth (2012) have noted is vital for practice-related making disciplines. Investigating the link between design research connoisseurs/critics and design practice connoisseurs/critics is a valuable research effort. Now, we see that ‘The development of the field of practice-related design disciplines makes it more and more possible that there will be an increasing number of people being both’ (Nilsson & Dunin-Woyseth, 2012, p. 9). With this new orientation in research, where the practitioners and educators are also the researchers, university and college educators can also develop theory-led studio practice. Thus, a new stage in what can be called the professionalization project has been achieved (Nolin, 2008). The practitioners not only run the studios they also conduct research into professional practice and education. At their core, the making disciplines are



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connected to practice. Similar to Nilsson and Dunin-Woyseth (2012), I aim to highlight the connection between research and practice in design education. In the university disciplines and the institutions that educate professionals there has been a separation between 'education research connoisseurs/critics' and 'subject-matter education practice connoisseurs/critics' (Dunin-Woyseth & Nilson, 2012, p. 9). The Scandinavian countries have developed their educational research based on the German traditions in the areas of didaktik and pedagogy (Myhre, 2001). The Design Research Society and design research have started using the concept of design pedagogy (Tovey, 2013). The fact that pedagogy mainly focuses on learning and bildung on a wider scale (Myhre, 2001) is what makes it simultaneously too narrow and too wide. Although this sounds paradoxical, it illuminates a situation in which pedagogy offers a general theoretical approach to learning and self-cultivation. While this is necessary, it does not relate specifically to a field of expertise, such as the specific subject-matter questions related to design education (Klafki, 1997). This led me to suggest that design didaktik is a more suitable approach. It is defined by the question: What basic design knowledge should the next generation of citizens or professionals have, why is it needed and what is the best way to achieve it? This is more specific than pedagogy; it also covers more than teaching methods or the formal curriculum or course plan (Klafki, 1997). As noted by Abbott (1988), this includes questions related to the philosophy of education, the philosophy of design and the knowledge of design history, professional practice, studio and workshop experience and design theory (Aase, Streitlien, Lorentzen, & Tarrou, 1998). It also articulates the justification of the field in education and in the wider society. It addresses current needs in relation to the development of new directions in design education or in professional practice, and it signals a commitment to the future based on the purpose (sustainability and societal improvement) the profession assigns to design. With my background in general education with a specialisation in design education, continuous learning in design has been a major focus of my research. The design education questions of what, why and how are asked at all levels, and they are never static (Digranes, 2006). They are also difficult to see as separate questions; what follows from why and how follows from what.

## **2 Is Culture Part of School or Separate from School?**

This question leads to one of the current discussions underway in art and design education in Norway. The design education community (from kindergarten to doctoral programmes) is in the process of establishing a common ground of values. However, in general education where the boundaries of professionalism are less stable, the concept of *Culture in education* or even *Culture education* has been added to the mix. This complicates the questions of what, why and how, as other professional fields are invited into the discussion, and they might have a different agenda and understanding of the concepts involved in the discussion or those related to design education as a whole.

### **2.1 Methods: A Norwegian Case of Outsourcing Culture Education**

The research presented in this paper is taken from my doctoral thesis, *Den Kulturelle Skulesekken. Narratives and Myths of Educational Practice in DKS projects within the Subject Art and Crafts* (Digranes, 2009a). For that thesis, I researched these questions in relation to the Den Kulturelle Skulesekken programme (from now on referred to as DKS) in design education in a Norwegian context. In Norway, DKS is permanently funded using lottery funds. It aims to bring professional experts into primary and secondary schools to collaborate with teachers. The visual arts (fine art, crafts, design and architecture) overlap with the school subject of Art and design, and it is one of the areas within DKS. Artists/designers and teachers are expected to develop projects within the subject content. Thus, the 'art world' and the 'school world' are brought together under one set of goals. The meetings between these two 'worlds' are not always painless. In the retelling of a situation of conflict, points of view are accentuated as oppositions to more easily identify the sides in a conflict (Latour, 2005). The end result is to present your side of the matter, your value sets, as the only way to go. As Riessman (1993, p. 11) noted: 'Like all social actors, I seek to persuade myself and others that I am a good person. My narrative is inevitably a self-representation'. These narratives are used

to enhance the values that underlie any professional choice. As such, they are invaluable for understanding the basis of a conflict at both the professional and personal levels. Within these narratives, transitory occurrences mark the conflicts of one value set and the return to harmony with a new agreed upon value set after the conflict is settled. The narratives provide an opening into the ambiguous situations because they enable the participants to critique the moment, either justifying the narrator's own choices or criticising the other party's solution to the problem (Czarniawska, 1998, 2004).

Where do we need to search for these narratives? Goodlad (1979) claimed that, as a value system, school subjects (and in this case projects located in schools) exist at several levels. He analysed this by organising it into five levels (Goodlad, 1979). The *Ideological level* exists in political discussions and the values that infuse the entire educational discourse in a specific country. This can be seen in media coverage, debates and regulations that provide standards for a practice as well as in textbooks and teachers' guides. My study of DKS included media narratives to establish what is presented to the public as ideologically sound in the educational debate concerning DKS. Is it in concert with, or in contrast to, the *Formal level* that is supposed to regulate the practice? The formal level is the document—in this case the Norwegian National Curriculum: The Knowledge Promotion 2006 (KD & Udir, 2006)—as well as the Report to the Storting nr 38. (KKD, 2003), and the subsequent Report to the Storting nr 8. (KKD, 2007) concerning DKS. In my study, I chose to investigate whether the ideological narratives presented to the public were reflected in the documents or were based on a different agenda. The *Perceived level* is what is read into the written guidelines of the educators and organisations that are using it in their practice. Thus, it represents the interpretation of the formal document based on the professionals' background and training. I would argue that although the perceived level is difficult to ascertain, it will be at least partly expressed by the narratives used by the professionals within DKS to justify the operational level. The *Operational level* is the actual practice in the educational context. It refers to the day-to-day practice, that is, the focus, content and activities that are chosen and then carried out. The operational level is a reflection of all the other levels expressed as actions in professional work. The *Perceived level* allows for individual variations, thus, ideological differences can occur. The *Operational level* is where differences are seen. The *Experiential level* is what the schoolchild/pupil learns or understands. I have not included this level in my sources of documentation.

The empirical base in my doctoral dissertation addresses:

- 1) Regulations and political documents
- 2) Media writings
- 3) Evaluation documents
- 4) Studies of professional practice

The documents mentioned above are the main data source; however, I also followed a two-week school project, and I interviewed an American researcher within the Artist-in-Residence (AiR) programme in the United States (US) to note that the problem is international and occurs in other countries. Consequently, the sources were gathered in the Ideological, Formal, Perceived, and Operational curriculum levels through *narratives* as: *Documents* (formal documents, evaluations, research projects and media coverage of the DKS programme); *Observations* (study of a DKS project in the lower secondary school involving Art and Design (A&D) teachers and artists, which also included research field notes from the case observation); and *Interviews* with A&D teachers and artists in the observed DKS school project and with a US researcher in the AiR programme. Thus, the documentation sources for the following case narrative are substantive.

### 3 The DKS Case

The research and evaluations demonstrated that what Nilsson and Dunin-Woyseth (2012) called the 'subject-matter education practice connoisseurs/critics' are constantly questioned by the external participants in the initiatives. The initiatives become a professional battleground where the

educational content becomes the weapon of choice to bash other people's opinions. Therefore, the narratives that justify professional choices within DKS will not only present the reasons behind the choices made in the professional practice, they will also present the opposing choices as somehow not being justifiable. Thus, they might represent the *hero* and the *obstacle*. The media impacts these narratives by adding their own focus on the conflicts. In lived tales, it is the ambiguous situations of instigated critique that stand out, and the need for justification that tells the story. People turn to narratives in order to explain themselves in different settings—as opposed to or in concert with others (Bruner, 1991). This might take different forms, and it is a socialisation project (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Justification is performed through patterns of narration that are taught. It is performed through given tools, such as worth and value. The *identifiers* presented in the On Justification theory form the concepts that are used and the aims to strive for; they also determine the people of authority and help define the value sets, or worlds, that the actors use as their basis for justifications. The higher common principle (HCP) surfaces in how actors approach a conflict and criticise the befallen. They reflect on and judge their own choices and those of others. However, '... actors rarely make explicit the general principles of their actions' (Boltanski & Thévenot, 2000, p. 210). These tools are used to isolate the critical points in the narratives of justification of professionals from two different worlds. In this case, HCP is the most important indicator because as all the other indicators are correlated to it.

Thus, artists and Art and design (A&D) teachers operate within their professional traditions and values, which underlie their understanding of education and art, while they are involved in DKS. The actors are forced to make an argument in which they justify their actions and their position through their values, but also through the laws and regulations that have an impact on their practice. Persuasion related to argumentation and justification can be exerted on several levels in the DKS collaboration in professional justification narratives. The involved actors choose to explicitly state their position through exclamations, such as: ... *But you have to agree that ...* or ... *Even you must see that*. In light of the theory of justification, the actors do not *have to* agree or see the other actors' points of view as being valid if it is in contrast to their own value set. They can disagree on the basis of the worldview that infuses their practice. The actors' values (the identifiers) related to their professional practice surface in the arguments they use while trying to organise the chaos into new and more harmonious stories. Justification departs from value sets, develops them further and gives them away. Thus, professional justification narratives are one way to determine the governing values.

At its core, education aims to facilitate subject education and *bildung*. Children should develop both a strong knowledge base and a moral compass—a cultural repertoire of values. However, as seen in recent evaluations and collaborations, a narrow concept of culture dominates the discussion. This becomes impossible to criticise because the initiative is laudable: culture to all children. It is also difficult to validate the professional stereotypes of what I have chosen to call the *artist hero* and the *teacher obstacle*. The creation and distribution of stereotypes are one-dimensional, either positive or negative, and one-sided, told by artists and artist organisations. However, I have no basis upon which to determine if this choice is deliberate or if it is unconscious and, thus, facilitated by the media. As it stands, A&D teachers are not given the opportunity to share their perspectives with the public via the media. Thus, the construction of these stereotypes is based on the value set of one profession.

The value sets, educational content discussions and views of who is the educational experts in Art and design education are created by the agendas of the artists and artist organisations rather than by research in the field. Selmer-Olsen (2003) cautioned against such a predicament at the start of the DKS programme in 2003.: "The development of knowledge in the field is defined by special interests and a lack of a unifying perspective. The distribution of culture is to a great extent guided by good will, politics and ideology, and not by research based knowledge and systemized experience" (p.3). The value set that guides educational practice within state legislation is based in

the civic orientation of social democracy, citizenship, common causes and in the industrial values of professionals, knowledge experts and the results. These values surface occasionally in the media narratives, but they are subordinate to and dominated by the inspired orientation of the personal journey that art making should be. Moreover, teachers and pedagogy are often listed as the obstacle in a situation of Art and design education. This is alarming in light of the DKS programme and its placement within the school institution. Artists are seen as ‘survivors’ of the toil and monotony of the classroom, liberating the children from the notion of society in favour of focusing on the individual. Craft, design and architecture are not often included in these initiatives, even though these elements of the curriculum are an integral part of culture education, both in the wide and narrow sense of the term.

### **3.1 Two Approaches to Bildung**

Egil Bjørnsen’s (2009) thesis, “Norwegian cultural policy. A civilizing mission”, addressed the problem of education and discussed how different interpretations of bildung can explain the propensity towards accepting the understanding of culture as something children can access through art projects when artists visit schools. External resources are brought in to ensure that children have access to culture. Bjørnsen (2009) mentioned that there are two types of bildung: object-oriented bildung and subject-oriented bildung. Subject-oriented bildung presents an open view of culture as something that makes a society what it is. Thus, people develop a moral sensibility and a cultural repertoire by participating in all areas of life. In this approach, the school as an institution becomes one of the main cultural arenas of a nation, without dividing the curriculum into cultural subjects and subjects that are not related to culture. This understanding of culture and bildung has the potential to foster a sustainable cultural repertoire, and it can change the rules that people follow to justify their consumption or quality of life (Lamont & Thevenot, 2000, p. 1).

Object-oriented bildung is based on the premise of the ‘educational potential of legitimate/elite fine art’ for children. In certain initiatives, culture is defined as something specifically related to a narrow interpretation of fine art (Bjørnsen, 2012). Thus, culture education is narrowed down to acting in a specific way: “being cultural”. You go to the ‘right’ exhibition, or you listen to the ‘right’ music, read the ‘right’ work in the literary canon and discuss cultural heritage through craft and art. It is believed that being exposed to the ‘right’ kind of art leads to moral growth and better humans. In this approach, the few will decide on behalf of the many what aspects of art and being cultural enhance human potential.

Thus, culture is not something that constitutes a community of reference in terms of national values and considerations; rather, it is viewed as fragments of the world separated from general knowledge. This is followed by words, such as creativity, that also serve to cloud the discussion of a common ground. Documents and initiatives targeted at culture and education seem to mix the uses of art education, aesthetic education and culture education—all of which can be said to hold different connotations within an education setting. Culture programmes in which pupils make up the audience, not working as practitioners, and where content and values are outsourced to an object oriented/audience’s take on culture, might lead us to an understanding of art and design in compulsory education as the appreciation of fine art. Instead, such programmes should also underscore the basic values relating to citizenship and the role of design in ‘the common good’ (Digranes, 2009b).

If culture is something that only belongs to a creative individual in art education, it will lose the potential of education to infuse people with a sense of citizenship by facilitating a civic mind-set geared towards a shared future. It is not enough to simply accept that something can be distinguished and separated into a school subject area called cultural education, and that this only corresponds to a small part of the everyday world of a pupil. At a minimum, it is necessary to have a discussion about what this division means, and if it is fruitful in terms of developing an educational curriculum with a focus on sustainable design. The focus might need to shift to youths as active agents of change (Digranes, 2015) in a changing culture rather than forming appreciative audiences

in external projects where people become passive culture consumers (Christophersen & Kenny, 2018).

#### **4 What, How and Why in Primary and Secondary Design Education**

In general education, a discussion of culture transcends the specific subject and focuses on the overarching sets of values. The evaluation criteria must include ‘...a national cultural repertoire and the rules that people follow in justifying their use’ (Lamont & Thévenot, 2000, p. 1). Thus, culture can be seen as the values and positions that permeate a society and as the criteria used to define what is good for society, the moral standards that should be met, what constitutes a democracy, etc. In the field of education, this position provides a richer approach for all subjects. However, the narrow interpretation of culture is increasingly being applied in policies regarding art and culture, especially in relation to Art and design education in primary and secondary school (Bjørnsen, 2009). Even though policy makers try to frame it as being inclusive, it still becomes subject-specific to art and culture education. As the Education, Audiovisual & Culture Executive Agency (2009) noted: ‘Two kinds of learning aims can be distinguished: those that are specifically defined by arts and cultural curricula and those identified by the overall curriculum but which can be linked to arts and cultural education and creativity’ (p. 17). Culture is no longer defined in terms of being a national cultural repertoire of values and evaluation criteria. Instead, fine art/culture is defined by the few for the many. At the same time, culture as a concept is often replaced by art, so that the push for culture education becomes a mission for art education, such as including artists in schools. According to the Education, Audiovisual & Culture Executive Agency (2009), ‘Schools in Europe are developing initiatives to connect pupils more closely to the world of arts and culture. In most countries, initiatives are taken to organise visits to places of artistic and cultural interest, or to establish partnership with artists’ (Section 3.2, p. 15). Thus, culture education can be perceived as being somewhat paradoxical. In Europe, for some time now, the trend in art, design or craft education has been to slowly outsource education to external experts and institutions through projects, such as teaching artists (KKD, 2007), creative partnerships (Orfali, 2004), DKS (KKD, 2003), Skapande skola (Lindqvist & Blomgren, 2015) or other programmes found around the globe (Christophersen & Kenny, 2018). Previous studies have shown that short artist-led visits have a limited impact on school children. At the same time, citizenship education with a focus on creative problem solving, 21st century skills and designing a better future, is making its entry into the curricula discussion (Ludvigsen, 2015) and is highlighted in international educational research as the new way to go (European Commission, 2017). It is worth asking if culture really exists in a realm of its own, separate from education. Research shows that longer lasting projects based on curriculum framing and shared responsibility and trust between the external experts and teachers have a more positive outcome, though they present more of a challenge to the parties involved (Birkeland et al., 2014; Borgen & Brandt, 2006; Christophersen, Breivik, & Norsk, 2013; Christophersen & Kenny, 2018; Digranes, 2009a). That type of approach has an impact on students’ attitudes and it provides them with permanent knowledge; it also changes the practice at a more fundamental level. The same can be said for school-based projects led by design teachers in general education. According to (Hilmola & Lindfors, 2017, p. 30) this ‘... includes various phases: needs analysis, the generation of ideas, the designing of solutions, the making or manufacturing process, and finally the reflective assessment of the artefact and the whole process’. Moreover, longer lasting, in-depth design projects are seen as being meaningful; they instil values and promote positive attitudes in youth (Randers-Pehrson, 2016). This cannot be said of short artist visits or performances where pupils form the audience (Birkeland et al., 2014; Borgen & Brandt, 2006; Christophersen et al., 2013; Christophersen & Kenny, 2018; Digranes, 2009a).

#### **5 Next Steps**

From the understanding of “being cultural”, culture can be read as something separate from education. As such, it is not viewed as part of the school day. In education and education policy, the

concept of culture is often connected to the understanding of “being cultural” in the sense of cultivating an appreciation of fine art. Rather than understanding culture as a wider societal platform consisting of values, attitudes and choices as well as designed artefacts and solutions, culture becomes limited to something conceived of by the few for the many. This article outlined two different approaches to culture in education, and it addressed the need to reawaken and reintroduce the wider concept of culture in relation to sustainable design education. Although some policy changes can be seen in regards to the DKS programme, the practice is far from optimal. New research continues to highlight the necessity of providing students with a strong every day education within design to exploit the potential of the projects that are brought to school by visiting artists. However, the projects become the excuse for not strengthening the school practice. An attitude change among politicians and policy makers is also needed. At the moment, they proclaim the intent to work for a stronger design education, but they are reluctant when it comes to enacting legislation to secure that. The costs required to increase teacher competence is never addressed; or rather, teacher competence in design education is never discussed. While it seems as if anyone could be a design teacher, schools can be criticised for not providing the quality of education that people want. A curriculum presents a vision of a future society and how, and if, design will play a part in sustainable development, both nationally and globally. In this sense, it is important to deliberate on how the culture of the many, strengthened through compulsory education based on values and ethics, can be a step towards building a sustainable future. If the lack of understanding of the importance of longer lasting knowledge and skills-driven projects has led to a lack of competent design educators in general design education, it is important to ask: Is there a culture for sustainability in European compulsory design education?

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