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Is Writing a Design Discipline?

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The objective of this paper is to reflect on the position and potential of the process of writing in contemporary undergraduate design education in the UK.

If alliances had to be chosen in the theory/practice divide, writing would probably be positioned firmly on the side of theory, especially in the university environment writing has traditionally been used as a tool for documentation rather than development.

There is an emphasis on 'writing-up' rather than letting the putting-of-words-to-paper assist in the creation of projects. And even though teachers might encourage their students to jot down notes as part of the process of creating, this is overshadowed by the teaching of academic writing, which students need for the often compulsory essays and dissertations. Frequently this tuition is located elsewhere, typically in Contextual Studies, and thus even physically removed from the workplace and reinforcing the attitude that theory can be divided from practice. Because these writing tasks are marked, students can be forgiven for developing the mentality that when it comes to writing what does not conform to academic standards is plainly wrong and as such not worth practising (in both senses of the word).

If designing is seen as an activity that goes through cycles of observing, reflecting, planning and acting, the distinction of design disciplines becomes a distinction of outcomes, with some disciplines (or projects) producing objects, others models or concepts, etc. In this scenario not only is research (or 'observing') recognised as a necessary aspect of any designing, the 'pure' research project becomes a design project like any other with the written word as a prescribed outcome and the writing of the thesis as the 'acting' component. With this perspective the theory/practice divide becomes reduced to being simply a distinction of outcomes and turns out not to be a divide at all.

By asking how far the activity of writing is a design process in itself (as the production of written material goes through the same cycles as designing does), the question will be asked whether there is a more pronounced place not only for encouraging students to use writing, but also teaching them about different styles (that include but are not exclusive to academic writing) on the curriculum. Would a greater awareness of writing as a design tool create designers who could use it to a fuller potential in their exploration of the projects they are working on?

Initially in my research these issues were approached through examining the position of writing on the undergraduate design curriculum through the available Quality Assurance Agency subject review reports and getting an insight into the potential of writing in practice through selected interviews with practitioners. Then a more detailed exploration took place through using the 3D Design course at Manchester Metropolitan University as a case study. Here students were made aware of the potential of writing and given assignments to use non-academic writing.

My research suggests very strongly that students leave university with the impression that writing needs to conform to academic standards and will not be useful for them unless they decide to pursue a career in research. Practitioners, however, frequently use writing in their practice, although they often do not consider it as 'proper' writing, exactly because it does not conform to academic standards. If the eyes of students were opened to the potential of using writing regardless of academic standards they would be given an important design tool that would empower their work.

Is Writing A Design Discipline?

This paper is based on some of the experiences gained through doctoral research on the role of writing in contemporary undergraduate design education in the UK.

When asking second year students on the Three Dimensional Design Course at Manchester Metropolitan University about their writing, I used to get blank looks. Once prompted they did confirm that they did indeed have to do some form of writing, all of which seemed to be part of the contextual studies portion of the course, i.e. regarding the history of design. The teaching of this is delivered by the history of art and design staff in the form of lectures and seminars - there is no teaching of writing as such, only guidelines on how to conform with academic standards. When the students reach their third and final year on the course they find themselves confronted with the necessity of producing the Programme Report, a written document that describes and reflects on the processes of their final year project, which takes the place of a dissertation. Instead of dealing with theoretical and historical issues in their writing they now have to make a leap towards focusing on their own practice, something that will be more useful for most of them once they have left university, but equally something that they have no experience in doing, although most of them, by now, can go through the motions of writing an academic essay. As a result these Programme Reports tended to be weak, the most common problems being a lack of focus and confusion of the students as to what aspects of their experience would be relevant enough to include.

In design education, writing seems to be treated as some sort of addition. Of course it is used, but that is the case in any type of university education. Writing is certainly not seen as 'owned' by design, not in the way that drawing or making models is. Although these are strategies that can also be found in other disciplines, they are expected to be found in design. For some reason, writing does not seem to be expected in design, to the extent that students sometimes admit to choosing a course in the design field because they have difficulty with writing tasks. This line of thought is connected to the dyslexia issue: a high percentage of dyslexic students are found in Art & Design education, because in this type of education the thinking strategies

that are associated with dyslexia are not necessarily disadvantageous, in fact the opposite might be the case.

Maybe these are reasons why the discussions about the role of writing in the design field are mostly concerned with the importance of visual literacy in conjunction with writing. There are many calls to balance the relationship of the written word and visual communication, though what is threatening to happen is not a balance, but instead the establishment of visual literacy as dominant whilst marginalising the written word in the design field, and even more prominently in design education.

Through examination of data available in the Art and Design subject review reports from the Quality Assurance Agency (which reviews academic standards and the quality of teaching and learning in higher education at the national level in the UK), the positioning of writing in design education becomes a bit clearer. A distinction is being made between transferable and subject-specific skills, with two different systems operating to teach these two types of skills: assignments are either carefully set so that both types of skills are required to reach an appropriate solution, or the two sets of skills are taught through separate modules, with separate assignments and outcomes. Although a certain degree of combination between both methods can be found on design courses, it is the latter that dominates. These separate modules, mostly referred to as "supporting" programmes range from a combination of Cultural, Historical, Contextual, Critical, Business and Professional Studies and are sometimes linked to departments of History of Art & Design, Learning Development Centres or English Language Units. Here writing skills are developed as transferable, tied to the development of critical analysis, description, research and - to a certain degree - reflection. Students have to write essays, reports and in some cases dissertations, and learn to see writing as a skill used on the theoretical side of the fence rather than being rooted in the practice of designing.

As a consequence, students learn to see writing as a tool for theoretical analysis on the one hand, and as a tool for documentation on the other. They often do not realise that it could also serve as a tool for practical analysis and thus help the development of their ideas, i.e. that it could also be a subject-specific skill. The idea

that putting words to paper could assist in the creation of projects seems to be little spread in student circles - and even less understood.

Even if teachers encourage their students to take notes in research and development stages of projects, this is overshadowed by the teaching of academic writing - often seen not as one possible form of writing, but as the 'proper' form. Academic standards are the benchmark for the often compulsory essays and dissertations.

To a certain degree that is just how it should be. Academic standards are important in research circles, the building of a shareable knowledge base rests on these standards, and the avoidance of plagiarism and giving credit where credit is due is important for the ethical development of every type of designer. However, there are two worrying things about how writing is positioned in undergraduate design education. Firstly, although the scribbled notes a student takes during research and development work might be included in the assessment of the process, more often than not it does not merit a separate mark. Academic writing, on the other hand, is evaluated on its own, which makes it more visible. Students, who are maybe more focused on marks than they should be anyway, could be forgiven for developing the mentality that when it comes to writing, that which does not conform to academic standards is plainly wrong and as such not worth practising. Secondly, because this type of writing is often physically located outside of the workshop/studio (sometimes even in a different department, which also means with different staff) the attitude that theory can be divided from practice is reinforced. And indeed, in real life students have difficulty making the connection between the research they do for their essays and the work they do in the studio, even if they are encouraged to link the two. They also have difficulty seeing the importance that writing might have in their practical lives, because most of them do not plan to go into research and thus might never need academic writing again. At the same time, however, they do leave university with the impression that writing needs to conform to academic standards.

From the perspective of design practitioners, the issue of the usefulness of writing is slightly different, although to a certain degree often still tinted by those very same attitudes. As part of an exploratory study I interviewed design practitioners and teachers (some of them wearing both hats), and discovered that most of them initially

denied using writing in their practice. However, once prompted they realised that not only did some of them have to write reports, but that most also used writing in self-promotional functions, i.e. covering letters, CV's, blurbs for exhibitions. Writing was also used in their research for projects and often within their note- or sketch-books, for developing ideas. Most of the latter were notes not to be seen by anybody else. The common denominator here is that most of the interview subjects did not consider what they were doing as 'proper' writing, because it does not conform to academic standards. However, that did not mean they did not put pen to paper to form words in the process of their practice. Those that did, and were aware of it, used writing in a very specific way.

Not only can writing help in the process of generating ideas, it can also function as a process of reflection. Just like the 'crit' of developing projects at university, writing has the potential to allow people to take a step back from the project and give a different, somewhat removed, maybe even objective, perspective. This is not unlike Schön's concept of reflective practice, but with a pen.

Since writing is used in design practice it could also be seen as a subject-specific skill that needs to be taught as such. This is not on the same level as throwing pots in ceramic or manipulating images in graphic design, clearly there are differences between design courses according to the speciality explored. However, the process of designing is similar, no matter what outcome is produced. If designing is seen as a process from the perspective of the action research spiral as Swann (2002) suggests, it can be seen as an activity that goes through cycles of observing, reflecting, planning and acting (Zuber-Skerritt, 1992). In this light, the distinction of design disciplines becomes a distinction of outcomes, with some disciplines (or projects) producing objects, others models or concepts, etc. This model does not only concentrate on physical activity (acting) that uses specialist skills, but also makes room for the development process (observing, reflecting and planning), which is where writing can be useful.

What is more, the activity of writing can be seen as a design process in itself - the production of written outcomes goes through cycles not unlike the action research spiral. Writing has been described as a process which passes through the stages of

roughing, shaping and polishing (Wellman, 1999). It is at its most effective when tied to reworking draft after draft - reading them (observing), thinking about them (reflecting), thinking about changes or reworking the structure (planning) and rewriting them (acting) until it's perfect or the deadline approaches. Although this is more obvious when thinking about a book, it is equally true when thinking about a shopping list (though there are hopefully not that many drafts required for the latter).

This perspective also allows the work of the design researcher to be seen as designing. The 'pure' research project becomes a design project like any other, with the written word as a prescribed outcome and the writing of the thesis as the 'acting' component. With this perspective the theory/practice divide is reduced to a simple distinction of outcomes and turns out not to be a divide at all.

If students were made aware of this, it could allow them to approach their next contextual studies essay as a piece of design, not just underpinning their practice, but as a project with a brief (the question), targeted towards a specific audience (the marking staff) and limited by certain constraints (in this case academic conventions). Although the assignment remains the same, this minute change in perception might help students link academic writing to their practice.

On the previously mentioned 3D Design course at MMU, I explained to students how writing could be seen as a design activity, how alike the processes are. As it turned out a lot of them had considered writing to be an instantaneous activity and they were very aware - and nervous - about academic conventions. Through showing them examples of the types of writing they might be called upon to produce in their future professional lives (CVs, exhibition reviews, catalogue entries, etc.) and talking about how these all conformed to their own conventions I aimed to make them realise that academic writing is just one type of writing. With the help of the rest of the staff the students were then set an assignment that used non-academic writing and focused on exploring their ambitions in their practice. This was organised through a number of sessions for which drafts by the students themselves were required to be discussed with the rest of a seminar group, opening up a peer review situation.

The results were very encouraging. Students seemed to become more aware of the fact that writing could be seen as a design project, and that words once put down were not set in stone but could be rewritten. It also allowed them to explore their personal aims, which made it easier for them to decide on a final year project once they reached the third year, and the Programme Reports became more focused and much more relevant to the individual students work. They were more reflective and less superficially descriptive. I would love to say that their projects got better as well, but I couldn't prove that.

Although this is only a start on a very small scale, it nevertheless indicates that there is a more pronounced place for encouraging students to use writing and to make them aware of different writing styles (that include, but are not exclusive to, academic writing) they could utilise. Seeing it as a skill rooted in their practice gives them a tool that can help them reflect on their practice, clear their thoughts and last but not least, express ideas in another way. Seeing writing as a design discipline would allow students to see it as part of their practice and use the potential it has to empower their work.

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