

There is far too little handicraft going on at the University

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Abstract

Design educations have transformed and changed significantly in the last decades. While, visual expression and craft based workshops used to occupy a big part of the students' time, nowadays many subject matters compete about time in the curriculum. There is little time for reflection, playfulness or free experimentation. For students this development can be stressful and demanding. I do not believe this is optimal for someone trying to be creative.

From my experience, handicraft (or Swedish 'pyssel') is often ridiculed in the 'serious' design discourse. However, it is my hypothesis that this very activity can play a vital role in fostering strong designers. Handicraft can bridge the gap between the effective, purposeful work for fast result and the more practical, analogue and thoughtful part craft can play by letting student's try practical work in a playful 'handicrafty' way.

This paper presents findings from my ongoing research exploring the possibility and potential of handicraft in a design context. The research is conducted through creative workshops and seminars with bachelor and masters students in the Department of design, Linnaeus University, Sweden.

Keywords

handicraft, practical based knowledge and learning, time, creativity

Introduction

Design educations have transformed and changed significantly during the last decades, not at least the design educations at Linnaeus University. Just two decades ago visual expression and craft based practical workshop studies occupied a big part of the students' time. Nowadays many subjects compete for the education's and the student's time. Modern society has become more and more complex; the same goes for education. For the students this development can be stressful and demanding, both University and society want the students to be effective and high-performing in many different areas. There is very little time for reflection, playfulness, experimentation or relaxing. This is no optimal situation for someone trying to be creative, which a designer is supposed to be. Does it have to be this way? I do not think so and here I think handicraft (or Swedish 'pyssel') can play a role and maybe be a part of the solution.

Background

The design educations at Linnaeus University are so called New discipline educations, not specialized in the traditional design fields like product, industrial or textile design. The students form new disciplines for themselves based on other criteria than a material. Sustainability and social awareness is key words and meta design a new field (for us) in our new educations. The students try and explore many different disciplines and study many subjects during their education, not at least theoretical studies in an extended social design context. We almost always work project based. It is a complex educations and maybe a contemporary design education have to be built like this, to get the students prepared for their profession as designers, a profession that has changed a lot during the last decades and become more complex. In Sweden we are one of the first university teaching New discipline education at bachelor level, but for example Goldsmiths University of London have a longer tradition in this field. Research has also been done in how design education have changed and broaden the design context the last decades (Dunin-Woyseth, H, Nilsson, F 2014) and it is described as 'visual intelligence' (Findeli 2001

p.11) to have a wider view of the design field and education, from focus on product design to design of systems that cares more about the wholeness of the society.

My background and education is in interior textile design, surface and print design. When I started teaching at Linnaeus University 2009 I was quite confused about the courses direction; that we did not teach deep knowledge in a limited amount of fields instead of, as I saw it, superficial knowledge in many fields. I was concerned that we did not give the students a proper education with enough knowledge. Now when I have worked at Linnaeus University for some years I realize that my worries were not founded; it was my traditional design background that limited my thinking. However, I can see that we put a lot of pressure on the students when we present so much different kind of knowledge to them in a short space of time. The students are focused, targeted and work hard, but it seems like they are stressed and don't have time for experimenting, reflection and having fun. Sometimes I think that the students do not even have time to understand how to apply their knowledge or to find out what design areas they are interested in. A danger with new disciplinary education can also be a larger focus on the theoretical parts of the curriculum compared to practical skills. The students read more and do less. At the same time several scholars have emphasized the importance of learning-by-doing as a pedagogical method. "*To know things you have to grow into them, and let them grow in you, so that they become a part of who you are*" (Ingold 2013, p. 1). By practically doing something the student will be better at learning and understanding contexts (Ingold 2013, p. 6f).

Handicraft/ 'pyssel'

In my research I have explored handicraft to see if that activity, and the handicrafty way of thinking, can be part of contributing to the wholeness of an education, with the aim to get better educated design students.

In this text, and in my research, I use the Swedish word 'pyssel' for this handicrafty way of producing artefacts. There is no exact English translation for 'pyssel' but the word means doing a 'crafty' activity, like for example Christmas crafting. When you think of 'pyssel' you often think of a practical, uncomplicated activity, you make or build something. Often someone show you how to do, or you find a tutorial on internet, in a book or a magazine. It is uncomplicated, you just start. If it is fun you can continue and change what you make in an easy way to make it more personal, not a copy of someone else's work. Often you can put in as much or as little creativity as you like, depending on what kind of result you want to receive and the purpose you have with the 'pyssel' session, as well as your ability, and willingness to take risks. The material used is often cheap, such as paper or simple textiles. 'Pyssel' is often an activity for children in for example preschool, but can also be more complex like origami, crocheting or stamp carving. 'Pyssel' also have another, more commercial, side like scrapbooking or making perfect seasonal decorations. You can buy kit from craft companies and put them together in a predetermined way. It is not the last mentioned, the more commercial way, of 'pyssel' I am using in my research.

The way I want to use 'pyssel' has been described in a good way "*To 'pyssla' alone is very meditative and to 'pyssla' together is a good way of socializing. You make and improve and help each other and find new ideas, talk and have fun. 'Pyssel' can also be political; to create something is to get your voice heard regardless of what you want to say. By choosing what material you use you can reduce the waste of resource*". (Klüft Frimark et al 2012, p. 9, original in Swedish, English translation by author).

In society the views on 'pyssel' have changed somewhat during the last years and it has become more accepted. What is called "pyssel" and where you find 'pyssel' have expanded. The maker-movement has been established and you find maker-spaces in many places (Anderson 2013). Craft bars with the aim to come together, learn from each other and make something have become common and a popular way to socialize. Craftivism is nowadays an established activity and movement (Corbett 2013; Arnqvist Engström 2014; Greer 2014). Commonly for those activities is not the quest for perfect technical skills, they are more driven by ideas, the love of making, learning from each other and sometimes to make a difference in society through material culture. Even though the maker movement sometimes is more focused on sharing technical equipment and 'pyssel' is more of a low tech activity, I think both activities are example of the same 'movement'.

'Pyssel' is both loved and hated. Because many of us remember it as a messy, childish activity it is often seen as an activity with low status for amateurs and sometimes described as a waste of time. Among the 'pyssel' lovers (and I am one of them), it is more seen as a creative, prestige less, relaxing and almost addictive activity filled with lots of joy. 'Pyssel' does not usually have a given place in the design context, if it is mentioned it is more likely described in a derogative way than something creative and useful.

Looking at 'pyssel' from a wider perspective, I think it is an activity with a lot of potential for design education. I want to explore if we can use it, and as a starting point I have defined 'pyssel'/ handicraft as: an immersive activity that enables creativity, playfulness, lack of prestige and gives the possibility of visual expression and improves practical and artistic skills.

I base my research on my hypothesis: I believe that design education, design students and the broad design field can learn a lot from the ease, unstrained and playfulness you find in handicraft. From there I have researched if my statement is viable by letting design students try and explore handicraft together. We research the possibility and potential handicraft has and what impact handicraft can have on the creative process. So far we have had 4 workshops where we have explored 3 different craft techniques.

I have choose to call my research subject 'pyssel', even though the status is low and some people can be provoked by using it in a university context, but it is the best way to explain this activity. It should not be mixed up with craft and the deep technical skills associated with that. This is a more easy going activity meant to awaken students' interest for the practical and playful field design can be.

The workshops

As a base for my research I have organized and facilitated 'pyssel'sessions for design students. So far I have completed two notebook making workshops, one stamp carving workshop and one garland making workshop.

Before I designed the content in the workshops I analyzed the workshops I usually facilitate for students (for example in screen printing). I made several mind maps and the one that was most useful was one where I put up worst case scenarios and tried to solve the problems that can appear. Another mind map showed what good impact I hope 'pyssel' can have in a design education and the synergy effects that hopefully will emerge if the students engaged in more 'pyssel' and applied a more handicrafty way of thinking.

Insert Figure1 here

Illustration of my desired outcome if students join 'pyssel' workshops

What differs most from ordinary workshops is that the 'pyssel' workshops are short in time, the instructions have to be quite precise and the subject or theme limited so that the students will be able to just sit down and start working with something they can finish two hours later. This is not the way we usually teach the students, but it is a part of the project, to try hands on working, where sketching and analyzing is done during and after the work, not before. 'Make it your own' is something often heard in the handicraft world and it means that you have an instruction as a base, but change it so you get something more unique and not just a copy of someone else work. 'Make it your own' have been one of my key words, when planning the workshops. When choosing themes it was important to let the students try techniques that they will have use for as designers, and that we do not teach at the Department of Design, Linnaeus University.

All of the workshops were optional for the students to participate in and took place in the evening. The students had to sign up in advance. Groups were small 6-12 students in each workshop, so everyone could have their voice heard during the conversations, yet there would be enough students for some diversity. I considered conversation about handicraft during the practical work would be important way to get to know the students opinions. Students also had to answer a survey in the end of each 'pyssel'session with questions about their handicraft habits, favorite handicraft techniques and projects, where they find inspiration etc. This has been valuable to analyze afterwards to know how to continue the work.

Conclusions from the workshops so far

The project is still on-going, but some preliminary conclusions can be made. It has been easy to get students to sign up for the workshops which filled up quickly. The students attending the workshops (a total of 35 students) wrote in the survey that they like to handicraft, but often were too tired or did not have time to engage in it, but wanted to handicraft more often. A group of students that I was a little bit surprised to meet was the ones who wish to be 'handy', but had not tried any practical activities before and have not found an entrance to the practical, material world. They were often used to work digitally. This group was often not of Swedish origin. It is not surprising that students of Swedish origin were familiar with handicraft, since in Sweden we have a long tradition of teaching craft in elementary school. I want to continue exploring the situation for the students of other origins.

It was nice to see that the students made much in a short time and the result was often of surprisingly high quality. The workshops was often a creative explosion, it seemed like the students had lots of held back energy. It was also easy for them to “make it your own” and most of them made original things to a high standard of making. The workshops also become a way to socialize. Usually our students work much in their cohort, now they got to know other students and the informal way handicraft workshops operate seemed to make socializing easy.

The key realization so far is that students want to continue work practically and that they can easily see and communicate the benefits of being ‘handy’ and knowing more about materials, craft techniques and how to apply this knowledge in their studies in model building, sketching, design processes or presentations, for example several students mentioned “the more knowledge you have, the better design you do”. They want to try new techniques and they want to attend new workshops. “Can´t we do this every week?” was a recurrent statement. So the first step to overcome, taking the time to start, seems to be easy for these students and I now know from the survey and talking with students that at least half of all our students want to continue working with ‘pysssel’. While I have yet to prove more long-term effects, and how ‘pysssel’ could be integrated in the design curriculum, I consider this a good basis for continuous explorations.

In the survey the students listed their favorite ‘pysssel’ activities and most of them where anticipated, like sewing, origami, paper cutting and crocheting. More unexpected was that students listed baking, digital handicrafting (illustrations was mentioned) and different art techniques like collage and painting as ‘pysssel’. Some of the students seem to master one or more handicrafty techniques, and it may be a good idea that these students teach other. That would be something they really have use for as designers, to be used to lead groups and teach and make instructions easy to follow.

Insert Figure 2 here

Note book workshop

Insert Figure 3 here

Stamp carving workshop

Insert Figure 4 here

Garland workshop

Can handicraft be a bridge between the digital and the analog, material worlds?

In a design education many subjects needs to be taught; theoretical and practical, analog and digital, visual and textual. In the new disciplinary educations, both traditional and new knowledge is needed. The education is meant to work in many fields and basic knowledge in many areas is necessary. It is easy to see that for some students it will be tricky to learn and apply everything or know how to choose from everything offered. The more digital the society has become, the more we teach students different digital techniques of course. The students also have their own gate into the digital world; they have lived most of their life in it. Many things in the digital world are good and help us both as designers and as human beings. Often the digital route is faster than the analog. But as a designer you must know what’s needed about the field you design in and if you design products you must know how they look, feel etc. in reality. It is important to know how different materials work, what size and scale really look like, how your designed product feels like in use, to become a really good, empathic designer. It is, for example, a big difference to test a 3D-printed cup in plastic compared with a handmade in clay. But for a student used to working digitally all their life it can be a little bit scary to make the leap to the analog, material world, especially if the student thinks it is a time consuming process, that he or she cannot see the advantages of or someone else can do that part. For that student I hope the step will be smaller if he or she through some handicraft sessions tries some different analog techniques in an easy way. If you, for example, see how easily you can carve some stamps and try pattern repeating or make interested looking surfaces for pattern design much faster through analog than digitally, hopefully the student becomes curious and wants to try other materials and use more professional equipment.

My hope is that the student can see the advantages with analog work, and experience the joy of it, if the entrance into practical work is uncomplicated and playful. To teach advanced craft skills in the field of new disciplinary educations is maybe not needed, but we need to give the students enough tools to work analog. If a designer does not know how the design works, looks and feels in reality, it is not design, it is just giving shape to products. But maybe it is better to think of other ways to teaching practical based knowledge in this kind of educations and find new gates for students to interest them in the practical field. I want to clarify that we of course teach craft in different ways at Linnaeus University’s design educations and we have several workshop areas. If a student is

interested he or she can get much more than basic knowledge from, for example, individual tutoring, by attending voluntary courses and not least by using our different workshops.

But time is a big issue. Practical work is often mentioned as something taking time to do and learn. We have to accept that some knowledge needs to be learnt by doing to be understandable, and that can take time (Wallin Weihe 2009 p.35). I think all of us also have heard that learning something properly takes 10 000 hours (Sennett 2008, p.20). The students have heard it and it is not helpful when trying to motivate them to learn new things. But to try something and learn enough to use it in, for example, the sketch process or building models does not take 10 000 hours, all those hours is if you want to reach master skills. The 10 000 needed hours practice is a discussed subject. Richard Sennett writes that society does not support or reward someone getting that specialist competence (Sennett 2008, p.21). Josh Kaufman discusses the problem about putting in 10 000 hours and suggests instead of learning something deep, spending your time learning fast. In his description of ten principles of rapid skill acquisition, you first have to be really interested in learning a specific subject, analyzing what you need to learn and then start practicing the skill intensively, but for a quite short time (Kaufman 2013 p.14f). This is maybe not the whole solution for not having time to learn deep craft knowledge, but when a student's interest is awakened for a specific field, it can work as inspiration to put up individual strategies for learning. I think that 'learning by yourself' and finding strategies for learning and understanding what needs to be learnt can be an important tool, not at least in the working life.

That something takes time is not always bad. Engaging in a slow and maybe repetitive activity offers time to reflect. It can be good for students to experience that both fast and slow methods are needed in creative processes and the outcome of the work often becomes better if you mix slow and fast processes, in the same way as both theoretical and practical skills are needed to make a project as good as possible. If we only rely on fast methods the creativity can become 'manic creativity' and the result of a project will be quite random (Gude 2013 p.39). To always work effectively, purposefully and quickly without time for reflection is not a sustainable way to work or study. Richard Sennett says "*Making is thinking*" (Sennett 2008 p.ix) and I think it would be valuable for many people to try that way of thinking.

But is it a little bit of a prejudice that practical work always takes much more time to do and learn compared with other knowledges? Everything done properly takes time; to manage and use an advanced computer program takes a lot of time, reading and writing takes time, learning to sketch takes time. What does not take time is doing something carelessly, which is not what we want students to do in any area. To apply and use craft techniques often takes long time and to make extensive projects in this way is very seldom possible within a new disciplinary education. However, to learn enough skills for use, for example, in a sketch process, does not have to be very time consuming. The problem is perhaps that we have put in too much content in our educations?

Continuation

I will continue to research what kind of role handicraft should and can have in a design education, but I do not know exactly how. I want to make more workshops, preferably with a group of students that make workshops together and teach each other, and a seminar about making in a design context. I also want to study and work more with pedagogical methods for teaching practice based knowledge and analyze if teaching in different ways would give a better outcome. I would like to follow up the effect engaging with 'pyssel' has on students, during their studies and afterwards. What kind of designer does this foster?

If introducing 'pyssel' in this way, does have a positive impact on students' learning, it would be important to involve as many colleagues as possible in the discussion. I think we need to both discuss what subjects we teach and what kind of pedagogy we use. Can more subjects be taught in this playful way with the aim to get the students more deeply interested and get them to learn by curiosity and out of joy, instead of just putting a lot of pressure on them? I think that if we set aside our thoughts about status of different subjects and how they should be taught, and more focus on the students and what kind of knowledge they need, the outcome would be students with better self-confidence making better substantiated and more relevant work.

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Figure 1
Illustration of my desired outcome if students join 'pysse' workshops



Figure 2
Note book workshop



Figure 3
Stamp carving workshop



Figure 4
Garland workshop

