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Teacher's New Compass. Rethinking Educational Methods. Between using Examples from Contemporary Visual Culture and Classic Teaching Materials

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Abstract

Some didactic methods, which have their sources in the work model used in arts education, provide valuable potential in working with students of faculties with a strictly theoretical profile. In this paper, I would like to present the results and experience of my semester work with first-year MA students of the Faculty of Polish Studies at the University of Warsaw. I present how in the process of classical university education we can effectively use: elements of knowledge in the field of contemporary visual culture, knowledge of design issues, practical exercises, and how to combine them with classic teaching materials. The made comments are the result of six months of work as part of exercises in the subject 'Knowledge about culture. A word in culture'. In cooperation with students, among others, a publishing project was developed: a poster (original zine form) and a series of postcards. Important here is not the end result, but the work process itself, taking into account the practical use of previously acquired knowledge. I would like to convey the reflections on this simple teaching exercise in this short study.

The most important issue (in the description of the semester exercise conducted with students) is to work with visual perception and actions with visual materials. An equally important aspect is the possibility of activating the potential of abstract thinking, including in the classical model of university work seemingly 'useless' competences for theoreticians – methods 'borrowed' from the Academy of Fine Arts. I would like to point out that the methods of creative, conscious work with visual materials – preceded by a lecture part – allow the consolidation of knowledge and its practical use by students of the Faculty of Polish Studies.

Keywords: perception of creative activities, graphic design, visual arts, work with students, educational process, artistic education, anthropology of the word, visual exercises.

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Introduction

In the first semester of the 2019/2020 academic year, I conducted classes 'Knowledge of Culture' (Anthropology of the Word) at the Institute of Polish Culture of the University of Warsaw; addressed to first-year students of the Master's degree studies at the Faculty of Polish Studies at the University of Warsaw.

Preparation of classes consists of following the syllabus proposed by the team of coordinators of classes (this syllabus has been unchanged for years, but it is allowed to modify it after consulting the coordinator). As part of the subject 'Knowledge of Culture' (Anthropology of the Word) classic lecture classes are conducted on basic reflection on culture, the main concepts of cultural sciences and selected cultural phenomena; taking into account the role played by a broadly understood word in culture, the role of language, writing, printing, etc.

I present observations from the perspective of a doctoral student conducting didactic classes (conducting an appropriate amount of lecture hours is provided for in the doctoral program). In the process of educating the teaching staff at the University of Warsaw, the doctoral student undergoes thorough methodological preparation necessary to work with students. In addition, the doctoral student takes part in the didactic course, assists in the classes of experienced lecturers, takes internships; conducts classes according to the syllabus, to develop its own seminar program in the final stage of didactic education, and to conduct classes based on an original approach.

Teaching methods proposed by tutors (during the training of future lecturers) consist of modernizing the paradigm of academic lecture known to us so far. During the process of educating academic staff, the role of changing the *ex-cathedra* lecture model, practiced for years, to be more friendly is emphasized. There is a certain emphasis on developing the skills of communication conditions between the lecturer and students, on changing communication patterns in a group of people staying together in the classroom.

'Opening' a classic lecture program to other activities (a fusion of a strictly theoretical approach with the appreciation of practical competences) can be beneficial for students and can have a beneficial effect on modifying the way classes are conducted. The benefits of such a fusion of theoretical and practical programs are increasingly recognized and practiced in Polish higher education.

It is useful for me to have higher artistic education (I am a graduate of the Graphic Arts Department at the Warsaw Academy of Fine Arts) and professional experience in the field of graphic design and work in cultural institutions.

The group of students consisted of 22 people of various ages. In the interview, a large number of students indicated very precisely (at such an early stage - the first year of MA studies) what path of professional development they want to take. The indications concerned the professional category resulting from philological education. The professional fields mentioned are: editing, publishing, translations, journalism, copywriting. Other people defined their interests more broadly, without specifying their professional plans: literature studies, literature, Russian literature, philology, philological pedagogy, law, and children's psychiatry (data based on my own reference notes from the teaching process).

Developing a coherent model of action that would combine such different interests of students was difficult. As part of the classes, I decided to combine the theoretical and practical models. Significantly to shift the student's role in the teaching process (from observational to participating role), this decision was made together with the students, with their consent.

The proposal to devote one part of the semester to strictly practical tasks met with the recognition and enthusiasm of students. This allowed students to be given practical knowledge about the design process and graphic preparation; which for people with specific professional plans (editorial and publishing) can be a valuable hint as to which competences can be developed.

Purpose and objectives of the study

The main aim of the study was to check the possibilities of including practical (artistic) aspects in the subject usually implemented as strictly theoretical.

Literature review

The clash (as contrasts) of the needs of the academy and the university reveals the most important needs of both environments. In my analysis I focus mainly on the circle of the Warsaw Academy of Fine Arts, referring to the circle of the University of Warsaw.

To better understand how the approach to connecting fields within university education is shaped in Poland, I propose to read the data and theses from the report of the ING Polish Art Foundation *How students of artistic faculties see their future?* (Szyma & Frąckowiak, 2019) published by the 'Bęc Zmiana' Foundation.

The situation of higher artistic education presented here (in the cited report) is exactly the reverse of the situation of universities. The same applies to the demands reported regarding changes in the learning program.

The presentation of the perspective of people associated with creative education does not show different motivations. As with university education, the inclusion of artistic aspects can have a positive effect; so in the case of art education, the use of advanced theoretical tools works very well. The strong need for such action is emphasized by the people participating in the study.

The authors of the report, finding out the opinions of interviewees, put forward the thesis that at present at artistic colleges there is not enough time devoted to developing competencies other than strictly artistic; and which (competences) may be useful to art school graduates at work as a professional artist (Szyma & Frąckowiak, 2019); there is also no discussion on pressing problems and characteristic phenomena of the present (Szyma & Frąckowiak, 2019).

In artistic education, the need for a fusion between approaches from different didactic orders (in the field of theory and practice) is recognized and increasingly emphasized. The enrichment of creative practice with conscious theoretical reflection is increasingly appreciated, both by the lecturers and by the students themselves (Szyma & Frąckowiak, 2019). In addition to the current classically implemented subjects in the field of cultural history: art history, history of philosophy, a theory of new media, etc., the theory is included in a strict workshop program. This approach is not new, also in Poland. Important practices in this field should be remembered; known from the history of the 20th century.

It should be added that in artistic education at the Warsaw Academy of Fine Arts there are also pioneering initiatives such as the extremely modern and dynamic '3D and virtual events Studio II' at the Faculty of Media Arts ('Dyplomująca Pracownia 3D i Zdarzeń Wirtualnych', n.d.). Professor Jakub Wróblewski, who runs the studio, focuses on the use of the latest technologies while working with students, while at the same time leaning strongly towards the practical use of theoretical background. A group of studio members makes extensive networks with theorists and researchers. The studio's program is also based on combining various fields (in a heuristic spirit), while securing the necessary technological facilities and providing students with the competence to operate the complicated equipment used to work in virtual reality and create experimental projects ('Zdarzenia Wirtualne', n.d.)

In university education, the potential for incorporating practical elements (not only understood as workshops) into the theoretical education process is beginning to be seen.

In the already mentioned study by Szyma and Frąckowiak, as art education, students from the History of Art class were qualified.

In Poland, this subject is realized only as a university subject, although there are programs for academies of fine arts focusing on a combination of curatorial competence and specialist knowledge in the field of art history (Faculty of Visual Culture Management at the Academy of Fine Arts in Warsaw) ('ASP. Wydział Zarządzania Kulturą Wizualną', n.d.); and programs at the humanities faculties of selected universities (for example, the new subject Social Arts at the Institute of Polish Culture of the University of Warsaw combines knowledge of cultural studies, a theory of work with communities, knowledge of art history and visual culture links ('Sztuki społeczne', n.d.)

Methodology

Methods (assigned to subsequent stages of work):

1) Carrying out a theoretical introduction to the anthropology of the word, the relationship of the word in culture; richly illustrated with examples from the history of editorial graphics, the history of literature, the history of Polish and world graphics (with rich subject iconography); presenting professional terminology (relating to areas such as aesthetics, graphic design, typography, printing, lettering, new media culture, editorial graphics, etc.). The theoretical part also included interpretation classes during which students became acquainted with critical and historical literature, as well as contemporary journalistic polemics regarding the issues of aesthetics and design (based on professional literature. For example books by: Rudolf Arnheim, Phill Baines, Hans Rudolf Bosshard, Adrian Frutiger, Eric Gill, Andrew Haslam, Krzysztof Lenk (Lenk & Kosmyńska, 2012), Wiktor Papanek, Marta Rakoczy, Piotr Rypson, Władysław Strzemiński, Douglas Thomas, Jan Tschihold, Karolina Wiktor and others).

2) Conducting a photographic exercise with students. Using the acquired practical knowledge of typography and lettering (Zagrodzki, 1975), students were asked to take several photos documenting forms of lettering in the city space (whether abstract or strict typographic examples).

3) Conducting classes (2 hours) consisting of brainstorming and writing on the board any associations related to the issues raised during lectures and given reading.

4) Dividing students into three groups that will cooperate in working on a zine/newspaper (according to their own preferences). Students according to their own preferences and predispositions indicated in the group what kind of character they want to find and work in: a group responsible for illustrative material

(graphic designers), a group working on the selection of texts (authors of texts), a group exercising editorial supervision and proofreading (editors).

5) Work on a zine and a series of postcards.

A selection of words has been prepared for each group (from the ones previously written together).

Graphic designers: *sign, letter, perception, visibility, language, word, speech, writing, typography, medium, communication, code, culture, symbol, image, medium, culture*. Text authors: *sign, letter, perception, visibility, language, word, speech, writing, typography, medium, communication, code, culture, symbol, image, medium, culture*.

Each of the graphic designers was asked to prepare 2 illustrations for 8 selected words from the above (i.e. 16 graphics in total).

Each group of authors was asked to prepare short texts (they could have been their own thoughts, notes, fragments of fiction, articles, etc.) regarding the 4 selected words from the following. One excerpt was for each. A minimum of 4 fragments (each max. about 400 characters).

A group of editors was instructed to prepare a proposal for a preliminary layout of the designed newspaper, based on known and available examples of artistic publications, zines, etc. Students were asked to think about the initial division and format of the newspaper - a proposal of the so-called layout. Preliminary sketches and a proposal of divisions were requested, sent in the form of a sketch, scan, freehand drawing.

On the basis of materials provided by students, a poster was created (freely expanded) - based on the aesthetics of collage and amateur zines.

In the formula of joint editorial meetings, we watched prepared materials.

From setting the format and layout, through the selection of the proportions of individual elements, determining the style and functionality of the means of artistic expression used.

Each subsequent (weekly) meeting was the next stage of joint discussion and editorial work – as part of a publishing college. The lecturer's role was only reduced to the role of delivery and supervision, focusing on ideas, being responsible for design correctness, standardizing the material, and preparing the file for printing.

The whole concept, linking elements, giving them the right expression, and also making final, very precise decisions regarding the final nature of the project belonged to the students and was their independent choice.

Results

In the process of working with first-year students of the Faculty of Polish Studies, we managed to conduct:

- Theoretical introduction richly illustrated with examples from the history of editorial graphics, the history of writing (with rich iconography of the subject).
- Photographic exercise 'Letter in space'.
- Workshops (lasting 2 hours of lecture) consisting of writing associations about previously discussed topics. As a result, we created a database of words and associations referring to the previously presented issues in the field of visual culture and visual culture criticism.
- Practical workshops covering half of the semester (content selection and online work, work at the university) involving group work on the zine/poster project and a series of postcards).
- Editing and preparing for printing a poster and postcards as a variation.

Discussions

As part of the example of one-year work with students discussed by me in the dissertation, it was possible to obtain specific effects in the form of material achievements. There are some important points to consider - constituting arguments that support or contradict the assumptions made by me, about the benefits of 'incorporating' methods outside of strict university training into philological practices. It seems very important to appreciate the attitude towards, largely independent, creative work and rejection of resistance to creative activities by people who are not involved in art or the fields of artistic design. It is worth considering whether a properly conducted multi-stage exercise (and consisting of various elements), will indeed give students the opportunity to find themselves at any stage of its duration (as well as active participation in the process) - depending on the personal preferences and predispositions of the course participants (Satalecka, 2018). Benefits of 'palpable' working through the problem (the process of cognition *a posteriori*, instead of the *a priori* model) seem obvious; one should also

remember about the possible unfavorable aspects related to the situation of forced work in a foreign field for the majority of philology students.

Of course 'forced' artistic activities may arouse in the participants of such exercises a sense of restraint, a sense of blockade, badly affecting their [students] general well-being, their assessment of their own competences, as well as the absorption of the material (I think it is important to communicate very openly in the group, to develop mutual trust. Although this is not always achievable.).

A significant limitation for the possibility of precise assessment (the model of work proposed by me) *For or against* is a one-time (and for the first time) implementation of such a model of exercise within the subject. Only after several test, it will be possible to determine whether this model works and what are the real benefits of the adopted method. So far, the evaluation remains only a hypothetical value. When assessing this model, I am using a comparison with the practices applied at the Academies of Fine Arts, so it is not possible to directly apply comparative models. For proper preparation of the ground for exercises combining artistic activities with strict philological practice, it may be valuable to refer to specialist literature in the field of 'social arts' (Dworakowska & Kubicka, 2012), artists' work with the community (Wójcik & Stokfiszewski, 2012) and the assimilation of a model of neutral anthropological observation.

Conclusion

Workshop work with philological students made the group relations more flexible; it allowed (according to my observations) to stimulate intuition and to value own creative activity. Appreciating the independence of students and granting them causative power allowed for a positive motivation of the group to work.

The action I took was one of the attempts to use artistic competences to sensitize students to their own creative intuition. This is, in my opinion (despite the small scale of the sample), a potential for use on a larger scale. The results of the exercise are satisfactory for both sides. Discussed in the teaching staff can bring interesting and beneficial changes in the teaching program of this subject.

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