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Preface

Pointing out in my abstract for my paper at the conference (repeated in some form below as an introduction): international collaboration between HE institutions call us to consider learning outcomes as a first question. What becomes of the description of the student learning outcomes having finished any particular course within his/her study program in which a thematic collaboration is inserted, if these outcomes are not considered during collaboration between different visual study programs? Adams(2004) admittedly distinguishes between different outcomes.

The second question focuses on the consequences of collaboration when we use e-learning and processing formats. Communicating over distance and using digital tools necessarily leads to a splitting up of the object(s) of art and design, those objects of attention we center upon in studio work, in studio teaching. This is even more evident in relation to the Interface project declaration you may have read¹ My solution will be to describe the objects we center on, hence also the objectives and intentions we have in terms of creating art and design, using a threefold set of aspects, media, form and theme.

Of these three aspects, one in particular becomes the way to link up attention, passion, imagination, rhetoric and content, namely that aspect of theme we easily turn our attention to when describing our work. Or as Guggenheim museum in New York describes it:

"... *Since the 1970s, Morris has explored such varied mediums as blindfolded drawings, mirror installations, encaustic paintings, and Hydrocal and fiberglass castings, on themes ranging from nuclear holocaust to Ludwig Wittgenstein's Philosophical Investigations.*

See url: http://www.guggenheimcollection.org/site/artist_bio_115.html

INTRODUCTION

A course module, *Stories and Places*, became an experiment in thematic collaboration between art and design education schools: The Art Academy of Latvia, Riga, the Dublin Institute of Design, Dublin and the University of Art and Design, Helsinki. The implementation of the course module ran from Sept 4th-Dec 15th 2007. Some conclusion can be made. My paper will deal with concepts: theme, media, form as visual quality, learning outcomes/objectives, semiotics/semiology, pragmatism, remediation, mediacy, immediacy, in the following sections:

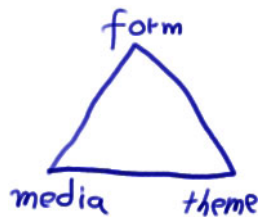
1. *Learning Outcomes in Thematic Collaboration*
2. *A multi-structural approach to the notion of a Art and Design object*
3. *The challenge of transfer/remediation: or the intersection between virtual and real in art and design education*

1. Learning Outcomes in Thematic Collaboration

Without defining a common set of shared learning outcomes², aspects of media and visual quality (form) are assessed relative to each professional interest. Learning outcomes are displaced from their ordinary position governing the whole of the course structure towards different aspects of what each specific study program include in their aims. Learning outcomes are dislocated from their position where the expected course results should be defined to another place at the seam between course and program.³ My paper discusses the consequences of a thematic collaboration between students belonging to different study programs. Learning outcomes state different categories of expected skills. In Stories and Places course module, assessment criteria/learning outcomes of participant schools were in practice overshadowed by a type of a transferable skill not necessarily belonging to new media and ICT competence alone: the skill of narrative and thematic collaboration by students and tutors. Thematic collaboration demands a tutoring approach more in line with narrative development and concept design – or improvisation in a drama studio. Here, no light will be shed on the various ways tutors did their work. My goal is only to point out an area of interest and further study, for a description of a heterogenous object of art/design, aspects of which seems to confront us with topics of ontology and epistemology, a risky affair for art and design education that demands pragmatism.

2. A multi-structural approach to the notion of an Art and Design object

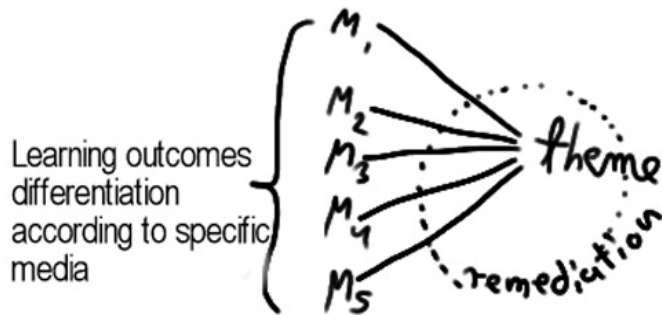
Thematic collaboration is one aspect or part of an investigating process based on a threefold notion of an (intermediate) object of art/design: form, media, theme.



Aspects of the art/design object, virtual or real, a theoretical referent, a possible icon, a combination of indexes and icons, a replica of a symbol, an action interpreted or habitual, a following or breaking of rules in how we (re)produce our environment, things and ordinary objects, are all examples of signs representing something else, of a familiar world or a potential one. A three-fold structure replaces the monolith notion of an art/design object, which can be described successfully, say, in an educational setting as learning outcomes pertaining to each aspect separately, independently, temporarily, that is, over time and physical distances managed in narrative connection to each other.

3. The challenge of transfer/remediation: or the intersection between virtual and real in art and design education

I will discuss the notions of virtual and real, both from a semiotic and pragmatist view. Art is a discussion about what we think is important to us and others in our lives or what could be done in a fictional world. Design is a discussion about function, in meaningful terms and objects: the chair is to be comfortable plus have visual quality. Meaning is use. The level of art and applied art is dissolved, it is about different stories. Remediation, the term borrowed from Grusin and Bolter (2000)⁴, becomes the name of the task of defining and (re)producing themes between a range of media in the domain of visual culture, diagrammed as follows:



If we confront the notion of virtual and physical with immediacy and mediacy, we can differentiate the virtual in everyday face-to-face context and environment. We also encounter the need for mediated, prosthetic and technological tools. Using those tools for communication, is, however, again embedded in virtual synthesis, immediacy. Art, design and our lived experiences join to share the paradigms of virtual and real. Media defined as parts of the world used for communication become interlinked through signification = content, or theme. We do not need one dominant set of learning outcomes in international collaboration, but many.

Objects of Art and Design, a reconsideration in the light of New Media and its uses in teaching/studying visual professional competences

Bolter and Grusin, in their book *Remediation, Understanding New Media*, refer to notions of immediacy and mediacy and hypermediacy in describing both modern and contemporary changes as well as continuity and tradition in visual communication. Following their ideas, what actually seems to be remediated are both theme and form, that is, visual qualities with their compositional features together with stories images and texts tell us. There is a thematic factor as well as a formal factor at play through the growing roster of media available. Now, what Bolter and Grusin wants to deal with is that paradox, that, simultaneously, new media seeks to obliterate itself in an accelerating pace to replace itself with virtual immediacy, with that bodily experience we have of our reality and environment as it is presented by our senses. This evolves at the same pace digital technology makes more convincing replicas of our reality than before. While our reality is heavily mediated – toolbased - , exactly that development of mediation eventually targets its own dissolution in immediacy. This will never be met with any final success, I am sure. The road to complete cyberspace is endless, I think, especially if we metaphorize further the notion of tool and media.⁵ I will not here discuss all the facets of Bolters and Grusins poignant dialogue on this issue, that we face still more hypermediacy as well, when aware of and how the different ways of communication influence each other and us, that is not at all targeting immediacy or highest possible illusion, but instead showing off their special powers of illusionism, fantasy while at the same time keeping up with what their adjacent media do. As an example of the double logic of remediation, besides the drive toward *immediacy*, *hypermediacy*, Bolter and Grusin states, makes us aware of the media as media.⁶ This process could also be described as parts of the world changing into other kinds of parts of the world. The history and iconography of images, film, television, fine art, design, architecture, fashion, literature as design and typography, all visual culture, borrow from each other, need their links to each others realms, yes, are often today owned by the same companies. The varieties of media proliferate their brands and styles. Remediation is, finally, more or less based on narratives, something Bolter and Grusin do not explicitly state. That what finally gets from one media to another is content, a story, something expressible in a line of words. We are used to images. But we feed on words. The text-image based new

media transfer texts and images. Their contents are themes we may or may not understand. But we have to interpret them in some way in order to see them at all. This happened in Stories and Places, namely, thematic interpretation.

Stories and Places were planned on the basis of a common set of themes to students of different study programs: fine art printmaking, graphic and visual communication, fine art and art education, in three countries, in three schools with their own educational culture, language, history. There was never any serious proposal to try to create a common studio setting, a common program, or even an identical course in each of the schools. Stories and Places was inserted **both** as a module within obligatory study program courses **and** was offered as a voluntary course where students applied for registration. No identical setting for an international group of students was established. Only a thematic starting point, a schedule and means for students to collaborate. The students groups were selected by teachers. The tasks were presented by teachers in each school. Dead-lines were given. What happened?

Each student continued within their study program as before, and was presented with an option or a compulsory task, to try to collaborate with a number of foreign students as well as student colleagues. The group measured 6 to 8 persons. Some conclusions can be done, but I will stress this point: my comments belong to the domain of hunches and hypothesis. More should be done to discuss my line of results here, for example my suspicion of the notion of transfer simple and transparent. No such thing takes place in communication. Communication is a constant implicit negotiation happening within both citation and questions marks. There is no clear cut metaphor of transfer, like transport of goods from one place to another that could describe people talking or discussing with each other, let alone sending texts and images to each other. Communication is about understanding and interpretation. The active part is the listener, not speaker, the receiver, not sender.⁷ This rather radical notion was long buried under the layers of structuralist thought. Only lately due perhaps to the strong influence of another famous person, the philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce, semiotic thinking evolves out the remnants of semiology. Peirce, a pragmatist philosopher, stresses the necessity of interpretation in communication. No meaning is without its use, meaning is use. To mean something is to makes signs and use them. Pragmatists like Peirce, Dewey and Rorty share this basic idea about meaning.⁸ It is revealed in how well it works in the interaction with environment and social community. Here the "receiver", rather than the Saussurean passive user of an implicit language system, becomes a producer of interpretation, thus carrying the chain of signs forward in an ever ongoing negotiation with the environment, realities and qualities of contexts, grounds, objects and beings like him/herself.

Stories and Places as study process

The Stories and Places collaboration consisted of six phases, three pairs of a studio practice sessions followed by a VLE meeting period taking place as writing to the blogs and commenting other students blog entries. The use of VLE tools were thematically preplanned by tutors handing out assignments in each phase. The final outcomes of the around 40 students varied, according to where Stories and Places tasks were inserted. Different materials in the VLE and results became possible: text, image, video, sound, painting, graphic design, concepts. Formative critique was given by collaborating tutors and peers communication in VLE sessions. The format of the studio work outcomes, presentations, body of works,

either by student group or individual participating student depended on the assessment criteria given by each school and respective program (art/design, art education).

Deliverables were defined by tutors of each school and vary by stage within courses, for example: negotiated comments on the brief, individual notebooks and group effort deliverables both in studio and VLE sessions. A shared brief based on a site-specific inventory will be developed through the whole course presented by groups and individuals in virtual environment formats selected in collaboration between schools, tutors and students.

Schedules

The course starts: September 4th 2006.
The course ends: December 15th 2006.

- September 4th - October 1st: First studio sessions; Self-presentations, studio and documentation practices.
- October 2nd - October 13th: first VLE session; Working in groups in group blogs.
- October 14th - November 5th: Second studio sessions
- November 6th - November 11th: Second VLE session
- November 11th - December 3rd: Third studio session
- December 4th - December 15th: Third VLE session

Working formats

Studio work, personal notebook or portfolio work, virtual learning sessions and digital tools, lectures, individual and group tutoring and assessment, written and oral statements and presentations, is a comprehensive list of educational processes, not, however, identical between each institution.

Content

Before students can collaborate, in this case, which I will stress, using thematic aspects furthering their work, tutors must collaborate. Tutors collaboration is embedded in the creating of assignments. For *Stories and Places*, a first fundamental assignment was conceived already well before the execution of *Stories and Places*. It belongs more or less to the rhetorical input of the *Interface* project as a whole. The thematic topic judged suitable for collaboration over distance was exactly the opposite, namely, the issue of the sites-specific, which is shared in all visual communication, art and design. This starting point was made first individual task together with the obligatory self-presentation so as to enable a group dynamic.

On the basis of the notion of site-specific, which was given via a narrative to look for one's journey to ones school and start from there, a second assignment was given, that of a *souvenir*. This assignment was given a group of students, many of which do not know anything in detail of another students environment, culturally, or geographically etc. Here a first encounter was arranged to react to the contributions given, all presented on group blogs.

A first evidence of interpretation as a generic and generative solution arises. The first assignments become starting points, where some links were preserved, but others were built, however, not completely within same categories. While connecting to imagery and visual quality, some features changed, reference(s) to new media (parts of the world) were suggested. These modifications both arise from and

lead into another theme, or a new content, another narrative. The stress is on the interpretations of the "receiver", not sender. The commentator becomes the lead guitar player, and does his/her own music. Communication is negotiation where themes cross swords and become a play between parts and wholes, dominants and accents.

Stories and Places continued into its third phase assigning the students to use both their site-specific task results and the souvenirs produced to, equally as group work produce one of three alternatives – following the student back as it were into his/her study program – a graphic project, an installation, a concept for art/design. This phase backfired, however mostly, due to lack of time. Asking for the thematic results to be brought back into the studio demanded too much time, thus what ever became of this phase, were buried in the separate studios in three schools, in three countries. They did not show up on the e-platforms, more than as a few attempts to coordinate the group dynamic into the coming work. With this, no serious damage was done to the original thrust of assignments. They eventually blended into the studio work within those courses Stories and Places were inserted. At earlier stages of assignments, some combination between studio and e-platform work was to be seen. Here, however, it seems clear, that the traditional use of digital means by artists showing their work on the net, does not fulfill any other function than documentation and marketing usually called an e-gallery. It is all about information. Stories and Places did not choose this road, to the benefit of other potentials, whatever the initial thoughts tutors came up with in discussing the use of an EU-funded setting such as this one.

Surely, there is much more to investigate here. Obviously, I have not benefitted from looking into existing narrative methods in other fields of art, let alone their theoretical backgrounds. Many of my punch lines are probably not punch lines at all for those who know their own, perhaps adjacent, fields of marketing and management/brand creation. Like we see in the Russian doll, some dolls are smaller than other ones, but the biggest of them all, must be named Story, Narration, Theme. Answering the questions of why? narrativity becomes a personal affair, and that, again, makes things move. This applies to students as well as teachers all around the globe, but only as we are still humans.

Some conclusions, having seen a few examples from Stories and Places collaborations

- to combine different media, hence, to disregard the needs of identical learning outcomes, objectives within any specific study program, can inspire motivation, usher the students to reach new solutions in his/her own work. This seems to be a way of describing "crossdisciplinary" benefits. Thematic linking and remediation is more or less the way artists work anyway.
- Co-operation becomes easier when schools do not have to disclose their personal attitudes(cultures) to others who cant benefit their use of time/money in trying to learn about the differences when it is all about getting students inspiration going. This was the way the Interface project took its dynamics, I believe.
- Thematic collaboration may be a first step towards more integrated cooperation, though
- Language barriers may be creative guides, students use other means: imagery.
- The curve towards integrating study programs or modules within programs will not get too steep in the beginning. Taking up only one aspect of the object of art and design leaves the rest to creative innovation and interpretation. This is always the burden of the receiver, not sender.

“represent” or refer to and what it is otherwise, this should be a feasible way of discussing different parts of things useful for different other things or uses.

Images in this sense is distinguished from the media it is made of, and become a vehicle for meaning for somebody who by the image sees something else. Here, a twofold distinction between media and image can be made. Following Wollheim (1980), we might in discussing the image-function distinguish two kinds of image-related consciousnesses, the seeing-in mode, and further, the seeing-as mode. The seeing-in, or the competence to understand images as representing something else than the image is medially otherwise made of as distinct from the competence to see this or that “theme” in the image, may only amount to theoretical formalism, but still, it sounds convincing enough a distinction for some theorizing, like when we discuss semiabstract works of art, or the relation between parts and the whole. This does not, however, apply to Wollheim’s own interests. See Wollheim, Richard, *Art and its Objects*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press 1980.

⁶ Perhaps *hypermediacy* could be stressed to fit the following example. It certainly fits the metaphorical use of the concept of medium spelled out by Marshall McLuhan in his famous *Understanding Media, Extensions of Man*, London, Routledge 1964. If I may, thank you, while finishing of this paper at the Copenhagen airport, among the airport readings I find Herald Tribune’s theater critic Alan Riding who writes on Ian McKellens performance as Lear and notes his colleague Tim Walker in the Sunday Telegraph, “who praised McKellens ‘breathtaking tour de force’ then added ‘But not for a second did I believe I was watching Lear. I was watching McKellen as Lear’ Herald Tribune, Sept 5, p. 8. Not only did I interpret this as a hypermediatic link to an other text, the content was also very McLuhanian, it is not always about the content (Lear), it is about the medium (McKellen).

⁷ This is wonderfully and strangely presented in the original line of thoughts by Ferdinand de Saussure. In his text, collected and edited later by his students, the famous *Course* (1915)⁷, Saussure presents two different images to describe the linguistic structure, something a speaker and listener engages in, while using a language (Saussure 1989, pp 11,12). Saussure maintains, that the linguistic fact is foremost connected to the to the listener who have the social and psychological competence to associate a sensed sound pattern (*l’image acoustique*) with an equally mental concept. Here, the speaker, or the system producing the sound pattern is in fact arbitrary as is the sign itself, referring to that union between a concept and sound pattern. Alan Harris, the translator of the *Course*, notes, on the other hand, that Saussure uses a linear telegraph-metaphor to picture his vision of the linguistic process, which does not clearly consider the interpretation, that is, not the means of production of the sign, but the competence as such, being an implicit socio-psychological competence and that object Saussure wants to study, namely language as a sign system. What then, to the eventual detriment of the famous structuralist ideology spreading its thinking into anthropology, psychoanalysis and theory of visual communication, Saussure left speech, that is, the production of signs, mostly outside his theory of signs. See Saussure, Ferdinand de, *Course in General Linguistics*, La Salle, Open Court Classics 1989 (1915) pp 11-15; transl. to English by Roy Harris.

⁸ On Peirce, see, for example, Houser, Nathan & Kloesel, Christian (eds), *The Essential Peirce. Selected Philosophical Writings. Vol. 1 (1867-1893), vol. 2 (1893-1913)*, edited by the Peirce Edition Project, Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1998. On Dewey, see, for example, Dewey, John, *Democracy and Education. An Introduction to the Philosophy of Education*, New York, The Macmillan Company, (1916), p. 18; on Rorty, see above, end note number 4.