

FUTURESCAN 4: VALUING PRACTICE

Making or not making in new disciplinary educations

Lena Håkanson, Linnaeus University, Sweden, lena.hakansson@lnu.se

Abstract

At the Department of Design at Linnaeus University, Sweden, we attempt to pioneer education within the design discipline. The students get an orientation in many fields, focusing on sustainability. We teach very basic knowledge in different materials like textile, wood, plastic and clay, but the focus is on working on projects with processes and developing concepts. We have developed our curriculum with 'Change' as a key word, we want our students to make change in society by using design. Do the students really need artisan skills in these new fields? They are not going to be craft persons and the time is always limited in an education. My answer is 'yes'. I think it is important for students to get the opportunity to learn basic skills to be able to make prototypes, workshops and exhibitions.

In my research I have worked with different workshops focused on making. The aim is to get students interested in the practical, material based field and give them tools to learn what they need based on their own interests. 'One-a-day' is a project where students get the possibility to deepen their knowledge by doing the same creative activity or technique every day for a specific period. We meet once a week for group feedback and discussions about learning, artistic work and personal development. During the project, the students write a weekly reflection as well as summarize their experience afterwards. I take notes and photographs, to document all our meetings. Afterwards I analyse the material. In this paper I am going to discuss my experiences from this project as well as other similar projects with the aim to increase design students interested in material-based working.

Keywords: learn it yourself; one-a-day project; making; time; sustainability

Background

At Linnaeus University, Sweden, we started a new design curriculum in 2015, called +Change and the main focus was working with sustainability in different ways, from the perspective of ecological, economic, social and cultural sustainability. We work in new discipline design fields, like metadesign, critical design, speculative design but also service- and system design (for further information see: <https://lnu.se/en/programme/design-change/vaxjo-international-autumn/>). Design wise we put lots of effort in working with concepts and processes. Depending on what the students are interested in, they can partly focus on a specific field. Some students focus on working with objects as tools for design exploration.

Our new curriculum is more theoretical compared to the previous structure. We work hard to find a balance between theories, artistic work, practice-based learning and project work. This kind of design education is new to Sweden. The topics we teach are important and interesting, the students and the teachers are very dedicated and lots of new contexts become visible in our work. Sustainable change in society is needed and through transdisciplinary work, both at the university and within society, design can be part of and play an important role in this development. Many design curricula over the

last 10-15 years have changed from focusing on visual expressions and craft-based contents, to more complex and theoretical working in wider contexts. Probably, this is a logical development as society has evolved and work in wider contexts must be undertaken in order to make design education useful for students and society.

Do design students really need artisan skills or knowledge in making or drawing in this type of education, where their work will not be focused on artistic work and materiality? The answer is, in my opinion, 'yes'. I think students really need that kind of knowledge for many reasons, not least in order to get a wholeness in their design practice, to become a better skilled designer. They will still need to be able to communicate visually in many various ways, areas and contexts. The designers in these new fields are often generalists, not working in a specific field. They need knowledge and orientation in many different areas, practical as well as theoretical.

At Linnaeus University we teach very basic skills in the practice and material based fields. The aim of our teaching is to give the students enough knowledge to be able to make simple models and make exhibitions, get an orientation in materials and sustainability and to do research. But there is a dilemma as there is very limited time for experimenting, playfulness, applying the skills and reflection. From my own experience as a textile designer I know that making takes time. You need to actually do the making, re-do, reflect over what you have done, re-do etc. It is not enough to try a technique or to look at a YouTube movie and try what the movie shows, and believe that this is enough for a robust design process.

In my previous research I have worked with students interested in the practice and material based field, trying to give them the opportunity to deepen their skills and to learn strategies for the practice based knowledge they need. The previous project was called 'There is far too little handicraft going on at University' (Håkanson 2016). In that project students got the opportunity to participate in workshops in different kinds of quite simple making; stamp carving, embroidery and notebook making - craft techniques that are easy to do as a beginner, but have huge potential for development. The aim was to show that to start making can be quite simple and once they have started and got interested in a specific area of practice based work, they can investigate what they need to learn and what they want to try-out.

In the surveys made in connection to previous projects, I could see that half of our students were interested in material based working, if this option was easy assessable. The students claimed they had difficulties in finding time to make, but when they made something, it was easy for them to see the benefits of doing this. Apart from learning the skills, and creating new objects, they also liked to use making as a way to socialize, relax, have fun and as a self-care activity.

It came as no surprise to me that the students wanted to attend workshops like those discussed. It was easy for students to attend, to make, to be creative and have fun. But I wanted to try something else, something that gave the students better knowledge and courage in practice based work as well as a strategy for learning practice skills. I also wanted to try something where the students needed to put in more time, energy and engagement in their learning process, not just making in single workshops. From the surveys made, I understood that some of the students were interested in activities like this. That was my starting point for my new research project 'one-a-day'.

The one-a-day project

A one-a-day project is when you do a specific activity every day for a specific time period. The activity can be creative or artistic, but could also be practicing a sport, learning a new skill or acquiring new habits. The time period is often one month, 100 days or a year. It seems like people do these type of projects to challenge themselves, for personal development, to get out of creative blocking, to develop a skill or technique or change habits. They also use one-a-day projects to 'find' time in every-day life for creative work. I first read of creative one-a-day projects in a Flow magazine article, A little every day (Buijs 2012). There Caroline Buijs describes how one-a-day project works and gives examples of themes to use if you would like to do a project of your own (Buijs 2012).

Different kinds of one-a-day projects have often been shared via social media like Instagram, but it can of course also be an analogue method. In social media one-a-day projects mainly work in two different ways; people can show their own project on the Internet, get likes and in that way keep up the motivation or they can attend a pre-organized one-a-day project. Inktober (Parker 2018) has its base on Instagram. An account is set up to organize the activity, people who want to join do their daily prompt and post their work with a hashtag on Instagram and become a community. In #TheJanuaryChallenge (Frankel 2019) all participants received creative challenges for all days in January by email with the aim to do-think-share. Sometimes like in Inktober, #TheJanuaryChallenge or in Jennifer Orkin Lewis book Draw every day draw every way (Orkin Lewis 2016) the author/organizer has decided upon techniques and themes for every day and structured the set-up. Many people find it easier to carry out a project if they do not need to make decisions everyday about what to do. It can also be more challenging and creative to have limitations.

I have tried different one-a-day projects several times myself. I have for example made a drawing a day for one year with the aim to improve my drawing skills and I have taken a photo of a pattern every day for a year, to get new input to my pattern design. I have used Orkin Lewis' book, Draw every day draw every way (Orkin Lewis 2016) for a year. For me this kind of project has worked well. I have understood the learning process in a new and better way, I have improved artistic skills, got a better understanding of creative processes and most important for me, I have found time every day and prioritized my own creative and artistic development. I have also experienced the difficulty in accomplishing my intentions and learnt strategies for overcoming them.

Based on my own experience of one-a-day projects I wanted the students who found it interesting to try it. I wanted the students to get a method where they could find strategies for learning or improve skills of their own choice, as well as to let them try to manage time in the way a project like this does. Since it is really easy for each participant to adjust the method to their own needs, it works well to try the method while studying in education. If the student has special interest in a technique or a field that the education does not include, the students get tools for learning themselves as well as implementing the knowledge in the assignments and content of the education.

When I made the structure for how to work with the one-a-day project I used an article in Flow magazine (Buijs 2012) as reference, combined with my own experience from doing these type of projects. I used parts of 'Ten principles of effective learning' (Kaufman 2013: 28). This describes how to use strategies for learning skills in a fast way. For example, a clear plan of what to learn is important, to identify obstacles and to try to eliminate them before starting the project. It also describes why repetition is important in learning as well as fast feedback loops. I implemented some of Nicolas Jacquemot's thoughts about how to keep up with motivation by finding a clear path to follow, as well as how

motivation can be kept up by support from other people (Jacquemot 2013: 69). Motivation is an important part of the creative process, together with curiosity, inspiration, playfulness, uninhibitedness, persistence and goal focus (Jacquemot 2013: 13). I considered this when I made the structure for the one-a-day project, because it was important that the project would become as creative as possible. As far as I am aware there have not been any written academic articles about one-a-day projects.

The structure of the one-a-day project

The project was structured and presented to the students in the following way. All participants needed to start by making a plan for the time period in question. The plan for each participant should answer:

What: decide what you want to do

Why: formulate for yourself why you want to do it

How: write down your plan. Do you need some specific material? Do you need specific knowledge to be able to fulfil your aim for the month? Do you need help from someone else? Do you need literature? Or maybe you just can start.

When: once a day for a month, but maybe you need to put a limit on time (for example 30 minutes a day or whatever works for you) or decide when during the day you are going to do it. Do you need to do changes in your life to get it to work? Is it worth it?

During the project everyone needed to write a short reflection about their work and experience once a week (for themselves, not to show to me or the group). When the project was finished, the students were asked to summarize their projects and write about their insights and send it to me. The students also answered a survey. The project also contained weekly meetings focused on feedback, talking about the creative process, learning, artistic work and personal development.

For my research, I used the documents produced during the project; the project plans, the overall reflections and a final survey sent to all participants at the end of the project. I also documented and took photographs of all discussions during the meetings as well as viewing the final results of the participants work.

Implementing the one-a-day project

I invited all Bachelors and Masters students at the Design+Change educations at Linneaus University and asked if they wanted to attend the project. I started by introducing the project, explained the method and what the students could expect if they joined. We talked about creative processes, practice based learning and making as well as advantages and difficulties during a project like this. The students also got the article A Little Every Day (Buijs 2012) as inspiration, when putting together their project plans. The project was voluntary to attend, it was out of teaching hours and the students did not get credits for their participation. The project started two weeks after the introduction. 22 students joined the project, 13 students completed the project and it ran for one month. This is a period of time that is achievable without bigger permanent changes in life, but still long enough to be challenging to keep up with the plan.

The project started after the students made their project plans. Examples of what the students planned to do were; to learn the programs Photoshop and Illustrator, making a drawing a day (several students choose to do that, but with different themes), a pattern sketch a day, explore watercolour, draw a pattern a day for a friend (this project turned out to be too complicated, the student changed and

instead made a small sketch of a plant for a friend every day) and visual diaries. All students choose to do artistic work, not material based.

We had four meetings, once a week, and they become very important for keeping up energy and continuing the work. We gave each other feedback and talked a lot about strategies for learning. The students were very open about the benefits of using the method, but also about struggles and difficulties. They gave each other lots of 'tips and tricks' of how to navigate the creative process, and how to deal with the boredom that everyone struggled with after some weeks doing the same thing over and over again. They also tried to help students struggling with their projects to change the rules within the plan or do 'smart cheating' to get it manageable and more joyful. When we finished the project the students were tired, but they could see that they had greatly developed their artistic and technical skills. They had made 30 new pieces of work and had learnt everything by themselves, which was good for their self-confidence and their sense of achievement.

Analysis of the project

Summarizing the students' reflections in my notes and photographs from our meetings, the survey the students answered and the physical result of the students work, it seems as if the students who attended and finalized the whole project started with a plan that was quite uncomplicated and realistic. For them as individuals, it was something that suited their way of living, like doing a drawing a day in a specific theme or technique. They did not need to make decisions every day before doing their creative activity. After making the plan they could just do what they had decided. It also seemed important that they knew why they wanted to do their specific activity.

The weekly meetings became very important. They kept up the motivation for continuing the project. Almost all of the students had a motivation dip after about two weeks. The first feeling, that the project was fun and easy disappeared and instead the project started to feel time consuming, something that disrupted their everyday life. In the beginning it was easy for the students to see that they learned new things and improved skills every day, but after some weeks the learning curve decreased. At this point it was useful to talk about how creative processes work and look at the work they had done, pointing out the development that all of them had accomplished. The meeting was just as important as the written weekly reflections for understanding the creative process for the students.

The meetings were also important for the students who did not finalize the project. During the discussions we/they identified what had worked or did not work. Mostly it did not work due to lack of time, being too big, complicated or unrealistic in initial aims or unwillingness to change habits. Instead of seeing it as a failure to not finish the project, they still learnt a lot about creative processes and especially their own ways of working. This is a good skill for their studies and future working life as a designer. The students who finished the whole project were satisfied and filled with self-confidence. They had 30 pieces of new work and it was easy to see that they have improved a technique or learnt something new, when they compared work made at the beginning and the end of the month. The fact that they had learnt themselves and gained strategies for learning was an eye opener for several of the students. All students who attended and also the ones who did not finish the whole project, wanted to try to do it again, however during a time period that was less intense.

When I summarized the survey the most appreciated part of the project was that the students had given themselves time to develop and experiment with topics and techniques of their own choice. The worst part was to do the same thing every day. This became stressful for some of the participants.

One student summarized the project:

'Challenging and fun, boring and interesting, easy and hard.'

Another student concluded

'Why did I finish the project? There are four major reasons it worked for me to finish the project:

1. Working with a group, sharing results and ideas kept my motivation (weekly meeting with feedbacks).
2. Short-term delivering deadlines. Stop to put it off to next day.
3. Finding an easy and fun method. Less pressure and stress.
4. Having physical results (30 pieces of paper in the end). The Visible result made me fulfilled and press me to next action.

My overall conclusion is that the project worked well. All students easily understood and could use the method in a way that suited their own way of working. All of us got deeper knowledge in creative processes and practice based learning. Afterwards I observed that I put a lot of pressure on the students, maybe too much for some. Maybe we could have started with a shorter test period of two weeks to try the plans. Maybe it would have been better to do the project every other day instead of every day, making it a less stressful way to work.

Discussion and how to use the result

The project shows the importance of creative work for design students. Sometimes we take creativity for granted or work with creativity as a routine. When analyzing the results of the one-a-day project, it is easy to see that by challenging and adding new and challenging ways of creative work on a daily basis, the participants developed artistically. This is also the conclusion that made Jo Hunter start the 64 Million Artists programme and #thejanuarychallenge (Davidson and Tashin 2019: 104). By adopting small challenges and breaking routines, people develop and this creative development improves people's lives in different ways (Frankel 2019).

When analysing the project, time constraints stand out as a dilemma. This is what the students struggled with most. Many of our students are high-performing in many areas of their life and to start a new activity where they have to deliver every day can be overwhelming. If you do not have time, you do not have time. You can learn strategies, reorganize your priorities, try to get rid of bad habits, acquire better working routines etc. but you can never get more time. Maybe we need to look more into this aspect when we plan our educational curriculums? We want to teach as many areas as possible to our students, in order for them to understand as many aspects of sustainability as possible. Maybe we have forgotten the individual student's need for a more sustainable life?

Today, making is acknowledged as being helpful to reduce stress. It has been proven to be a self-caring way of working. Gail Kenning (2015) writes that 'Craft-based textile activities such as knitting, crochet, tatting, and lace making have provided challenges, physical and mental stimulation, creative outlets, and social interaction for generations of women'. In the book *Craftfulness* this is described 'While making we give our overactive brain a much-needed break, and some unpressured time to tap into intuition and creativity' (Davidson and Tahsin 2019: 49).

Maybe we should have more instead of less making in our curriculums in order to give the students a balanced life and working life? The dilemma is that other subjects' need to be removed. We cannot

put making on top of everything else we expect a student to deliver. This is an interesting area for future research, as well as a consideration for curriculum development. Even though time and stress issues are problematic and not fully addressed in the one-a-day-project I am really interested in continuing to work with methods like this. Strategies for learning are important for all of us and in society today, we need to be prepared for lifelong learning as well as learning ourselves new skills and knowledge.

Following the completion of the one-a-day project, I have used part of the method in teaching twice. In a pattern design course the students made pattern sketches in different pre-determined techniques seven days in a row. The aim was to try to influence the design process and not let the students get stuck in a specific style or manner. In a typography and illustration course the students delivered a poster a day for three weeks (except weekends). The aim was for students to learn InDesign and Illustrator and apply the knowledge in their work. We wanted them to work hard and experiment during daytime, rest during evenings and weekends and not put too much attention on the final result. It worked fine, seven of the eight students liked the method and wanted to use it again. I will continue to refine and develop the method and I hope to be able to set up a bigger project and maybe let my colleagues try it in their own artistic or other practices. This will provide a useful comparison to the student adoption of the method and the different results obtained.

References

Buijs, C. (2012) A little every day. *Flow international magazine* 1: 128-133.

Davidson, R. and Tahsin, A. (2019) *Craftfulness*. New York: Harper wave.

Frankel, J. (2019) The January challenge, Read The January Challenge 2019 long report. [online]. 64 million artists. Available from: <https://64millionartists.com/our-work/the-january-challenge/> [Accessed 5 April 2019].

Håkanson, L. (2016) There is far too little handicraft going on at University. In: *In this Place: Cumulus Association Biannual International Conference: Conference. Proceedings*. Wednesday 27 April - Sunday 1 May 2016 / [ed] Duncan Higgins, Venu Dhupa, Nottingham Trent University, 2016, pp. 127-132.

Jacquemot, N. (2013) *Kreativetskoden*. Stockholm: Natur & kultur.

Kaufman, J. (2013) *The first 20 hours*. New York: Portfolio/Penguin.

Kenning, G. (2015) Fiddling with Threads: Craft-based Textile Activities and Positive Well-being. *Textile, The Journal of Cloth and Culture* 13(1): 50-65.

Orkin Lewis, J. (2016) *Draw every day draw every way*. New York: Abrams Noterie.

Parker, J. (2018) Rules & prompts. [online]. Inktober. Available from: <http://inktober.com/> [Accessed 5 April 2019].