Leaving The Ivory Tower ... How about becoming a self–employed designer?

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1. Abstract

Being excellent in designing is unfortunately not enough to succeed in working as a self–employed person. "Leaving the Ivory Tower …" is a seminar aimed at students who want to inform themselves about possibilities of working as a designer. This seminar is meant to help students to turn abstract future visions into something tangible. In addition this seminar is also a first–aid–package for students who start performing commissions during their studies – maybe because they want to gain experience or they want to earn money or just because they are asked to do an interesting job.

This seminar provides the students with exercises (e.g. role plays), facts (e.g. economic basics) and case studies. It illustrates steps of cooperation between designers and clients: starting with the first phonecall and ending with being paid – hopefully. Moreover it sensitizes the students to regcognize potential conflicts at an early stage.

To give realistic impressions and additional information from different points of view, this seminar presents a number of guests such as product–managers, patent agents and young designers.

2. About the necessity of seminars like "Leaving The Ivory Tower …"

Universities try to teach students how to work on projects with an open mind and in an extensive and innovative manner. On a high level of education students leave the university and suddenly they find themselves confronted with the life outside: with marketing people talking all Greek, product managers who did not have enough sleep the night before, technical staff ignoring the importance of real substantial esthetic decisions. There is a large amount of problems students have to deal with and of course they cannot be prepared for all of it. But there are lessons in the field of organizing work under real life conditions that can be taught in order to avoid wasting energy. Energy that can be put to better use while working on the content of projects.

The seminar focuses on self–employed and freelance designers who face different challenges than their employed colleagues. Some facts to underline the seminar´s relevance:

- In Germany the amount of freelancers increases at a steady pace. Going into business for yourself is also supported by the government to reduce unemployment.

- Under certain circumstances, employment is not very likely. For instance if companies recognize the benefit of the factor of design but start to work with designers just on a trial basis. Or if smaller companies do not have enough design work to hire a designer constantly. Or if companies choose different types of designers depending on different tasks.

- Students often become self–employed without actually intending to do so. Knowing the facts prevent them from acting unintentionally illegally. Official self–employment as an alternative to illicit work.

- Being self–employed enables students to work on actual projects during their studies. From these projects they gain useful insights, that will help them planning their further studies.

- Working on actual projects enables students to work on qualitatively different projects than the ones within the structure of the university. Initializing projects with industry requires more extensive planning than university projects. The seminar encourages students to deal with those planning challenges.

- Inexperienced designers have difficulties in evaluating their own worth and some companies may take advantage of this circumstance. Some experience has to be made by all beginners on their own, but this seminar tries to avoid unnecessary mistakes.

- Students frequently ask questions about how to execute a contract. This seminar is one possibility to answer their questions.

- Students get an imagination what their future work could be about and where their place in working life could be. It may reduce the student´s insecurity and help them to concentrate on their studies.

3. What benefit can students expect from this seminar and which expectations will not be fulfilled?

First of all this seminar helps students to become aware of their competences and qualities with regard to practical challenges. Knowing about the worth of her/his skills is the basic prerequisite for working as a self–employed designer, because her/his abilities are the goods the designer is trading with. The students have to profile themselves and put the results into words understandable for leaders of companies, project managers etc..

Secondly, the students should gain the necessary minimum of knowledge to execute a simple contract in the field of industrial design – without excessive waste of energy, time and money.

But, students who hope to get instructions on how to do the job right, will be disappointed. Working as a designer is a design problem in itself: As usual at those problems, there are indefinite right solutions to do the job. They depend on the relationship between designer and client as well as on the weather or if the client´s favourite soccer team has won its last match. Every designer has to find out his personal way of doing the job best by gaining experience and its constant evaluation.

4. Seminar structure

The seminar takes place two hours a week for one semester. It is divided into six topics. The sequence is determined by the order in which the aspects usually surface while working on a contract. Whenever possible, students are asked to do homeworks such as writing cost estimates, before the topic is handled at the seminar. Experience shows that if students have to struggle with problems on their own first, they discover potential conflicts by themselves. Their personal experience leads to better understanding of the relevance of the individual topic and increases students´ motivation.

In order to give realistic impressions and additional information from different points of view, the seminar presents guests. There are about five professionals per semester, who enrich the theoretical contents with illustrative examples from their field of work. There are experienced designers, but also young ones just having finished their diploma and now founding their own business. For instance they tell about their difficulties in organizing teamwork. A patent agent teach the students the basics of copyrights as well as a member of the patent information center demonstrates, how students can search their data bank. Finally students, that are executing contracts during their studies, tell about their recent experiences including their mistakes.

These guests are spread over the semester to liven up the seminar and to remind students of the realistic scope.

(In fact the experience of having given this seminar four times shows, that there is no need to motivate the students. They are eager to gather information about ways of working as a designer and to learn about facts that could be helpful in earning money. And by the way they like listening to all the small catastrophes happening to me and other designers. Maybe the next time it is on them to tell the younger students about their mistakes … and success!)

1. Topic ″The first contact″

The students have to work in groups on defining their personal competences and the competences of their group and present them to the plenum. What are the differences between the groups? What kind of competences can be found and which other ones are conceivable?

The students are confronted with situations, where they have to contact a fictive company. Preparing, making and analizing telephone calls and conversations are part of this session. What can happen within a conversation with a client? How to prepare a meeting? What does the client wants to know? What are the designer´s questions? Etc.

2. Topic "The species of freelancers and self–employed people"

The students are provided with facts about the economic structure in Germany such as the developing of economic sectors and its significance for the group of designers.

In Germany there is a legal difference between being self–employed with its emphasis on working power and being self–employed with its emphasis on capital. Both types have different legal consequences with regard to rights and obligations. The students are provided with the most important facts about what they are allowed to do and what they explicitly should not do.

3. Topic "Types of companies"

The students are provided with facts about the most common types of companies. Special emphasis is put on the type of the "Gesellschaft bürgerlichen Rechtes", one of the most relevant types of organizations for young designers, in case they intend to act in teams.

4. Topic "Designing offers"

The students are provided with exercises and facts about structuring offers considering performance, duration and costs: Who performs what for whom when at what price?

The students have to write offers on fiktive requests. First a simple one – designing a giveaway for a funeral institute – that will be copied for all participants and discussed. After covering the theory of structuring offers in general they have to do a more complex one.

5. Topic "Income and expenditure – about money"

The students are provided with financial facts like the meaning of value–added tax, how to determine one´s profit etc.

6. Topic "Teamwork"

This topic pays attention to the increasing meaning of teamwork. It discusses reasons for teamwork as well as some mystified suppositions, like "it´s always more efficient to work in teams". In addition methods are mentioned, that help to make teamwork more efficient and to recognize problems within teams at an early stage.

5. A product–manager visiting the ivory tower – one example

The students were trained in earlier exercises to define their competences and they were theoretically prepared for acting within conversations with businessmen.

In order to give them the opportunity to put this theoretical knowledge into practice I asked the product–manager of a middle–sized company for their participation in the seminar. She agreed because of her own interest in improving the education of future industrial designers who will work together with companies like hers.

Together we planned structure and content of her visit: It is divided into two parts: first she would talk about her area of responsebility within the company. This would be interesting to the students from two different points of view. On one hand, she had been studying industrial design and her career is one more example for the wide range of possibilities for industrial designers. On the other hand, she represents the interface between designers and companies. She is the one, designers have to convince, if they want to work for the company. In the second part of her visit she acts as a training partner in role plays.

The visit of the product–manager to the ivory tower in detail:

1. The product–manager tells the students about her job: determining the range of products, developing briefings for new products, visiting international trade fairs to be up to date in terms of fashions, negotiating with international manufacturers to have prototypes built, mastering the challenge of cultural differences especially when negotiating with companies in far east, calculating developing costs and last but not least establishing contact with designers.

2. Starting with the first role play, some students make a phone call to her company, in order to get the chance to work for the company on a freelance basis. After finishing this exercise the test persons are asked about their impression of the conversation. What kind of information did they obtain? What did they tell about themselves? Did they present themselves in a self–confident manner? Afterwards the plenum is asked, how they feel about the behavior of the test persons. At last the product–manager gives her evaluation of the tested individuals. In addition she gives proposals on telephone techniques when calling companies, e.g. you should ask, if this is a good time to call, repeat dates of appointments etc.

3. The week before the students were asked to bring samples of their design work along this day. In this second round of role plays the students are to assume that they have managed the phone call and are now visiting the product–manager at her company to show their portfolio. The students are asked not to play a role, but to be themselves. So if asked about their working experience they should answer truthfully and not fake ten years of experience. I also tell them, that I have asked the product–manager to integrate some difficulties into the role play, that would hopefully never occur to this extend in reality.
The product-manager and me have prepared two sorts of different nasty obstacles to put in the way of the students: On one hand in terms of content, like expressing doubts about the student´s ability to work within a restricted time schedule. On the other hand nasty things like offering coffee and chocolate biscuits. (Of course the product–manager asks a real important question exactly that time, when the student has taken one cookie and put it into his mouth. Or she forces him/her to answer her question while he/she is holding the melting chocolate cookie in his/her hand: his/her hand is full of chocolate, there is of course no napkin, the student licks off the chocolate from his fingers. What about shaking hands for goodbye? Presenting the licked off hand?) The analysis is done like the time before.

The students were very impressed on how exactly the product–manager was able to judge their abilities after a short time of about 15 minutes – although in the beginning of the role play conversation they were horrified how fast the product–manager flicked through their samples of work. But more surprising to them was the way criticism was expressed. In some cases, the students didn´t even recognize the rejection. They thought it had been a successful conversation.

6. Conclusions

The example above shows the importance of building bridges between theory and practice and not acting like a sage on stage. If the students had only been told that such misunderstandings could happen, they wouldn´t spend one further thought on it. But in this case they have learned to pay attention very carefully to what professionals say and how they act.

In order to underline the relevance of the seminar´s contents it is absolutely necessary to give students a colorful impression of what working as a self–employed designer means.

Almost everyone can teach economic basics like for instance the meaning of the value–added tax. But imagining typical situations requires your personal experience and its clear analysis: What kind of possibilities do you have to reason, if the client tries to reduce your payment to a minimum? Frequently introduced by phrases like "It´s also to your benefit …" or "If you´re still a student … you surely take less money." Having thought about potential questions before, helps students to stay calm and to communicate their point of view clearly. Moreover comprehending the interests of the client leads conversations to a less emotional level. In most cases trying to reduce designers´ payment is not an ethical question of good and evil, it is a conflict of economic interests where a compromise has to be found.

The seminar´s educational goal is to enable students to build up a balanced relationship with clients. Therefore the students need both: factual knowledge and soft skills. They are no petitioners, but they may offer a benefit to the company – even if they are still students.

Students´ formal and informal feedback, especially from those that worked self–employed after participating in this seminar, leads to the conclusion that the mixture of the contents as well as the teaching style improved their starting position in working life decisively.