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Lichtblau! ... Designing between Postmodern Pluralism and Values

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1. Abstract
2. The significance of the guiding topic
3. Why choosing a certain way of teaching
4. Seminar structure and content
5. Results

1. Abstract

Combining theory and practical experience is a continuous challenge in higher education. Although teachers of design projects usually do have a high standard of theoretical knowledge themselves, working at the projects the focus very often shifts to “more simple” design problems while theoretical questions tend to be ignored.

The project “Lightblue! ...” has combined several successive short-term-projects under one guiding topic. In the first place it was a classic design project but, in order to integrate theory best, the tasks were created in reverse order: A number of contents was chosen (methods, process, theory, designing) and the design tasks were planned to fit these contents.

The intention of the guiding topic was to discuss what kind of values can be found in the field of design nowadays. Are there any general/traditional values or merely a huge amount of individual values? Does pluralism mean the opposite of values? ...

The students should be forced to develop their own opinions about the meaning of values. Eventually they will have to decide whether they want to adopt somebody else’s values or if they want to be the ones to define values themselves.

2. The significance of the guiding topic

Working on the meaning of values is one central subject of designers’ personality development. Every decision in designing unavoidably means making statements visible for everybody – designers have to be aware of this fact. Nowadays designers do not have the possibility to revert to general points of view. In order to be believable they have to hold their own opinion, otherwise every critic, superior or consumer, will dismantle their working results.

Apart from this aspect it’s an ethical question to which extent the designer feels responsible for spreading unreflected three-dimensional statements.

3. Why choosing a certain way of teaching

A balanced mixture of theoretical contents and practical exercises is chosen to extend the guiding topic. By giving just a design problem to a group of students they are forced to establish their own priorities. This leads to working on a problem on a wide range of aspects, but restricts unnecessarily the possibility to explore the individual aspect. Naming interesting aspects that have to be considered by all group members produces synergetic effects and adds more depth to the research results.

The student's designs and their way of finding solutions are always discussed in relation to the guiding topic. The students are forced to substantiate their design decisions again and again within the plenum. Beside practising their ability of linguistic expression they simply cannot help to think about values because of their constant need to reason.

Additionally the design tasks are created to be less complex in terms of technical functions, so it is easier to oblige the students to deal with the determined aspects and to stick to the subject. Their entire practical design work is accompanied by theoretical lectures and discussions spread over the whole semester.

In order to provide the students with a large number of topics, the time they usually spend with organizing their work has to be minimized in this case. A restricted and well-thought-out schedule as well as clearly determined minimum requirements support their concentration on the substantial topics.

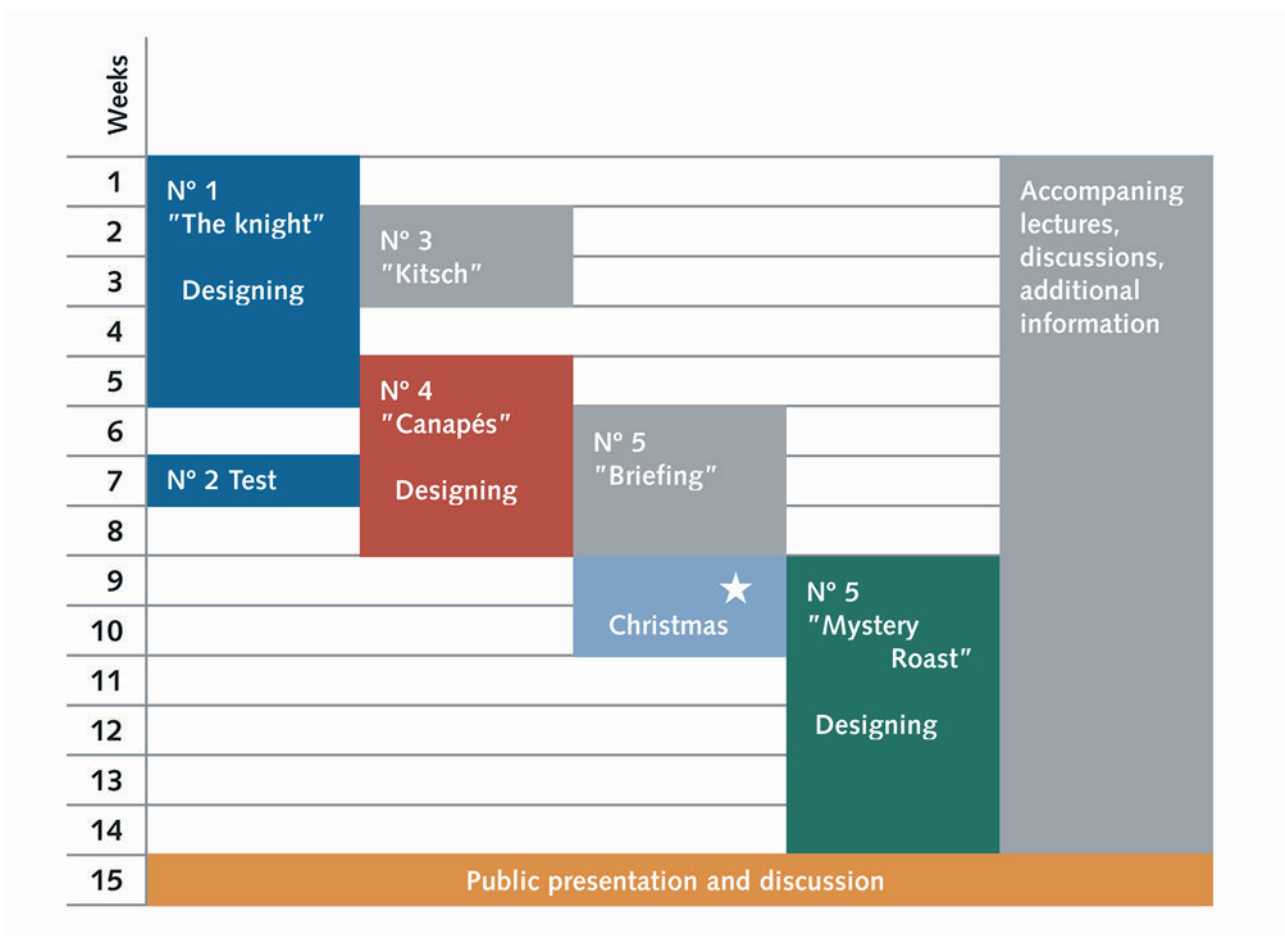


Figure 1: Seminar structure

4. Seminar structure and content

The students get three design tasks and two theoretical ones to work on. The design tasks are organized in sequence, while the theoretical ones have to be carried out on the side. All tasks are distributed in writing to avoid quarrels about its detailed content. Parallel to every design task the students have to write a "logbook", where they should record the design process and initial ideas: like "watching 'Star Wars', thinking about the appearance of good and bad, considering whether I like to express opposites within my design – a good/bad knight?". Students are told right from the beginning, that these logbooks will be published as well as their design results. Therefore everything that is going to be assessed, like photographs, essays, descriptions etc. has to be handed out in digital format.

1. Design task "The knight"

Standing for a complete chess set, the white chessman "knight" should be developed. The final way of manufacturing, the size of one single field of the chessboard, the color and scale of the model are determined. In order to save time, the history of chess, its distribution and the development of the chessmen is reported to the students when the task is handed out.

Each student has to write his/her own briefing considering the following aspects: target group, appearance, use, non-use and a description of material. Integrating further aspects depends on the students. Their final design will be judged by its corresponding to this briefing. (Figure 2 – In this case photographs of the models are taken by myself to ensure their comparability. Copies are handed out to students in digital and analogous format.)

2. Experiment "The knight"

A test situation is arranged: Two test groups, designers and non-designers, are provided with the written anonymous briefings and the anonymous design models. Then they have to match the briefings with the designed chessmen.



Figure 2:

Students' designs according to their individual briefings: B. Koßmann, H. Hornung
B. Stang, R. Brantsch, K. Weißmann (above), T. Rieger, Y. Akkus, F. Th. Haut (below)

3. Theoretical task "Kitsch"

Students are asked to write down their comprehension of kitsch. This means also a preparation of the discussion, where the phenomenon "kitsch" is discussed under ethical, esthetical and psychological aspects.

4. Design task "Canapés"

A very concrete briefing is given to the students. They should imagine the following situation: A congress on the topic "Design and Language" lasting several days takes place. European designers and poets not knowing each other are invited. After the first day of the congress an informal evening meeting to get in contact is arranged.

The students are asked to design finger food to be served at that party. These canapés are not for satiating the guests. Instead they should possess the function of a communicative moment.

Some additional requirements for the designed canapés:

- they should invite to be eaten
- there should be a relation between the canapé and the professions of the congress' participants
- one should be able to eat the canapés only with fingers; this means without the help of plates or cutlery – a napkin may be used
- the canapés are prepared by professional chefs in a professionally equipped kitchen
- the preparation of the canapés should already be finished one hour before they are served
- the costs of material per piece shall not exceed 2,50 Euro (calculating with the retail price)
- the appropriateness of means has to be considered (e.g. no specially manufactured mold for producing Philipp Stark's "Juicy Salif" in chocolate)

Each student has to design three different types of canapés. They have to manufacture prototypes of their designs and are asked to stage their canapés to be photographed. Additionally they have to find names for their designs and give reasons for their choice.



Figure 3:
"Spice" by F. Thilo Haut; one of
24 different canapé designs

5. Theoretical task "Briefing"

Students are asked to analyze their experience in writing briefings and working according to given ones. What are the practical and social meanings of briefings? What guidelines are appropriate to integrate within a briefing on which purpose?

6. Design task "Mystery roast"

A novel's extract that describes the interior of the café "Mystery Roast" and its guests is given to the students. The students have to create a colored collage, that describes the text with figurative means. Furthermore the students have to write their interpretation of the individual parts of the text. On side students are provided with a report about the history of collages: from Picassos' "papier collé" via the term of "collage" interpreted by Max Ernst up to so-called "trend tableaux" used by marketing people.

The students have to exchange their collages after they have been discussed (surprisingly there was no doubt about which collage suggested the most expensive coffee). Now they have to design a candleholder for walls corresponding to the individual collage. It's not permissible to choose another found object fitting into the café's atmosphere, instead the candleholder has to be especially designed to fit into it.

7. Accompanying contents

There are additional reports and discussions spread over the semester. Sometimes they belong close to the tasks like reporting the history of chess or the development of collages. But sometimes they are more independent and just correspond to the guiding topic.

Here some examples:

- existing criteria in the field of design, e.g. in cases of competitions or given briefings
- methods of communicating about objectives and target groups, e.g. working with semantic differentials, scenario techniques or using figurative means
- existing results of designing target groups, e.g. the "Sinus Milieu Studie"
- discussing the question why the number "6" is a more accepted favorite number than "7.382.514"
(remembering Sesame Street: Bert loves the "6" and Ernie's favorite is the other one)
- meeting the design historian Prof. Dr. Schmidtberger at his museum "Hessisches Landesmuseum, Kassel" to discuss the way of defining values in former times as well as mentioning the already treated topic "Kitsch"

5. Results

Students appreciate the clearly defined organization of the project, its condensed contents and intensive group dynamics that lead to enthusiasm for their work and to more concrete discussions.

Although the students worked on designs individually, they developed acting like one group. The most obvious expression of this development was the final public presentation: the students decided not to present their designs individually, but established an overall concept. An overall concept requires complete understanding of the designing results of all group members in order to be able to present someone else's designs. Furthermore it means an expression of confidence and responsibility within the group.

The requirement to write logbooks was fulfilled in very different ways. Some students did not write down any word regarding the content, they just recorded the hours of working time like "2h designing". Others even wrote down, what kind of conclusions they drew from the feedback of the group and myself. This was very important to me, because it improves directly my way of teaching. But nevertheless all students get instructive information on how much time it took them to get to a certain result.

Concerning the guiding topic "Designing between Postmodern Pluralism and Values" the informal feedback leads to the conclusion that students started to comprehend why it's absolutely necessary to be aware of values: On one side asking for personal values during the design process improves their designing results in terms of consistency.

On the other side developing a feeling for existing complexes of values enables people to handle the tool "target group". In spite of dealing with clichés and stereotypes, imagining target groups is one way of creating a basis for communication, e.g. between designers, managers, marketing people etc. But the following aspect was mentioned most frequently by the project's participants: Working about values leads to a very self-confident and convincing attitude towards your own designs.

This attitude constitutes one important prerequisite for developing oneself's personality in the professional field of design and it is also a basic requirement for working in teams. Expressing your own attitudes clearly gives others the opportunity to react in a constructive way. This circumstance enables you to check and balance your values. This again helps you to express your point of view clearly ...