Walk this way! To mimic the merge of hip hop and hard rock in a design programme by using the socio-semiotic and multimodal approach and thereby creating a unified learning beat

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Introduction

In this chapter I will present a study that was made during the fall of 2014, applied in the 2015 study programme and then evaluated by the students at the end of the fourth semester 2015. This is part of an ongoing project to enhance quality in the Graphic Design bachelor programme at Malmö University. In the study I have turned to *Design för lärande [Designs for learning]* (Selander and Kress, 2010), a socio-semiotic and multimodal approach. The model was chosen since it fits so well in a design environment. The intention of the authors was to borrow from the field of design, and apply to education. However, to reapply their findings back in the education of designers has proved to be very useful (Selander and Kress, 2010). It simplifies my students' understanding of curriculum design. By including the students in quality enhancing work done in the programme, I hope to bridge the gap between quality enhancing work in required documents (such as the curriculum) and what actually takes place in the classroom. The music metaphor has developed from earlier writings (Brost, 2014, 2015) that I have based on Sennett (2012) and his discussions on rhythm and ritual. I will touch upon that when I put forward my concept of the learning beat.

In the United States and in Europe, graphic design has traditionally been taught as an artistic subject but with a strong concern with the needs of industry. Up until 20 years ago, in many cases, graphic design was confined to private schools, often art schools (Heller, 2005). This is also true for

Sweden. It is only during the past 20 years that graphic design has made its way into public higher education (HE). Therefore it is academically a new subject, with all that that entails. In order to make students see the parallels with scholarly work we stress method and theory and try to instill a clear sense of *why*. At the same time, internationally, an increasing interest for design perspectives in learning can be noticed during the last two decades (Wiggins and McTighe, 1998; Gagnon and Collay, 2001; Wasson and Ludvigsen, 2003). Having said that, this interest has focused on the normative or user oriented. In a user oriented design process, emphasis is placed on transparency, social-action space and personal connectedness (Lövgren and Stolterman, 2004).

When you design an education you design the future. We educate designers and if we aim for the future we need to include new solutions in specific social circumstances, new ways to read and organise the world; by doing so an implicit criticism of the status quo, as such, is presented. To design is to bring something new into the world that did not exist before. Design is not only form, function and aesthetics. Aesthetics is entangled in taste and taste in social meaning. The designer aims for the future and to design is to create new meaning. When you design a bachelor programme you have to balance on the fine line between stability and change.

In *Designs for learning*, Selander and Kress (2010) like to create a new topic place that can help us with a new perspective that will bring light on design and multimodality in learning. A metaphor is a topic place, from where we view the world. The metaphor that I have chosen is the merge between music styles as in the video for *Walk This Way* by Run DMC and Aerosmith (Tyler and Perry, 1975). In the video Run DMC and Aerosmith play their music in two separate rooms divided by a wall. They bang the wall since they are disturbed by each other's music. As teachers in a design programme it is easy to relate to. We want to play our own tune and the curriculum is subject to our own very personal interpretation. In the room next door another interpretation takes place and our students are left confused.

Teaching is a solitary occupation and even if we spend a lot of time with our students we have very little time with our colleagues to discuss and develop a unified pedagogical approach to our subject. Added to that is

the fact that HE is not only subject matter, graphic design in our case, but it also allows the students to develop analysing skills and critical thinking. It implies the creation of identity and how to become a citizen, how to cooperate to solve problems and how to become accountable and responsible.

In earlier writings I have relied on Richard Sennett (2012), a sociologist who in his book *Together* enhances rhythm and ritual as important factors when we collaborate. I will therefore bring Sennett into the discussion when I draw my conclusions from the study and develop the concept of learning beat.

Background

In Sweden HE is funded by taxes. The students consider their education as free. Each university receives money from the Government and therefore gets evaluated by the Government on a regular basis. This evaluation is a big deal, especially for education in the field of graphic design that, traditionally in Sweden, has been taught at private schools and not as part of publicly funded HE. For us as educators in the programme it has been a tall order to prove to the Government that we have a scholarly approach to the subject.

In 2014 we passed the evaluation with excellent marks. The faculty had put in a lot of energy in order to prepare the students to be good scholars, since the main focus of the evaluation was the final thesis. Sadly, in my role as programme director during this time, I realised that by doing so, we had at the same time put our main subject, graphic design, on the back burner.

For three years we had molded the final semester but our design courses had lost their sharpness. A redesign of the entire programme was necessary and we decided to work backwards, the reason being that we had a well working last semester that had been fine-tuned. The sixth semester is the students' final one. The fifth semester is when the they go on exchange/study abroad or do internships. We therefore focused on the fourth semester, the spring semester of the second year and, hence, a crucial semester, since what we do here is set the standard for the students'

expectations for the last and final semester.

Theoretical framework

The concepts of 'education' and 'learning' are strongly linked to institutional practices. The displacement of design education into HE and the rules and regulations that that entails is the core of many of the problems we have in our daily practice, mostly since they are seldom addressed. When our students complain we hold up these rules and regulations as a shield to defend ourselves with rather than focusing on what the students are really saying. The aim of this chapter is to listen to the students. This is the study that I conducted together with my students as research for the chapter and the comments that were made by the students are presented later. In the Selander and Kress (2010) model the rules and regulations are addressed, such as budget, hours and number of assessments. These are the very circumstances that we have to practice in and accept rather than ignore or fight, the reason being our students. They too have to live by and accept the fact that they actually have applied to a bachelor programme in HE. They might think of themselves as designers, when in fact they are students in HE preparing to take a bachelor degree.

According to Selander and Kress (2010), *Designs for learning* has been elaborated at the crossroads between social semiotics and Vygotskian inspired socio-cultural theories, this is to say that design, in this context, deals with changed dispositions towards information and knowledge. The teacher as designer of the curriculum asks how she or he can use material resources and the structures of power in a specific environment. Therefore, it is the perspective of Selander and Kress (2010) that will create the backdrop to my discussion in this chapter.

From a socio-semiotic point of view, design is a way to configure both communicative resources and social interaction (Kress and Van Leeuwen, 2001). The model that Selander and Kress (2010) put forward in *Designs for learning* is the model that the students were introduced to in order to evaluate the redesign that we made of the fourth semester of their bachelor programme.

The concept of *Designs for learning* highlights the material and temporal

conditions for learning as well as the learning activity itself. The use of modes and media in processes of interpretation and identity construction is here central for the understanding of learning activities. I find this very useful since I fear that we as teachers, in a design programme in HE, fail to recognise learning activities when they do not fit our preconceived ideas. As pointed out by Selander and Kress (2010), learning is seen as an activity where signs in different media (information) are elaborated, and where the forming of new signs in new media (reconfiguration and recontextualisation) takes place. Thereby new knowledge and new competences can be traced. Knowledge is defined as a capacity to use an established order of signs and engage in the world in a meaningful way. Learning is defined as an increased capacity in which to use signs and engage meaningfully in different situations. Learning is here understood as a process of interpretation and sign production (Selander and Kress, 2010).

I am comfortable with the sociological approach to design education and the idea of reconstruction, remediation and reconfiguration as described by Sennett (2012). He is concerned with the skill of cooperation. In his writings he also stresses rhythm and ritual as important factors in collaboration. My interpretation is that rhythm and ritual can create structure in a learning situation. I will return to this when I discuss my concept of learning beat.

The model

In a formal educational setting we have purpose and defined curricula, institutional norms. Learning, according to Selander and Kress (2010) is process, and the process is characterised by the transforming and forming of signs. The expectations that are embedded are learning outcomes. The model is in two parts and the primary transformation unit describes the first cycle. The teacher creates the staging of what is going to take place. The teacher has a purpose and an aim with this staging and controls the resources. The teacher is familiar with the institutional rules and regulations, and understands how to navigate within these rules and regulations. In the first cycle, interest and motivation are created. It is the teacher's job to create understanding for what is going to take place.

Figure 1: Formal – learning design sequence
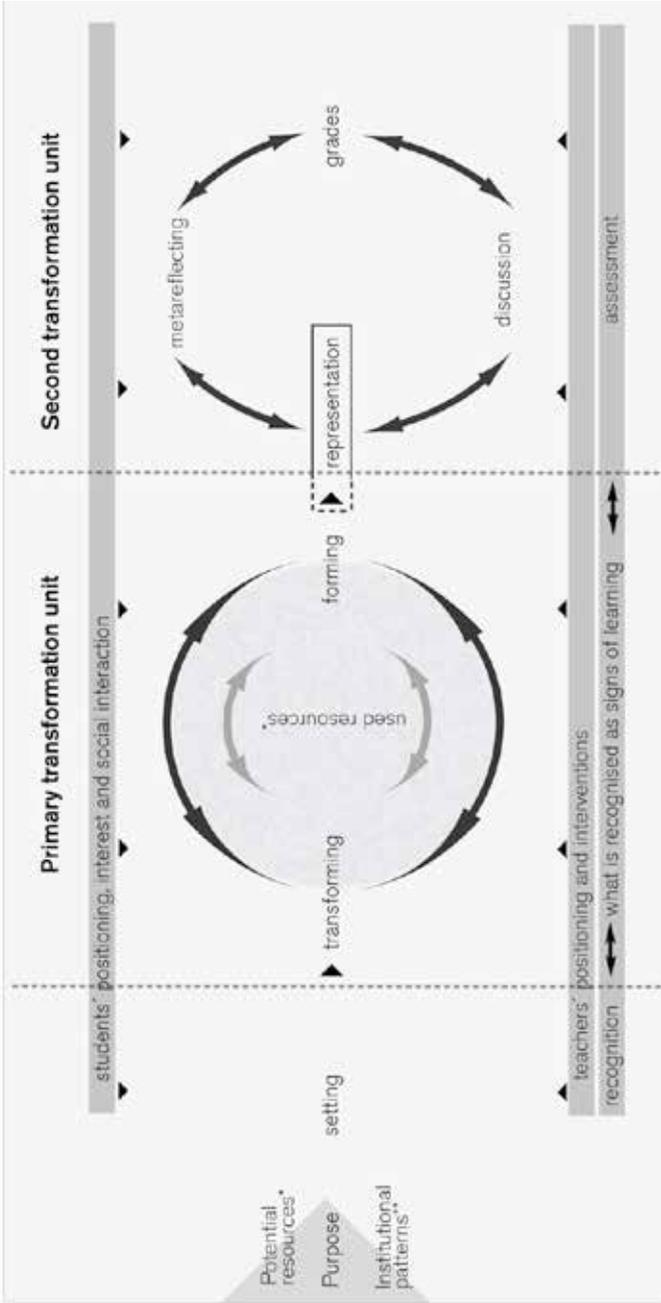
The secondary transformation unit, the second cycle, starts with the students presenting their work. If the goals, as well as the expectations of the process and the product, are clearly defined, both students and teachers will have a powerful tool for reflection and evaluation. Students are expected to present their understanding and reflect on both the process and their understanding. During the whole sequence, teachers make interventions and have the possibility to reflect on the signs and indications of learning that take place.

Redesign of the fourth semester

Most of our faculty are practitioners, so we needed a theoretical framework. The Center for Teaching and Learning at Malmö University offered to facilitate and we redesigned the entire semester with the help of Dr. Marie Leijon. We did receive a lot of praise for this ambitious quality work from our university and I felt confident that we had now found our tune. The semester totaled 30 credits, divided into 4 courses of 7.5 credits. Each course went through a fine loophole when it came to learning outcomes, assignments and assessments, and each course was given a new course plan.
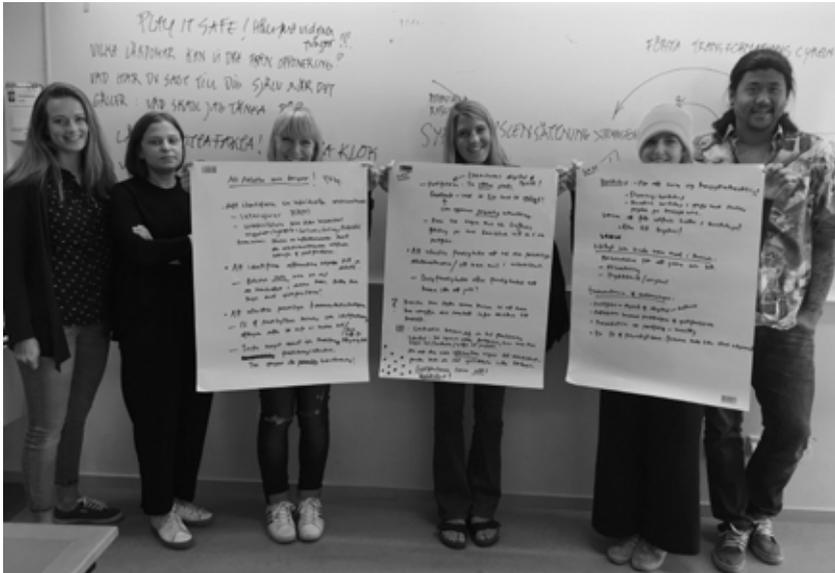
Being the teacher on the ground, as well as the then programme director, I do get immediate feedback from my students on what goes on in the courses they take. I told them how pleased I was with the work that we had done and that I was going to write a paper about it. The students told me: 'Well, it is not there yet!'

As it turns out, the course plans were aligned but when it came to classroom practice it did not correspond, and this is where the video by Run DMC and Aerosmith came to mind. When I look at the video I think of us teachers, alone with our students in a classroom and in the room next to us is another teacher, alone with their students teaching to a different beat. The reason why I find the video hopeful, and like to use it as a metaphor for the teaching situation, is that when the two bands finally listen to each other and play together they actually have the same beat.

I have a lot of confidence in my students and truly believe that they have a very clear view on what supports their learning and what stands in the way. I decided to apply the approach that I use in the project courses,

Figure 2: Each group marked all their comments on a large sheet of paper

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the transfer of authority. I was involved in one of the redesigned fourth semester courses, 'Perspectives on design', and the students were supposed to formulate a research question. We decided to make the problems of the fourth semester our study and together try to identify what issues had not yet been addressed, hereby letting the students take a bigger part in the curriculum design.

The study

Evaluation of the redesign of the fourth semester

Again, Dr. Marie Leijon was invited to participate. This time she would meet with the students rather than the teachers. Dr. Leijon presented the theory *Designs for learning* by Selander and Kress (2010) to the students. The students were just about to finish the redesigned fourth semester and therefore had first-hand experience. The students applied *Designs for learning* on the semester's four courses. The class was divided into four groups, each group being focused on one course. The division was made randomly, by dividing the classroom into four imaginary squares, each square forming a group.

The students apply the model

In May of 2015 the semester was coming to an end and we had had several discussions on the model, reflecting the students' own experiences of the four redesigned courses. Since I was giving the course 'Design Perspectives', I had turned their segment on research and the research question into a study of the aims and goals of our redesign and an evaluation of the actual results. I found this to be especially fruitful since research on bachelor level in graphic design very often borrows from other fields, such as feminism, post-colonial theory, cognition and communication. I thought that the fact that Selander and Kress (2010) borrowed from the field of design would be interesting for my students.

Now familiar with the model, the class was divided into four groups; each group was given one of the four courses. Familiar with the assignments they had completed during the semester, the students could now analyse the courses from within. They had access to the course plans and learning outcomes. Each group made a close reading of the course through the

model.

Result

There were four courses and four groups of students, each group taking on one course.

Images in context, 7.5 credits

This course gets good marks on clarity. The brief is written and available online. It is clear what the students are supposed to do, how much and by when. They get verbal feedback mid-way and final feedback. The students regard this feedback as general and vague. What they lack is individual written feedback so that they can identify their own strengths and weaknesses. They point out that if there is a clear aim and purpose in the brief it would be helpful if assessments were related to that.

Branding, 7.5 credits

This course gets low marks on clarity. The students point out that it would be helpful to get an introduction that explains what this course is about, why, and what the aim and purpose of what they will do is. Again they would like written feedback, since they 'have no idea what was good, what was bad'. When it comes to assessments they ask: 'Did I pass because I did the assignment or did I pass because I met the criteria? I do not know; the criteria was [sic] never presented to us'. They ask for more feedback on the assignment's creative parts rather than feedback on what actually needed to be part of the presentation; the students consider that information not to be feedback.

To work as a designer, 7.5 credits

The students are not critical about clarity here but critical with regard to the level. They feel that much of what the course was about, how to apply for a job, be part of LinkedIn, is common knowledge and nothing that they would need lectures about. They ask: 'if [the] portfolio is such an important tool why do we not get feedback on our portfolios? Why do we not have[a] workshop on how to gear our portfolio towards industry? Why are classes held on how to write a letter of introduction, and then that is assessed rather than how I put my portfolio…together and why?'

They feel that what they lack the most is feedback that will help them develop. They even take our workload into the equation and suggest that 'if individual feedback take[s] up too much time, please meet with us in smaller groups, but please help us'. They also comment on the fact that 'to work as a designer includes prepress knowledge and communication with printers' and that they would like to see them as part of the course.

Perspectives on design, 7.5 credits

This course is theoretical and is meant to prepare the students for their final thesis. The study that this chapter presents took place during this course. The students were happy to look at the redesign that was made, their perspective being from within the four courses, since they believe it was much needed, but at the same time they commented that what they lack the most throughout their education is a chance to get writing skills. They feel that they do understand what is expected of them when it comes to their final thesis, how to do a study or how to gain knowledge through design, but in terms of how to write about it, the craftsmanship of actual writing, they had hoped to get more of in this course.

The students have a segment in this course where they peer review the third year students' theses. They comment on the fact that they did get verbal feedback on this when the theses were presented, during a seminar worth 75 per cent, but they lack written feedback and clarity on what is really being assessed in that presentation. They do understand that reading of third year students' thesis is one way of understanding how to write academically, but again they stress that they would need more support in their own writing. During the course they also write a brief for their final thesis 'as if' as an exercise and they receive marks on how well it is done. They do not find this to be the most pedagogical way to do it: 'let us do this step by step, present work in progress, get feedback, rewrite and then hand it in, and please, give us a clear understanding [of] what is considered [a] pass and pass with excellence'.

Discussion

We are fortunate to have ambitious students, ambitious in the sense that they are eager to become designers. The students are not critical of the

content of the courses. By this I mean the assignments or projects that they do. What they point out as being problems are the introductions, what Selander and Kress (2010) call the staging of the transformational cycles. Very seldom do the students feel that it is clear why they are asked to get going on something. This is problematic to me since my aim, as stated in the introduction, is that we instill in them a clear sense of *why*. Apparently we do not succeed in communicating this to the students. They are thrown into something; they might enjoy it, but they ask us, and themselves, 'what was I supposed to learn by this?'

The second problem is the feedback: too little, too late and too general. Every group is critical about how feedback is delivered. Students point out that it is too general and not something they feel that they can build on. Traditionally, in private schools critique classes were the place where you meet with your professor to have a conversation to develop from. How come that tradition, the most important part of design education, did not move into HE? This is what surprised me the most and so too my colleagues. We are under the impression that this still takes place.

The third problem is assessment and grading, described by the students as 'we do something; we get our grade when the course is over, no explanation no motivation or reasoning'. This means that there is no reflection, which is a big part of the model's second transformational cycle, and in turn no clear motivation for the grading that will help them to aim for something. There is no transparency in terms of criteria and the students leave the courses not really knowing where they stand.

Hidden curriculum

The concept of 'hidden curriculum' was first introduced in 1968, by Philip W. Jackson in his book *Life in classrooms*. This is now a long time ago and yet, again and again I discover a lack of transparency in HE. There seems to be an attitude of hope, if you want to be positive and ignorance, if you want to state it in a negative way that students will get knowledge by osmosis. We as teachers focus more on the subject and less on how we deliver the said subject to the students. Jackson (1968) did recognise that teaching and learning is a complex web. In his writings he is seeking out the physical and emotional. The Selander and Kress (2010) model could be

a way to help shift the focus. It is clearly stated by the students that when we lack transparency important parts of the course design remain hidden. Since Jackson, much interpretation of the concept of hidden curriculum has been made, often political and social. In this chapter I refer to the concept of hidden curriculum in its most basic form, the things we take for granted and do not communicate and explain to our students, thereby creating a lack of transparency.

The gap

To make use of their knowledge students need confidence and to get confident we, as teachers, need to build their trust. We can do this by being more transparent and much more to the point in our feedback. Transparency is of great importance. When we lack transparency we do in fact create a hidden curriculum that creates problems both for students and teachers. A lot of unnecessary frustration meets the teacher, frustration that would not form in the class if communication had been clear. In my discussions with teachers after this survey, they all feel that they do communicate aims and goals. So we are left with a gap, or rather, if we relate this to the model, without a beginning and end. We teach our students in the middle of the model using two half circles rather than two full circles. This is not to say that our students are not used to cracking the code of HE that so often comes up in the discussion on widening participation. The problem we have here is lack of code and conduct. There is no score. Again, music serves as the metaphor.

The Selander and Kress (2010) model contains two full circles (see Figure 1). If we skip the introduction, the staging of what we think we are teaching in a course, we in fact slice the first circle in half, hereby leaving the students without the *why*. We then look at what they do and assess, again slicing the second circle in half. Feedback, and the much needed reflection on that feedback, never takes place. The student gets the grade and the course is over. In our ongoing discussions on widening participation at our university, this is a concern. We need to guide our students in, during and out of each course.

Learning beat

The gap, pointed out to me by the students, needs to be addressed but where

do we go from here? Again, thinking about Aerosmith and Run DMC has been helpful for me. If they can unify their beat, so can we as teachers. Addressing pedagogical issues in HE is always met with hesitation. The reason for this is that no-one would like a risk of an increased workload. So how can this be solved over time so that our courses and our intentions are not undermined by the lack of a clear beginning and a well thought out end?

Closing the gap

I presented this chapter, then work in progress, and the *Designs for learning* (Selander and Kress, 2010) model at the 2015 Forum for Access and Continuing Education (FACE) conference in Wales. The theme for the conference was 'Closing the gap'. In one of the parallel sessions I listened to Theresa Wyborn (2015) from Sydney. The title of her presentation was 'Bridging the feedback gap'. She gave me her feedback and feedforward sheet. She had solved the issue of increased workload by turning it over to the students. The process was feedback, then the students picked three points out of the feedback, one to three in terms of relevancy, and from them they formed an action plan. The students communicated this action plan with the teacher and commented on how to put this action plan in motion for the next assignment. I could hear the beat in my head! Rhythm and ritual (Sennett, 2012): to have that linked to all the presentations and feedback situations. Could this be the beat that would unify us? Well, it does not stop here. We lack transparency when it comes to communicating the structure of the course to our students. The staging needs work. Assessment and criteria for grading need much work. However, if we can come together in rhythm and ritual when it comes to feedback, we have something to build on.

Conclusion

Designs for learning by Selander and Kress (2010) makes everything part of the process. Learning according to them is a process that is understood by the transforming and forming of signs. They do not hide from the fact that in a formal educational setting we have purpose and defined curricula, and institutional norms. In the curricula the learning outcomes are embedded. The teacher has a purpose and an aim with this staging and

controls the resources. The teacher is familiar with the institutional rules and regulations and understands how to navigate within these rules and regulations. The teacher creates the staging of what is going to take place. In the first cycle interest and motivation are created. It is the teacher's job to create understanding for what is going to take place.

The secondary transformation unit, the second cycle, starts with the students presenting their work. If the goals, as well as the expectations of the process and the product, are clearly defined, both students and teachers will have a powerful tool for reflection and evaluation. Students are expected to present their understanding and reflect on both the process and their understanding. During the whole sequence, teachers make interventions and have the opportunity to reflect on the signs and indications of learning that take place.

In conclusion it all sounds so simple and maybe it is. The fact that the study made by my students, using this model, is so to the point tells me that even if our courses lack a beginning and end, the students do leave us as analytical, reflective designers. Imagine where they would be if we did everything right.

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