Becoming friends with the ABC
Reflections on writing across the design curriculum

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Abstract

This paper reflects experiences made with teaching writing in a recently installed master programme in design. At first, it outlines the educational context in Switzerland and specifically the historical background of the Lucerne School of Art and Design. It then sums up important findings regarding writing in design and academic writing. Finally, a case study based on ongoing teaching practice is presented. The crucial question discussed concerns design students' writing reluctance and the role of blog writing in this context.

Keywords

academic writing, writing in art and design, teaching academic writing, blog as learning tool

Introduction

How students may become friends with the ABC has been widely studied in the last years. In the UK, the teaching of writing skills in art and design disciplines even has become a distinct research field (see http://www.writing-pad.ac.uk and Journal of Writing in Creative Practice). All the same, most European design faculties – except for the UK, Ireland and Norway – ignore these experiences and lack a systematic, research-based debate about writing in and across design curricula. In Switzerland as well as in other countries, academic writing in design only became a topic some years ago when new bachelor and master programmes were installed.

From a practice-based perspective, this paper examines how findings obtained in writing research can be transfered to the class-room. In a first paragraph, the educational and historical context is outlined. Then, important topics discussed in research on teaching (academic) writing are summed up. Finally, the case study is presented and discussed.

Context

In 1784, the locally well-known painter Johann Melchior Wyrsch founded the Lucerne draughtsmen school, the first swiss institution of its kind. Like many others, it changed to an art and craft school in the late 19th century and then to a design school in the 1970s. In 1997, seven regional, public-funded swiss universities of applied sciences were created by merging former vocational schools, art and design schools included. The Federal Department of Economic Affairs approved their degree programmes according to Bologna regulations. In Lucerne, the bachelor programme in design started in 2005, the master programme in 2008. The university homepage provides further information on the different educational programmes (http://english.hslu.ch/index).

Still, Lucerne School of Art and Design stands out due to its strong propensity to craftwork. In the meantime, however, research-based master programmes in art and design have been introduced and PhD-programmes installed. This reorientation conflicts in some respects with traditional attitudes. Merited long-time staff often lacks (academic) writing experience and is, at least in parts, openly reluctant to ongoing educational changes. Moreover, both design lecturers and students frequently reject writing as opposed to their artistic and creative work. This antagonism is increased by a curricular divison of so-called theoretical courses and studio-based design practice.

Writing workshops developed for the Lucerne MA programme consider the context briefly outlined above. The teaching takes into account findings obtained in writing research regarding both (academic) writing in design and (academic) writing in general.

Writing in Design

In a paper for the Engineering & Product Design Education Conference 2010, I analysed experiences obtained along the first two runs of the Lucerne master programme in design (Nyffenegger, 2010b). To identify writing problems more specifically starting the third run, I asked first semester students in fall 2010 to answer a series of questions. The questionnaire replicates in parts an investigation entitled „Designing Your Writing / Writing Your Design" (Orr, Blythman & Mullin, 2006). In the frame of a joint research project, the referenced authors talked with design students about their perception of the writing and of the design process.

A preliminary evaluation of the answers obtained in Lucerne indicates issues similar to those identified in the UK:

- students perceive writing as static and coercive;
- they are not aware of social and collaborative aspects in the writing process; and
- they hardly use creative design methods while working on texts.

Metaphors given as well for the design as for the writing process illustrate their unequal perception of both. One student, for example, describes the design process as „an expedition" while the writing process is „a must". Another student claims writing to be „heavy and difficult"; design, in contrary, is „my own life". A very strong metaphor relates design to „breath" and writing to „throwing out".

In fact, writing and design share many qualities and do not necessarily have to be opposed (Orr & Blythman, 2002). Teaching writing in design has therefore to focus on similarities between the writing and the design process and to encourage students in applying common design methods when writing: „Using the discourse and experience of students' design practices, we can support student writing effectively." (Orr & Blythman, 2002, p. 50)

Academic writing

Writing in an academic context and for academic purposes can be defined as a specific subspecies of writing in general. It includes both certain formalities such as the inclusion of footnotes, quotes, and bibliographies, and, especially in german, specific habits such as the use of an unpersonal style, complex sentence structure, and technical terms. These specific conventions, however, do not constitute students' main writing problem. The challenge lies within the academic genre, not on its surface.

According to Pohl (Pohl, 2010, p. 100), academic texts include various perspectives and dimensions. To master such polyphony is a major challenge even for experienced writers. Therefore, academic writing has to be understood and adopted in several steps (Pohl, 2010, p. 109ff). First, the writer has to learn how to describe a subject precisely. This step includes text genres like protocol or memorandum. Secondly, the ability to digest disciplinary discourse has to be trained, for example by writing excerpts or literature reviews. Finally, writers' skill to develop own rationales and arguments is required. Students will achieve this by composing essays and degree dissertations.

When entering university, students of all disciplines face similar problems since they all lack experience in dealing with academic text genres (Kruse & Ruhmann, 2006):

- Students conceive writing primarily as knowledge-telling not as knowledge-generating; thereby, they misunderstand academic writing processes and the various dimensions of academic texts.
- They experience written text as a product of individual authorship rather than as one of socially embedded action; they hardly use peer-feedback and learning groups while working on writing assignments.
- Especially in german-speaking countries, writing competence is perceived as a question of talent and genius and not as something to be coached and exercised.

Teaching academic writing in higher education should take into account the specific situation students encounter when changing from grammar school to university. Students' difficulties in writing – whether in art and design or in any other discipline – do not necessarily have to be perceived as problems; they may as well be seen as regular part of ongoing learning processes.

Case study

The Lucerne master programme in design includes major specific project and skills modules as well as courses compulsory for all students integrated in a so-called transfer module (table 1).

1st term (total 30 ECTS)		
project module (18 ECTS)	skills module (3 ECTS)	transfer module (9 ECTS)

2nd term (total 30 ECTS)		
project module (18 ECTS)	skills module (3 ECTS)	transfer module (9 ECTS)

3rd term (total 30 ECTS)
master thesis

table 1. modular MA curriculum structure

The transfer module encompasses inputs in business and project management, design theory, research methodology and academic writing. The overall learning goal aims at enhancing discourse competence. The module also intends to facilitate transfer between so-called „theory" and „practice". A blog (http://blog.hslu.ch/madesign10/) serves as a medium of transfer, as discourse platform and as learning tool.

In 2010/11, over the first and second study term, four all-day writing workshops take place. They introduce basic creative writing methods as well as academic text genres and conventions. The writing workshops also offer the possibility to discuss writing assignments received in other transfer module courses. Both teaching and assigning consider the following assumptions based on the above briefly resumed results of writing research:

- writing is basically a craft → you can learn it and you can train it;
- writing is a process → to succeed, you need time to revise and redo your writing;
- writing and especially academic writing is discursive → you need exchange and feedback to develop a convincing written argument;
- writing is design → as a design student, you have the essential means at disposal.

These assumptions help to loosen students' writing reluctance and to push the learning process. In the following, selected examples illustrate how the mentioned topics may be integrated in tuition. Most of the presented exercises originate from the lecture of publications on creative academic writing (mainly Bean, 2001; Francis, 2009; Pyerin, 2003).

The aspect of writing as a craft, for instance, may be enhanced by encouraging handwriting. Handwriting instead of typewriting a first draft also illustrates the affinity of writing and design (fig. 1). An assignment demanding several rewritings of a draft demonstrates the processual character of writing. The task to comment on other students' texts points to the social side of writing. Group writing also strengthens the understanding of writing as social action. Design aspects of writing can be explored in a simple test when students are asked to question a collection of common design methods with regard to the writing process. Such a test will show how much they can benefit from their designerly background when writing (fig. 2).

In the here discussed case, in-class tuition is closely linked with blog writing (fig. 3 and http://blog.hslu.ch/madesign10/). As a permanently accessible platform, the blog guarantees continuity parallel to the infrequent writing workshops (for details on blog writing as learning tool see Nyffenegger, 2010a). Moreover, it enables different narrative trails along the study course: narratives connecting given lessons and writing assignments published on the blog; narratives

tightening the class through intense commenting of each others writing; and narratives telling each student's development in mastering more and more difficult tasks.

Discussion

Experiences with the combination of analogue teaching and blog writing in a design master programme are promising (Nyffenegger, 2009; 2010b). Blogs help students to develop a more casual attitude towards writing. They also enhance writing as a social act. Students are virtually forced to leave the scriptorium and to expose their texts to a common readership. Nevertheless, writing remains enforced and somehow irksome. It is not done at free will but as part of course assessment and under certain constraints. Undefined tasks in terms of „just write what you like to" may foster a more pleasurable access to writing but resulting texts will be hard to compare or even grade. Lecturers will not be able to control learning outcomes. Furthermore, the relationships between blog writing and academic writing need to be explored. Blogs are convenient for short text formats while academic text genres often require more length. Blog writing exercises targeted on specific aspects of academic writing need to be developed and tested.

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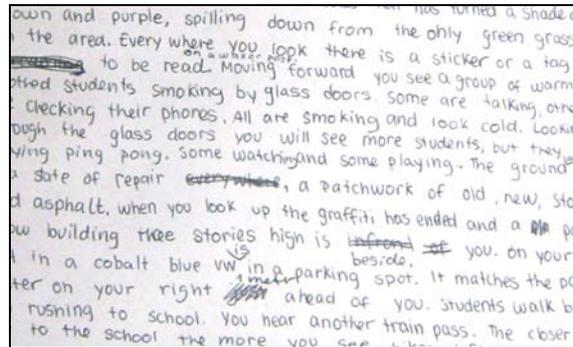
Figures

fig. 1. The kinship of writing and design becomes obvious when a text draft is sketched by hand.

fig. 2. In a group exercise, students collect familiar design methods and than enquire to what extent these methods can be used when writing. At first, they hardly find similarities but in-depth discussion typically reveals how design methods may facilitate a writing process.

fig. 3. Blog writing enables to establish various narratives along a study course.