

Giovanni Innella | Teaching Statement

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As large parts of the world try to recover from a decade of recessions and crises, we found ourselves questioning the production industry, its size, principles, technologies and its cultural and economic impact on societies. Consequently, also the design profession has been substantially questioned. In search for relevance and influence; the design practice and education have been looking for answers well beyond the realms of product and industrial design. Indeed, design is now less and less concerned with the mere design of consumer products, extending its range to other more immaterial aspects that better reflect our societies. So, design practitioners and researchers have increasingly engaged with challenges offered by governments, communities and companies. They had to think of new services to meet needs and wishes of the people, interpret the emerging identities deriving from social changes, and imagine innovative systems that question the current economy and its implications.

For design educators, researchers and practitioners this is undoubtedly an exciting moment to reconsider our discipline. In this sense, design schools are in a privileged position, as they represent the place where a critical reflection can occur amongst students, teachers and guests.

Although educated both in industrial design and conceptual design, as a design practitioner and researcher I have engaged in a vast diversity of projects including the installation of an internet connection in a town in the north of Burkina Faso and imagine new services with the local people, as well as the design of interactive installations on the facade of a museum about the environment that would broadcast the museum's content outside the building, or the repurposing of a dismissed solari-udine flipboard in a Portuguese airport as a publishing platform for nano-fiction stories inputted via Twitter.

Through my experience I have learnt that the design discipline represents a powerful learning/teaching tool that allows anyone involved to reflect on the broad topics that each project proposes. For this reason, it is important that briefs and assignments touch on current and relevant topics.

Design students need to be introduced and confronted with the opportunities that in the last years of fast technological and economic progress might have been overlooked or that yet have to be discovered.

There are three principles that I tend to adopt in my teaching methods:

- Design is a cultural activity
- We do not know what industry we could design for
- Workshops + Exhibitions are a good format

These tenets shape my philosophy of teaching and learning, as well as influence my actions as both a teacher and a practitioner. Each of these basic tenets is worth elaboration.

Design is a cultural activity

Good design finds its spot at the convergence of the technical, commercial, and ethical realms. Even though a separation between these three components constituting any project is hard to be made, often design is analysed adopting these three perspectives, each time privileging one over the other. Usually, in the design schools, to each of these perspectives is given the space of a module, a course or a department. Technical skills represent the tools for students to express themselves, a commercial knowledge is helpful to understand how to reach consumers and ethical awareness is necessary to find a place within people. However, what differs a designer from a craftsman, a salesman and a preacher is the ability of challenging the existing production techniques, commercial strategies and ethical indoctrinations. Preferably, a designer or a design student combines these three components in his or her projects. So, in my teachings I would like to propose as little separation as possible amongst the technological, commercial and ethical area, if any at all. In my view, every aspect of a design project needs to be discussed culturally and holistically rather than separately and technically.

The dialogue with students should be held bringing references from the current state of society, also using news and facts as sources of information and inspiration for speculations and debates. Whether students will pursue the conventional design profession or not, my aim is to provide them the context and tools to be informed and critical citizens that are able to provoke and inform their audience by expressing and visualizing their reflections.

We do not know what industry we could design for

Although assignments should be well grounded on what is current and actual, the design process should leap into what is imaginative and exploratory. The current industry is in a crisis through which - hopefully - it will come out deeply transformed. If we base our students' work solely on what is already happening on the industry now, their vision will be outdated, preventing students to think further than what already exist. The next design industry still need to be imagined, and it is part of design school's role to imagine what other new industries could emerge. This is an important exercise for students and teachers aiming for true change.

The debates held within design schools should touch on the forefront of the issues presented by our society. In design classes we should not be afraid of using the most advanced technologies whether from the production, medical or even military industries. Imagination should be allowed in the measure that helps students to articulate their reflections and lead them to exploratory grounds. Students should be encouraged to shape their visions by adopting a degree of fiction and narration, if necessary. Technologies and services like Amazon's Mechanical Turk, Bitcoins, robot drones, self-reproducing machines are all real and available resources that should be presented to students as possible material for their new visions and aesthetics.

Workshops + Exhibitions are a good format

Through the years I have conducted several workshops, often very different from one to another with a variety of participants and in numerous locations. I have realized that the format of the workshops is very effective in motivating participants and achieving interesting results. The topical specificity of workshops reflects the way students access information nowadays. In fact - accomplice the Internet as a source of information - I have noticed that students are keener to build their general knowledge starting from specific topics, tasks, or names to then track

information backwards to the more general subjects. This path counterpoises itself to the traditional method of introducing the broader subjects to then get more specific.

The workshops can be about certain topics or techniques, decided in accordance with the rest of the staff members. The limited duration of the workshops (1-2 weeks full-time) helps the students to focus more and work more intensively. As a tutor, I plan the workshops' activities so that for participants time is organized. The sequence of activities is planned aiming for tangible results by the end of the workshop's term. The resulting outcomes - which can range from artefacts, videos, graphics, according to the context - could be presented in small exhibitions, whether just for an internal audience, or open to other guests than tutors and participants.

Exhibitions are terrific goals to motivate students throughout the activities. That is why I privilege to end workshops and terms with shows. Furthermore, the planning and set-up of these small displays represents an opportunity to curate and design the exhibitions. This is an important phase that allows participants to make connections amongst the projects and develop an identity for the whole workshop. When exhibitions are ready and opened, further discussions arise, students are informally confronted with their own expectations, the reactions of their peers, their educators and possibly other attendants. This is an important moment of evaluation and self-evaluation.

Outcomes do not have to be finished outputs, they can also stay at the stage of experimentations and try-outs, but having to present them in exhibitions encourages students to articulate their process and thoughts in a clearer way. The workshops can be planned in concert with other educators so to involve more modules and expertise under a single broader brief.

Finally, in my teaching I bring references from past or contemporary design and art, as that is part of my knowledge. In doing so, I aim to inspire students and help them build their own baggage of references and have a mutual visual vocabulary. For this purpose, I also enjoy engaging with them in visits to museums and events and I encourage them to be proactive as authors also outside the curricular activities.