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**Abstract:**

This paper was presented at CLTAD 5<sup>th</sup> International Conference in Berlin, during the year of 2010. It examines the general design used in curriculums, within the arts, to propose a set of principles by which academic practice can be re-defined and improved. It argues that its present logic, based on an industrial model, fragmentary and hierarchic, is no longer fully operative and that in order to have an updated correspondence with the contemporary state of affairs, it should be reassessed and replaced by an organic model, integral and negotiable.

Drawing on the possibility of art and design Higher Education to inform change, and on the verge of the social demand for both equality and difference, the paper explores the notion of a criteria of interests based on need, by hypothetically replacing –problem solving- for –problem making- as first priority in education.

It argues that the quality of academic results, or the ability to raise relevant questions, depends on methodologies that correlate to responsibility and to the promotion of individual agency, for which art and design Higher Education offers a privilege research field. The paper explores the relation of the arts with the emergent and argues that the possibility of the new, depends on how structural the notion of knowledge in use can be. Taking the example of practice-lead research, the paper supports self-reflexibility as useful method for improving art and design curriculums, and crucially from there, to a wider cultural field.

Donald Schön's notion of the 'reflective practitioner' will be analyse in relation with 'self-production' and 'the sociology of action', as developed by Alain Tourraine, as well as, with Richard Rorty's concept of 'truth as use value' and Bruno Latour's key term 'matters of concern'.

As outcome, the paper offers reasons why the re-skill of learning facilitates a critical and sustainable investment of interests, crucial for education at large, and specific to the field, why it constitutes an influential strategy for art and design Higher Education.

### **Conceptual paper:**

With this text I would like to propose a very simple idea: making problems give us more than solving them. With education as my main concern, I'll start by defining a relation between an early model of research and objectivity, and from there, its influence to present education. With the support of a few key thinkers, I will then argue for the advantages of such conceptual shift, from problem solving to problem making, to current academic practice.

Education is a concern for most of us. Generally accepted as a formative experience, it can refer to the development of an individual or in a technical sense, to the process by which a given community transmits knowledge and secures its values. If education is received we speak of learning, if it is given, we call it teaching. At an institutional level, education follows from an egalitarian principle and thus, focuses on strategies that ensure a commonly shared formative experience. This is structured by an objective understanding of knowledge, based on facts, that favours reason as the faculty that best serves education's social purpose, because it makes objective judgments possible. In those lines, research is fundamental for a community with a progressive ethos, because new conclusions, or new facts, are crucial for improvement.

According to Wilhelm Von Humboldt, who first conceived a model for a research-lead university, the quality of higher education pertains to the activity of research, that is, to the discovery of new knowledge. Students conducting research on their own terms with the supervision of teachers, who on their part follow their personal interests, is a scenario that although very familiar to us, derives from Humboldt's 19<sup>th</sup> century model. Even the scientific method, essential for Humboldt, continues to inform our understanding of knowledge, which, since we assume that truth is out there, can be described as 'extracted comprehension'. For that reason, research may be referred as the pursuit of relevant findings, findings that have to be verified, assessed and shared. In other words, research has to constitute evidence and ideally convey improvement. Finding a question that identifies a problem is half way there, a milestone for anyone commencing research; however, even if solutions are found, we respond to a problem that was already there to be identified.

Solutions themselves are determined and to a large extent, already constituted by hypotheses: all we need to do is find the facts and prove them right. But in so doing, we rely on a hierarchic model of intellect that excludes the possibility of change, because we take facts to be stable. As a result, we isolate practices and segregate people, with some having the propriety of the findings, whilst other the right to task. For example, the division of labour was the solution found to increase the quantity of production during the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Not only did this mean the division of work into smaller units, but also that intellectual and manual labour, respectively finding and executing solutions, were separated and given different values. In all cases, the absence of accumulated goods is no longer a problem, at least in the part of the world we found ourselves living in. Our present problems have more to do with

finding the sort of respect for others that we like to praise ourselves for, with the kind of social mobility promoted by our work and with the quality of that work.

Donald A. Schön is for that reason crucial for art & design theory and in particular for the present text. Having observed how often solutions are found through practice, he concludes that work can be improved if individuals become reflective practitioners. In so doing, he reconsiders the opposition between technical knowledge and creative skills, in advancing professional standards, and manages to open a great precedent: the disclosure of thought in action. He considers the fact that practitioners can respond more adequately to instability and uncertainty, to claim practice as a gesture potentially invested with knowledge. Such claim, contrasting with a more traditional scientific method, that alternates thought and experience, puts things into a state of flux because it implies that practice and therefore practitioners, are conduits to knowledge and from there, may contribute to social improvement. Not only that, but in offering artistry as research method, Schön reinforces the idea of individual agency and gives way to the present status of art & design as higher education subjects in their own right. However, with this approach we still look for efficient solutions to social problems instead of focusing on the nature of those problems. The model of intellect has changed, with practice no longer subservient to theory, but the notion of knowledge remains at core, something to be found rather than something to be produced. As a result, when in research we identify a problem, this problem is a given because we assume that it precedes formulation, which leaves us with no access to the way a necessity is adjudicated as a problem. My intention here is not to question which necessities are more important than others, but rather to argue that if we conduct research without considering the way we formulate problems, we risk pursuing wrong headed-ideas.

Schön's analysis lends us the confidence to make the best out of art & design, which in turn, demands from us to be reflective but also more critical. After all, in a contemporary community marked by difference, needs are not standard but complex and tend more to the ethical than to the economical. This, in spite of the present economic climate, is the way we like to think. So our concerns should include differentiated needs, all the way to the level of the individual. Needs that within art & design take the form of inventive resources, most noticeably in art, found in symptoms not in facts. And since making problems is both art & design strength and its best investment, I say away with questions that follow problems, towards questions that form problems, from dead ends to many possibilities. And if the expansion of the field that results, reinforces the logic of the present economy, may it be only as a secondary priority.

In all cases, from politics to the economic system, we find institutions that are highly discredited. Adding to that, in the words of Alain Touraine, best known for coining the term 'Post-industrial society': "We no longer believe in progress. We obviously go on wondering about what new technological products will change our way of life, and about when biology

and medicine will conquer the diseases that strike down so many of us. But our hearts are no longer with it”<sup>1</sup>. It is obvious that something has to give. Having acquired its own modes of production, the priority of Higher Education is no longer to serve industry with recipes on how to increase production. And with knowledge production at core of the present economy, the one we all hope to be a secondary priority, students and teachers are able to act directly on the social fabric. How then it should be asked, can students and teachers become better actors? Subjectivity is the obvious answer, but it could also be singularity or personal affect, since in contemporary times work is structured in networks of self-organized unities, for which art & design, focusing on personal development, offers a rich field. For once, hope is owed to us, individuals, to take action upon ourselves.

Important to my claim, is the way individuals take action by making problems. If in finding solutions we look outside our community, because our beliefs relate to objectivity and not to humans, in making problems we negotiate beliefs with equals. This according to Richard Rorty whose thought, even if scarcely, I’ve just introduced, replaces the tradition of pursuing truth for its own sake, a tradition that underlines the idea of essence, with ‘truth as use value’, that refuses the idea of essence. Which means that truth becomes what is good for oneself, or for one’s community. And in that sense, a community that likes to be defined by how much it includes, not by what is left out, is a community continuously challenged but also expanded by individual problems. It either offers some sort of agreement between personal and collective beliefs, or it becomes something else, not a community. So between equality and difference, making problems drive us to negotiate forms of agreement, dependent not, of an objective solution, but of needs which we share. From there, making problems evolve into the understanding of necessities as a contribution to knowledge, which on Rorty’s view, as well as on mine, is a report of how people try to agree on what to believe<sup>2</sup>.

In agreeing, cooperation is better than competition and in order to cooperate, understanding both needs and concerns is crucial. Introducing Bruno Latour into my argument, in solutions we look for facts, in making problems we act for concerns<sup>3</sup>. And if our act would consist in redesigning curriculums by replacing problem solving for problem making, concerns would face continuous “trials of strength”, but also the possibility to further “alliances”, since in making problems we necessarily enlarge the arena of debate. Contrary to what happens in solving problems, in making problems the dynamics of change are not ruled out, which serves us good because needs are constantly changing. To that extent, the quality of art & design education, a subject that offers a strong individual experience, depends on the ability to raise relevant questions and on the way those questions affect us on a personal level and form our

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<sup>1</sup>TOURAINÉ, Alain (2000) Can we live together? Equality and Difference. Cambridge: Polity Press. pp. 19

<sup>2</sup>RORTY, Richard.(2008) Solidarity or objectivity? Objectivity, relativism and truth. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. pp. 21-34

<sup>3</sup> In here, I draw from a reading of Latour’s work offered by Graham Harman. HARMAN, Graham.(2009) Prince of Networks. Bruno Latour and Metaphysics. Melbourne: re.press

acting. But it also relates to the agency of objects in cooperation to each other, to how well students, teachers, thesis, chairs, several computers or a portrait can negotiate and constitute needs, as concerns. What do we need? What is more important? Is there a better way to guide our interests? One thing is for sure, it takes many questions to be more just.

But education remains under the spell of science, and even ourselves, we tend to guide our lives by certainty. On the opposite, if we receive the most important of all our formative experiences during childhood, it is because we simply ask more questions. With the occasional embarrassment of our parents, childhood is a time when making problems guide our way into life, and truth is, we are all great learners then. So why do we insist in problem solving when problem making seems to be a better method? I do hear voices calling: large companies and universities with research labs, sometimes employ 'creative people'. Even youngsters in fact, are called to offer views, and what do they do? They simply ask questions and notice problems, problems that are inconvenient at times, I'm sure, but also problems that carry the possibility of difference and improvement. So in the end it seems, a problem is a risk worth taking. However, even in these rare occasions, we are not improving the way we learn and thus the way we teach, we are simply using an alternative skill to improve our results. We would need to incorporate the method of problem making into the very fabric of universities for this to happen. For the time being, we stop asking as soon as we find a good result, or a good enough question that can unfold into multiple solutions and a thesis, hopefully before we run out of ideas and books to read. But once we stop asking, if we are making the right question in the right way, we turn our backs to the problem. Lets take one example: the honest and loving efforts put together to help students with dyslexia. To which problem is this a solution? I wonder about the splendour of all thoughts lost in favour of grammar, and to whose benefit? The problem it seems, are the opportunities we miss because of our old methods.

In recent years, a lot has been done for higher education in art & design, including a more efficient representation within a large number of universities. But at the same time, we spend a substantial part of our energy in trying to resolve problems which are not necessarily our own. Results and assessment don't serve the specificity of the subject. But where do we go from knowing we achieve more by making problems? Hopefully we evolve into a more inclusive model of education, where different fields of knowledge might count as academic expertise, where people who have developed relevant skills, independently of the type of labour involved, may have the opportunity to say a thing or two and contribute to general knowledge as equals to academics. It has to be said again and again, that science does not circumscribe all knowledge and neither does it include or encourage the active participation of many, so why should we insist and try to comply, when goals are not attained by facts? We probably shouldn't, because although the scientific method is thought to solve problems, it is not appropriated to art & design, period. Problem making on the other hand, follows from a critical methodology that marries art & design with more current debates: it asks why to all

that is presented as a fact. In the same way, the term art & design should be used to cover all areas of art education at once, and not to blur the two, or worst, to suggest a practical economy of means. Both disciplines demand a creative approach to learning, but with very different priorities. In Art we first ask 'why' followed by 'what' and 'how'. In Design we first ask 'what' followed by 'how' and 'why'. Art is closer to a methodology, design to a method. If we use the methodology we make problems best, with a methodic mind we engineer problems better. Both approaches benefit education at large.

In between what is received and what is given, the necessities of education are constantly changing, so there's a lot to be gained in preparing for the unpredictable. Because education is organic in process, a program for flexibility would be an important step for both research and taught systems, to the point of, if proven necessary, combining the two. Flexibility however, does not imply being deprived of a structure. In the case of education, that structure includes the shared necessities of students, teachers and institutions, the development of academic skills and the acquisition of specific contents. If education is strictly based on information about a given subject, it risks redundancy once the field advances, if it only provides students and teachers with competences, than nothing is really shared. With problem making on the other hand, the means and use of truth are continuously questioned and all exchanged hopes, expanded. It also implies questioning one's necessities as students, teachers or institutions, so that interests may be critically invested. Necessity, which as a term could be replaced by desire, is thus a requirement for education to become more sustainable, since it is through necessity, or desire, that key aspects, such as curiosity, are maintained over time. More than receiving or giving, education consists of negotiating concerns, and to negotiate well, it takes, skill. It is precisely at this level that problem making intervenes: it re-skills learning, making it possible for knowledge to be actually produced and not discovered.

Art & design practice-based research, is for that reason, a good example for education at large, because researchers are not only reflective practitioners, but also practitioners in their own right. People who use self-reflexivity to negotiate personal concerns and collective needs, who are necessarily responsible in their choices. And since research produces knowledge, defined someplace else as 'a report of how people try to agree on what to believe', making problems is the conduit to knowledge for it implies continuous negotiations. In that sense, making problems is equally the process by which education is re-skilled, since abilities to negotiate improve with time. One problem leads to many, and yet, we refine our ways with a critical and sustainable investment of interests. If 'practice makes perfect', with making problems we repeat attempts to serve concerns better and thus, enhance the formative experience known as education.