

Stories for Academia

How storytelling may improve academic writing



(picture credit: Fischli & Weiss, 2001)

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Abstract

Impartment of academic writing in art and design study programmes contains particular challenges. Students as well as lecturers perceive writing as opposed to the self-understanding of their visually oriented disciplines or even hold that visual language is able to communicate without using verbal language. Based on a literature review and my own teaching experience, this paper proposes storytelling as a didactic tool apt to break down barriers and to improve design students' academic writing.

Questions

What are the main problems facing the teachers when imparting writing skills to design students?

How can design experience be fruitfully used in academic writing?

Is storytelling a useful tool in this context?

Keywords

storytelling; academic writing; creative writing; visual and verbal literacy; didactics in design education

Context

Along with Bologna reform and the introduction of Bachelor and Master degrees, European art and design schools are requested to teach, train and assess academic writing, a skill that most institutions previously neglected, since it seemed to be unimportant for professional practice and therefore was nearly absent in traditional art and design curricula.

For various reasons, academic writing as a new element of art and design education, is regarded with scepticism. Critical voices ask for example, why artists and designers should be able to write an academic paper at all, and whether such a requirement would be of any use for their later professional practice. Often, students as well as a senior generation of art and design teachers, themselves being formed by practice rather than by academia, are unaware of the educational potential inherent in academic writing. Besides, they see writing as a part of theory and theory as opposed to practice. Moreover, they identify with visual rather than with verbal literacy (see for example Orr & Blythman, 2002). Along with these obstacles, possibly specific for art and design disciplines, bachelor degree students in general – and often even master degree students – have a hard time being confronted with academic writing tasks (see for example Bean, 2001; Björk et al., 2003; Kruse, 2007).

The context outlined so far, is a challenge for teachers in charge of writing courses in design study programmes. US-American and British academies have developed specific study support methods and instruments to improve writing across and within disciplines since the 1980s (for a current example see www.writing-pad.ac.uk). By contrast, schools of art and design in German-speaking countries not only seem to be fairly unprepared for the new task but also rather ignorant of the international debates.

This paper aims at learning from case studies and research at hand, relating literature review to my own experience with a special focus on storytelling as possible tool of writing impartment.

main issues

Teaching practice in Swiss BA and MA design programmes suggests three hypotheses about the causes of design students' writing problems:

1. Students are not aware that writing competence is basically a craft and can be achieved by practice and exercise, applying techniques like brainstorming, mindmapping or sketching, i.e. very common methods in design.
2. Students ignore the close ties between reading and writing skills. They overlook what they can learn from reading and how reading can improve their writing.
3. Students do not consider writing as a process with many steps and as a knowledge-generating act. They rather see it as knowledge-telling in a linear process and expect their very first draft to be the final result.

A review of pertinent literature confirms and complements these preliminary observations:

4. Students interpret writing problems as personal problems (and failures); they neglect that even skilled and experienced authors face difficulties inherent to any writing tasks (Francis, 2009; Kruse, 2007; Ruhmann, 2008).
5. Students consider writing as opposed to design (and so does the majority of design teachers); they perceive a dichotomy between design and writing practice, between visual and verbal language; this inhibits a fruitful use of design skills in their writing (Marks, 2004; Orr & Blythman, 2002).
6. Students write for tutors rather than for themselves; they do not see writing as part of a creative process improving their thinking and having a value on its own (Evans, 2007).

As it seems, in different institutions and different art and design programmes, similar issues may be identified. Therefore, solutions to the problem might be equally applicable. It also seems that storytelling can be an apt tool to intertwine design and writing.

lessons from teaching practice

The most important lesson I take from my personal experience and literature review concerns the gap between theory and practice: As long as curricula are divided into theory and practice, students will have a hard time connecting (academic) writing skills to their disciplinary interests and competences. Another important lesson relates to the dichotomy established between so-called visual and verbal languages and between design and writing assignments: As long as students (and teachers) focus on the differences between writing and design, as long as they perceive the former as an impersonal, formal exercise lacking practical relevance and the latter as a creative, satisfactory personal journey, they will not be able to establish helpful connections.

Instead of emphasizing (or even celebrating) an opposition of visual and verbal literacy, design knowledge should be used to develop student writing. As Susan Orr und Margo Blythman put it: „(...) writing *is* design (...)“ (Orr & Blythman, 2002, p. 40).

Similarities in writing and design processes – for example similar internal and external constraints and conventions, similar qualitative judgement criteria, similar importance of craft and creativity, similar role of peer-feedback and so on – enable students to use skills already familiar to them in the context of an academic writing assignment: „Using the discourse and experience of students’ design practices, we can support student writing effectively.“ (Orr & Blythman, 2002, p. 50).

The power of storytelling and its use in writing workshops

Before discussing the application of storytelling in teaching practice, we should define the meaning and use of the somehow hackneyed term. In the context discussed here, „storytelling“ basically stands for a process of cognition, a gain of knowledge (see Mosbach in Mentzer & Sonnenschein, 2007, p. 78, original in German: „Erzählen ist ein Erkenntnisvorgang. [...] Gutes Erzählen ist vollzogene Erkenntnisarbeit.“).

Telling a story always requires making sense of observations and the interpretation of facts. Used in this sense, storytelling works as an epistemological tool: deriving a philosophical thought or a scientific conclusion is nothing else but storytelling (see Heissenbüttel in Mentzer & Sonnenschein, 2007, p. 62).

Teaching (academic) writing, we can use storytelling as a polyvalent didactic tool:

- telling stories to uncover relationships and mechanisms vital for reading and writing (Orr & Blythman, 2002, p. 49; Bean, 2001)
- establishing a learning story in a students’s group (Lioy, 2008)
- assigning writing tasks that will produce stories (Gantenbein, 2003; Pyerin, 2003)

In all these cases, storytelling will unfold its cognitive power and allow students to gain new insights. If a lecturer explains, for example, his own reading and writing strategies, showing students his notes and transitory texts, i.e. telling his own story, they will gain a deeper understanding of generic writing problems (Bean, 2001, p. 137-138). If tutors remind the parallels between design and writing process by providing explanations, examples and equations, i.e. telling good stories about the bridges between design and writing, students will benefit from their design knowledge and experience when writing (Orr & Blythman, 2002, p. 49-51). If students are given the opportunity to reflect their writing biographies over a longer period, they will gain self-confidence and leave behind pre-conceived barriers, i.e. they will be able to tell their own story of empowerment (Lioy, 2008, p. 163-164). If students are assigned to write stories, they will learn how many drafts and revisions are necessary to finally approach a convincing version, i.e. by telling their own stories they experience a gain of knowledge (Gantenbein, 2003).

Even though the cited authors do not explicitly use the term storytelling, it well characterizes their teaching practice. In writing workshops realized with BA and MA design students at Lucerne University of Applied Sciences and Arts and at Zurich University of the Arts, storytelling was consciously and intentionally applied as a tool to alleviate the burden of writing. Extracts of students’ final reflections from these courses corroborate the ideas suggested by the previously mentioned literature:

„Writing is not that wicked.“

(original in German: „Schreiben ist gar nicht so schlimm.“;
source: handwritten feedback)

„Writing provides opportunities.“

(original in German: „Schreiben eröffnet Möglichkeiten.“;
source: handwritten feedback)

„Writing is both craft and art at the same time. I would like to master it but obviously it needs patience and time.“

(original in German: „Schreiben ist Handwerk und Kunst zugleich. Gerne möchte ich diese Fähigkeit beherrschen, doch es braucht wie alles im Leben Geduld und Zeit.“; source: handwritten feedback)

„Writing promotes true knowledge. I used to think it was reading.“

(original in German: „Schreiben ist wirkliches Wissen. Ich dachte immer, es sei lesen.“; source: handwritten feedback)

Conclusion

After all, the didactic benefit of storytelling is quite evident – or as a common German saying states: „It is not possible to instruct people, unless you tell them a story.“ (Faber, 2002, original in German: „Sagen lassen sich die Menschen nichts, aber erzählen lassen sie sich alles.“)

Since writing most often *is* storytelling in a strict sense of the word, making use of it as well in the context of academic writing is evident and promising. Hopefully, the glance at relevant literature and own teaching experience presented in this paper will encourage designers and writers likewise to tell students thrilling stories about the kinship of design and writing.

links to own academic writing projects

HSLU D&K Hochschule Luzern Design & Kunst

<http://blog.hslu.ch/madesign/>

Lucerne University of Applied Sciences and Arts, Institute of Design, Master of Arts in Design, study course „Design & Research“.

ZHdK Zürcher Hochschule der Künste

<http://blog.zhdk.ch/designabc/>

Zurich University of the Arts, Design Department, Bachelor of Arts in Design, study course „Design with the ABC“.

ZHdK Zürcher Hochschule der Künste

<http://blog.zhdk.ch/academic>

Zurich University of the Arts, Department of Cultural Analysis, Master of Arts in Art Education, study course „Basic Principles of Dissertation“.

useful links

EATAW: European Association for the Teaching of Academic Writing

<http://www.eataw.eu>

A scholarly forum for those involved or interested in the teaching, tutoring, research, administration and development of academic writing in higher education in Europe.

ATD: Across the Disciplines
<http://wac.colostate.edu/atd/>
 Journal devoted to language, learning and academic writing.

Writing-PAD: Writing Purposefully in Art and Design
<http://www.writing-pad.ac.uk/>
 National project, funded by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE), with the aim to promote models of good practice and to bridge the gap between studio-based practice and academic theory; the homepage offers helpful resources and case studies.

CAW Center for Academic Writing, Coventry University
<http://www.coventry.ac.uk/cu/caw>
 British example of a writing center as common in the USA, offering writing support and writing workshops for students and staff; host of the EATAW conference 2009.

OWL: The Purdue Online Writing Lab
<http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/>
 Free writing help and teaching resources on the internet, a service of the Purdue University.

Design / Writing / Research
<http://www.designwritingresearch.org/>
 Ellen Lupton, director of the Graphic Design Master of Fine Arts programme at Maryland Institute College of Art and independent writer, artist and curator (see e.g. Lupton & Miller, 1999), regularly imparts writing courses; she considers writing „a life skill“ and challenges design students to consciously study writing as a craft; her homepage contains interesting examples for writing assignments.

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