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Design Literacies: pasts, presents, and possible futures

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Editorial: Design literacies: Pasts, presents, and possible futures

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Knowledge and skills are tightly entangled with economic and political powers. Critical studies (e.g. Crocker, 2017; Ritzer, 2018; Smart, 2010; Thorpe, 2012) exploring the relationships between design and consumerism suggest that skills, knowledge and ethics are inseparable from how these relationships are constituted. Thus, the design, production and consumption of artefacts, including services, are interconnected to values of the way we want or expect to live our and others' lives, the way resources are being exploited, and their subsequent effects on climate change.

As values and expectations change, so do the relationships which make up these interconnections. For example, in the past agricultural societies, most of the population required skills such as animal husbandry to feed and sewing clothes to keep warm. The skills and values needed to operate in the current hyperactive global markets have shifted in other directions. To tackle the current issues, we propose that all people should be versed in design approaches to have a 'say' and the ability to meaningfully act on how today's artificial world is shaped.

This approach is convergent with the critical spirit of the New Literacies Studies (Coiro, Knobel & Lankshear, 2008) and similar initiatives that questioned the traditional notion of literacy by considering it to be excessively technical and socially decontextualised (Kress, 2003). According to these perspectives, based on Freire's (2005 [1970]) work, being literate means having the ability to read the world in all its complexity and participate with autonomy and self-determination in creating meaning and the very transformation of



society. Thus, the Design Literacies should provide citizens with the ability to read and act in today's predominantly designed (artificial) world.

Thus, by organising the Design Literacies track, we wanted to explore the above issues and follow up on ideas proposed during the 2013 DRS//cumulus *Design Learning for Tomorrow – Design Education from Kindergarten to PhD* international conference which was held in Oslo, see Figure 1 (Reitan et al., 2013). The 2013 conference aimed to explore how cooperation between designers and the general public might facilitate the development of a better and 'greener' tomorrow. We assumed that in order for the designers and the general public to meaningfully cooperate together, the general public members will need to be able to read the designed (artificial) world and therefore will need to be skilled as critical consumers, producers, and decision-makers. It was proposed that Design Literacy as a concept may help us to articulate how skilled citizens might be developed (Nielsen, Brænne, & Maus, 2015; Lutnæs, 2021a, 2021b). Pacione (2010) argued that we should educate the general public about design as a form of literacy similar to that of mathematical literacy to a level where the skills and techniques serve us in our daily lives.



Figure 1 The four volumes of the conference proceedings are available at the conference webpage <https://uni.oslomet.no/drscumulusoslo2013/> and at the DRS digital Library <https://dl.designresearchsociety.org/learnxdesign/learnxdesign2013/> Photo: Reitan (2013).

Since the 2013 conference (Reitan et al., 2013), the Design Literacy has been discussed at conferences organised by DRS which were held in Limerick (Storni et al., 2018; Nielsen, 2018), Chicago Learn X Design (Vande Zande et al., 2015), Jinan DRS Learn X Design (Bohemia et al., 2021), and London ADIM (Lutnæs et al., 2021; Nielsen et al., 2021a, 2021b). As a result of these discussions several special journal issues journals have been produced including: *Design Learning for Tomorrow – Design Education from Kindergarten to PhD* (Nielsen, Brænne & Maus, 2015), *Making, Materiality and Knowledge in Creative Research* (de Freitas & Lutnæs, 2013) and *Alfabetización en diseño para todos [Design Literacy for All]* (Bravo & Bohemia, 2020).

In addition, the Design Literacy International Network has hosted, since June 2021, monthly community-based events where scholars from different countries and various theoretical and methodological approaches discuss their work and its contribution to advancing Design Literacy¹.

A decade later we invited scholars worldwide to reflect on the work started at the DRS//cumulus 2013 conference. We sought to take a 'stock' of the past decade to advance our understanding of Design Literacy as a concept which might help us better orient ourselves in today's predominantly artificial world (Bravo & Bohemia, 2021).

The four accepted submissions, included in this track, provide us with a useful reminder that the Design Literacy concept can be as diverse as other more established literacies such as the Reading and Writing or Numeracy or Financial Literacies.

Ingalls Vanada's take on the call in her paper, *Dynamic Learning: A learner-centered Paradigm in Art + Design*, is that students in the U.S.A. are not versed in design approaches from PreK-12 level to the university level. Rather, students have been exposed to linear ideas about learning that are intended to produce one right answer. They fear failure and are more comfortable with being told what to think. Ingalls Vanada suggests that a shift in education should start in the teacher training programs by developing the capacities of the future teachers. She argues that there is a critical need for training art + design education teacher candidates to think critically, creatively, and practically in collaborative ways. The article discusses the importance of learner-centered philosophy and the ways it overlaps with design thinking as a methodology and collaborative practice. In 2011, Ingalls Vanada developed the T-H-I-N-K model to engage teacher candidates in design thinking and in investigating ways that art + design can be a source of social responsiveness and vision for social and educational change. The study features an online graduate-level art + design education course and shares reflections on how the T-H-I-N-K model shifts students' thinking, builds ways of creative action, and provides a structure in wrestling with complex issues of socio-political, community, or educational injustice.

In their paper entitled *Involving Craft Know-How and Traditions in Design Education: Cases of Switzerland, Turkey and India*, Bettina Minder, Özlem Er and Shilpa Das discuss the re-integration of crafts with design through the educational and research cases of their universities in three different countries. These countries have their specific pasts in terms of industrialisation and therefore in industrial design education and practices; besides, the traditional local crafts form an essential part of their culture. Industrialisation, through mechanisation and technology, has led design into developing as a discipline separate from the arts and crafts based on the differences in the types of production involved. This separation has also been reflected in industrial design education for decades, where students have been taught to practise standardised production through machinery. Recently

¹ The recordings from these discussions can be accessed on the Design Literacy International Network website designliteracy.net/activities/

there is a rising interest in the local arts and crafts, and the value that production carried out by hand lays on the output of such work. The authors argue that industrial design education can provide the medium for the integration of design and crafts, allowing the exploration of the ways and benefits of this, through digital production and social design projects. Such explorations reflected on the curricula are supported through research and contribute to the accumulation of skills, methods and knowledge related to design and production.

In her paper entitled *Democratic Design Literacy Research*, Ingvill Gjerdrum Maus discusses how research in design education for youth can support students' opportunities to have a voice in research that shapes today's artificial world and their own education. She is influenced by the approach of Digranes and Fauske (2010), according to which the general design and crafts education would develop a reflective citizen capable of promoting a sustainable future through choices and actions. The study focuses particularly on how some methods for data construction can support students' democratic participation and contribution to research on design education. The author observes that the semi-structured group interviews and action research contributed to democratic education in situations where students engage with open-ended questions on opinions and choices and self-evaluations without any correct answers. Maus concludes that the conceptions of education for democracy, education through democracy and democratic education are embedded in the research methods used for the data construction and contribute to different parts of the research results. Considering that ideas of democracy have been fundamental aspects of design literacy research; these results show the potential of research methods for democratic design literacy research. Thus, research methods would be essential to developing future research projects in the field of design literacy.

In their paper entitled *Weaving Design as a Practice of Freedom: Critical Pedagogy in an Insurgent Network*, Bibiana Oliveira Serpa, Frederick van Amstel, Marco Mazzarotto, Ricardo Artur Carvalho, Rodrigo Freese Gonzatto, Sâmia Batista e Silva, and Yasmin da Silva Menezes describe the 'weaving' of the *Design & Oppression network*. They claim that design can be both a practice of freedom or practice of oppression, depending on who designs and whose intentions are prioritised. When this practice underestimates, excludes, disrespects, or deceives people who are part of oppressed groups, it intensifies oppression. Design as a practice of freedom takes more than a new design method. It requires the union of the oppressed. The *Design & Oppression network* has responded to the growth of political authoritarianism and naive consciousness in design. The network's goal is to establish bonds of solidarity between all struggles against oppression that cut across design. Its critical pedagogy draws from the Latin American tradition of critical thinking in Education, Arts, and Sociology, promoting both professional training and concrete social actions. The authors promote studies of the writings by Paulo Freire as one of the network's activities with the intention of raising critical consciousness in Brazilian design.

The included submissions extend our understanding of Design Literacy and its incorporation to frame how design knowledge impacts on and can be uptaken by the general public. They

also indicate a need to further research Design Literacy and its relationship to how individuals and society construct the world and make sense of it. For example, development of the democratic design literacy research can contribute to tackling ever-increasing issues related to post-truth (Ball, 2017).

Ingalls Vanada's submission highlights the entanglement of educators in shaping future citizens. This applies to also design educators who shape future design professionals who in turn are intimately entangled in cultural production that makes up the ever-increasingly artificial world. The last two contributions remind us of the importance of critically examining designers' practices which shape the world. Rather than uncritically recycling 'feel good' statements about how design is unmistakably a force for good, for example, Herbert Simon's notion that design aim is to change existing situations into *preferred* ones (Simon, 1988, 1996, our emphases). What we need to do, is to ask: Whose preferences are or should be taken into consideration when devising these *preferred futures*?



Figure 2 A sign at the entrance of a London-based Art and Design higher education institution (120th Year Anniversary Installation, University of the Arts, London). Artist: The Fandango Kid. Photo: Bohemia (2022).

Take for example the claim of “Creativity Will Save Our Souls” plastered as a sign, larger than life, at an entrance of one of the Art and Design higher education institutions in London (see Figure 2). The sign highlights that design educators are well aware of the impact they will have on the students and subsequently, their students will have on individuals and society at large. The sign flags that the designer's impact goes well beyond the material and is creeping into the realm that in the past was reserved for the priesthood, shamans or of wizards and magicians (see, for example, Frascara, 2007; Kolko 2010). We are not questioning whether designers should or should not be impacting people's “souls” as to whether they like it or not, they always do. What we are arguing is that as designers' decisions do have an impact on people's lives, it is important for the design community to critically examine how design decisions can be more ethical. We suggest that Design Literacy could provide one of the ways to achieve this goal as it makes the designers more accountable. Hopefully, design literate citizens will be able to more meaningfully participate in shaping the future world.

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Úrsula Bravo is an associate professor at Universidad del Desarrollo, Chile. She is the Revista Base Diseño e Innovación's Editor-in-Chief and a member of the Design Literacy International Network. She has taught in Design and Education programs.

Liv Merete Nielsen, is professor emerita at Oslo Metropolitan University. Her interest for Design Literacy in education, from Kindergarten to PhD, is seen in the perspective of building a greener and better tomorrow. This includes responsible democratic participation.

Eva Lutnæs is a professor at Oslo Metropolitan University and a teacher in lower secondary education. The dual position allows her to advance knowledge and innovation in the interplay between sectors on topics such as design literacy and responsible creativity.

Erik Bohemia's ongoing research is in the broad area of 'Materialities of Designing' with a focus on how cultural elements are shaping designers' approaches. He has co-chaired over 20 key international academic conferences with international societies such as the Design Institute Management (DMI); Academy for Design Innovation Management (ADIM); Design Research Society (DRS) and Design Society (DS).

Naz A.G.Z Börekçi is currently an associate professor at METU Department of Industrial Design and has been serving as Associate Dean at METU Faculty of Architecture since April 2020. Her research interests include design methodology, university-industry collaboration and design for all.