

# COMMON LANGUAGE FOR COMMUNITY BUILDING

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## ABSTRACT

This paper is based on a master's thesis that will be completed in the spring of 2017. Through critical realism, we will analyse the attitudes and priorities in design education in Norwegian primary schools. The aim of this article is to shed light on causal mechanisms which must be taken into consideration when developing new curricula. With professional terminology and concepts as a starting point, we will delve into selected public documents, white papers and curricula to determine how these texts affect teachers working in the field. This study has been set in context with what use of concepts can have in a social perspective, as well as what the academic field can contribute with in terms of future curricula and community building.

*Keywords: Design education, community building, terminology, conceptual understanding, material overarching concepts, lifelong learning, communication.*

## 1 INTRODUCTION

In recent white papers, Norwegian politicians have called for the core knowledge of each academic discipline to justify the subject's place in general education. This core knowledge should facilitate lifelong learning and allow students to use key concepts, methods, ways of thinking, knowledge areas and different forms of expression in all areas of life [1]. In the subject of art and design, there has long been a disparity between the focus on theory and the focus on practise in the teaching environment. Historically, teachers have concentrated on practical, creative work; thus, the theoretical aspect of the subject has been displaced [2], [3]. This development has influenced how teachers and the public relate to the terminology and concepts of art and design.

Norwegian curricula are public governing documents that provide the framework for the objectives, contents and principles of public Norwegian general education. Their supposed function is as a predication of what students should learn through their schooling. Teachers and school administrators are required by law to design lessons from these documents. However, the text is open to interpretation to allow teachers free choice of teaching methods. Norwegian curricula assume that teachers have formal qualifications, which is often not the case in practise. The curricula do not specify that interpretation differences may arise as a result of the age or degree of formal qualification and school tradition of the teacher who interprets them. Surveys show that a minority of teachers of art and design have formal qualifications; in addition, fewer number of teachers being educated with formal qualifications now than in previous years, and continuing education in the subject is minimal [4], [5], [6], [7].

This paper will offer a short analysis of the Norwegian art and design curriculum, as well as the ways in which art and design teachers interpret the core terms of the curriculum. This analysis will anchor a discussion of the resources and conditions conducive to achieving the goal of a common conceptual understanding. The paper will also point toward the material overarching concepts that may be relevant for students' lifelong learning.

## 2 CRITICAL REALISM

This paper is based on a study that asks how educators and researchers can introduce key concepts in a subject that has a long tradition of disregarding theory. With critical realism as a scientific standpoint

for this paper, our aim is not only to explain the current situation but also to point to possible solutions. Critical realism recognises the complexity of the world. It is open to pluralism in the scientific method and applauds an interdisciplinary approach to reveal invisible causal mechanisms. Causal mechanisms can be described as interactions between actors and structures over time [8]. The word *structures* here imply external and internal actions, ideas and discourses.

The study is based on qualitative, in-depth interviews of teachers with different formal qualifications to teach art and design. These teachers form a representative sample of art and design educators in Norwegian schools today [4], [5]. Their interviews, combined with critical discourse analysis of the curricula, will give us an understanding of the current situation.

Through teacher interviews and a critical discourse analysis of the curricula that identify the text's assumptions, discourses and interpretations, this study addresses teachers' interpretations of the terms used in art and design. Reviewing teachers' reflections and statements about their use of concepts in teaching, the study attempts to shed light on the factors that affect teachers' choices of and attitudes toward professional concepts and communication. In short, it will guide the search for material overarching concepts that may be relevant for lifelong learning among students. The terms that teachers use must be sustainable over time and useable across different materials.

## **2.1 Short analysis of the art and design curriculum**

Subject-specific curricula have to be read in light of the general curricula that guide all subjects, as well as the "basic skills" required for all subjects: oral and written communication, reading, counting/calculating and using digital tools. This contributes to a discourse between the subjects that have natural ownership of these concepts, like reading for the humanities and counting/calculating for math. Practical, creative work is central to art and design, but theory is not. This creates an artificial distinction between head and hand, an element of society that both Sennet [9] and Tesfaye [10] emphasised. Drawing, which is an important part of many subjects within general education, is excluded from the understanding of basic skills. Nevertheless, art and design students are expected to be able to express themselves in writing: "To maintain the visual skill parallel with the development of writing skill is conscious and versatile work with drawing equally important at all stages". This can be interpreted as an attempt to promote the art and design discipline has important characteristics that stretches across subjects, and as a contribution from the field of design education to open for interdisciplinary collaboration.

## **2.2 Terminology in the curricula**

The terms and theory that students should know upon graduating are not highlighted directly in the curricula. The term *composition*, for instance, is mentioned only once in the art and design curriculum: "Use contrasts between diagonal, horizontal and vertical directions in simple compositions to give the illusion of calm and movement". There is no further explanation about what composition encompasses and whether students should learn what composition, or any of the other terms, is.

In this study, in order to get an overview of the concepts that appear in the curriculum, the individual words have been systematised and divided into groups according to various characteristics. These groups are products, materials and tools, history, action, design and aesthetic means; it is in the last two groups that the material overarching concepts exist.

In terms of the relationships between concepts, there are some significant shortcomings in the curriculum. For example, the concept of geometric shape is mentioned twice in the curriculum, while the opposing concept of organic form is not mentioned at all. It may be that geometric shape is related to mathematical concepts and thus receives a stronger focus through the emphasis on "basic skills". This contributes to a value discourse between different subjects. Another example is the word conversation, used ten times in connection with experiences, art, society and architecture, but it is not used on concept and what they entail. This leaves us with a question: Is it acceptable to arbitrarily include or exclude concepts, or should we have conversations about theory in art and design, thus also developing the subject's terminology in general education?

## **3 CAUSAL MECHANISMS**

The results from the interviews show that the teachers' formal qualifications affect how they relate to concepts, but it is unclear whether the causal mechanism is the total length of the formal qualifications or the time frame for when the formal qualification was acquired. In other words, what quantity and

how old is the formal competence. The teachers' consultation of Internet resources to obtain academic information and their repetition of terminology seem to be connected with their attitude and formal qualifications in the subject. The teachers' attitude toward the subject could be affected by continuing education. Conscious use of terms increases the inclusion of those terms in lessons, as well as in feedback to students. It also shows that the framework around education, such as the organization of teachers and arrangement of classes, affects teachers' ability to build relationships with their students. Spending less time with students results in more turbulence and, hence, less space for reflection and conversation with students, which is itself important for student learning outcomes. The interviews also conveyed the impact of the negative attitudes of colleagues and school management, demonstrated through comments and actions, on the teachers—for example, showing disrespect for a particular subject by constantly fetching pupils out of classes, especially those taught by teachers with fewer formal qualifications.

This study reveals that the requirements posed to students vary widely based on the subject. Art and design is promoted as the counterbalance to an otherwise theoretical school day. It is expected that in language courses, students should have knowledge of means, but in art and design classes, the emphasis is on what students want to create and not what they want to learn more about. There is an established collaboration between primary and secondary schools in some subjects, such as math and language, in which concepts, repetition and a shared knowledge base are considered important. In art and design, however, teachers do not have a common understanding of which concepts are important to teach students and why. Teachers promote terminology as theoretical, and as such it is regarded as something opposed to practical work. This highlights the ongoing disparity in society as well as in the field of design education [2], [3], [10].

Is there a connection between theory and practise in art and design? In mathematics, a teacher can explain, in theory, how to set up a second-degree equation and conduct the appropriate calculations, but the student will not understand the problem before performing these calculations. A student may understand how to write a good short story in theory, but if he or she has not done it in practise, that student will be missing important knowledge. Teachers with formal qualifications recognise students' need for practical knowledge to interpret terminology in curricula, while a lack of formal qualifications results in less reflection and understanding of the discipline's terminology.

Formal education, school structure, colleagues' and school leader's attitudes, the different values placed on various subjects and communication from the academic field of design education are the main structures that affect teachers' approach to terminology and practise in relation to the concepts of the curriculum.

#### **4 METHOD AND FORMAL QUALIFICATIONS**

The study shows that consciously working with concepts and the theories behind them puts more focus on them during lessons, as well as when giving feedback to students. Low focus on concepts leads to little emphasis on theory, which provides less room for the conversation, dialogue and reflection that increase learning outcomes. This is unfortunate considering that students should be able to read, speak and communicate on the subject.

One solution to this issue lies in the formal qualifications and continuing education required of teachers. These affect teachers' focus on concepts, their repetition, and their attitudes toward the subject. There is a relationship between society's demands for performance and its recognition of the competence of an industry's professionals, and pay for expertise contributes to deference and status [10]. Qualification requirements for teachers have been used to good result in *Lærerløftet* [11], leading to increased focus on formal qualifications in subjects such as language and mathematics. As a result, school leaders value formal qualification in those particular subjects, and more school leaders are motivated to provide training for teachers and to hire teachers with more formal qualifications.

Fors and Vetlesen [12:41] link authority to integrity, which they describe as “to stand for something in the sense of being firm, even if you meet resistance”. They also point out that if we do not intervene when we know that an attitude or behaviour is wrong, we constitute normality of this action pattern. When it comes to colleagues and school leaders, would a teacher with more formal qualifications have the authority to convey a subject's values and draw a clear boundary around an acceptable collegiate action pattern? School leaders must organise the school structure to provide a better basis for teacher-student relationships and a better progression in the development of student knowledge. This can be

done by letting teachers follow students over several years through the same subjects and by setting a limit for the number of students in a class.

The difference in student requirements for different subjects is undermining art and design. Why is common knowledge considered important in core subjects but not in art and design? Is it because core subjects are easily associated with the basic skills in the curricula, with the result that other perspectives and definitions of basic skills disappear?

## **5 FACILITATION OF KEY CONCEPTS**

The new curricula must not only identify key concepts but also have a more deliberate focus on how key terms should be used. The kind of knowledge students will be left with and the terms they should learn must be much clearer. However, there are some variables to consider. Should we have a detailed, guided curriculum to facilitate easier access for teachers who lack formal qualifications in art and design? Would this compensate for a lack of conceptual understanding, or would a detailed description override qualified teachers' freedom to choose content and methods? Would it be in the students' best interest to have teachers with formal qualifications who can adapt to local challenges and needs? In other words, would it be effective to design the curriculum so that everyone can teach a subject regardless of competence or qualifications? This might be useful as a short-term budgetary measure, but, in the long run, it would be best to employ qualified teachers who are able to facilitate lifelong learning through discussions and a focus on material concepts and a combination of practical and theoretical knowledge.

## **6 THE POTENTIAL OF A COMMON TECHNICAL LANGUAGE**

The Norwegian curricula include the goal of developing students' visual and creative skills and their ability to communicate and cooperate. Sven Østerud [13] expanded the concept of literacy from the ability to read and write to the ability to embrace multiple forms of communication, both sent and received. In today's society, we surround ourselves with visual culture. Since many decisions are made on the basis of pictorial representations, visual literacy and the ability to visualise ideas, solutions and designs that have not been invented yet must become a required competence [14], [15], [16].

In the doctoral dissertation by Lutnæs it appears that the vocabulary and the verbal have a minor role in assessment and teaching, and that "... the way is short to regard them as superfluous.". Lutnæs argues that a well-developed verbal language for both teachers and students can be used as a resource and create better prerequisites for professional motivation, both when introducing a task, giving underway assessment and when to write grades. The theoretical knowledge increases the pupils' choice in addition to increasing "... the students' competence in assessing own and others creative work ..." [17]. This implies that a well-developed language can contribute to improved communication. The art and design curriculum, as well as the academic field of design education, should identify and clearly communicate the concepts and knowledge that students need for adulthood, with a focus on the common social perspective. As students learn about material overarching concepts in more depth, they create a collective basis common to all in this fragmented world. A shared language based on concepts and the theory behind them will allow students to continuously exchange ideas and experiences. They can also avoid the increasing division between general and specialized knowledge, creating a common basis with which to communicate across disciplines, or with those carrying out assignments for private individuals. When educating people to be part of a fragmented society, they need a good foundation of communication.

A discipline's key terms can form a common basis and have a unifying effect on students who are growing up in diverse communities. A common understanding of these terms makes it possible for people to communicate more easily, both verbally and visually, across different disciplines later in life. A common basic understanding of concepts in art and design can build community.

## **7 IDENTIFYING MATERIAL OVERARCHING CONCEPTS FOR LIFELONG LEARNING**

We need clearer concepts that can be used both theoretical and practical, and that has material overarching properties. We often use terms like *form*, *colour* and *composition*—all of which carry their own definitions and theories, an example of this are the various colour theories such as Ittens,

Goethe and NCS. There is no common language to communicate visually [18], [19]. But through a common conceptual clarification, we can pave the way for better communication.

The terms we use must be sustainable over time and useable across different materials. In other words, we need to identify the material overarching concepts and the appropriate terminology. In art and design, aesthetic instruments are important when we want to communicate about visual effects verbally or in writing. But design also bears material overarching concepts, such as function, requirements specification, development of ideas, life cycle and consumer perspective. By using material overarching concepts, we can remove material tribulation in curricula and create room for the deep learning that politicians are calling for.

## 8 AN OVERVIEW

Everyone has a knowledge base, which, collectively, affects public attitudes. The field of design education affects how knowledge resources are prioritised and presented in different discourses. Society's attitudes affect politicians' attitude, which in turn influence curriculum. The curriculum, in turn, affects the dynamics of the school, through school leaders, colleagues and the organisation of school life. These structures affect teachers, who make their own methodological decisions based on subjective opinions influenced by their formal qualifications. All this affects what knowledge the student is left with, which, in turn, influences society's attitudes.

What changes are necessary to create a common language for social building beyond the identification of core concepts and material overarching concepts? The design field in general must stand with the field of design education and exert pressure on politicians. We must start with demands for formal qualifications for teachers of art and design as well as raising awareness about how use of concepts in art and design subjects will contribute to make teaching, feedback and assessments easier. This is important because it will allow students to receive a common basis for lifelong learning in addition to that students, with a better developed language, can communicate more easily across different disciplines. This will have a unifying effect on our understanding of society's design needs. The arguments for the subject should be developed through a unified field, one that must exit the trenches of theory and practise. A unified field of design education will communicate more clearly, and an increased focus on the subject can influence political and social attitudes toward it. By only focusing on the practicalities of art and design subject, we end up being the practical compensation the theoretical subjects stated to be missing, rather than promote that we are an independent subject with its own theories and concepts. Concepts are the theory that is applied in practise.

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