

# 'There is No Pedagogy'

Conversation between **LISA BAUMGARTEN, JUDITH LEIJDEKKERS** (Teaching Design) & **ISKRA VUKŠIĆ & ROSA TE VELDE**

The collaborative research project 'Teaching Design' was founded by Berlin-based critical design mediator Lisa Baumgarten and design journalist and researcher Anja Neidhardt in September 2019 in Berlin. (1) The project began as a participatory bibliography of intersectional feminist and decolonial perspectives in relation to design education/pedagogies. When the COVID-19 pandemic hit in March 2020, they started a document called 'Ideas for teaching and learning design online', which was widely circulated.(2) Rotterdam-based designer and educator Judith Leijdekkers joined Teaching Design in the spring of 2020. Judith currently follows the Fine Art & Design Teacher Training at the Willem de Kooning Academy (WdKA) in Rotterdam. Her design and education practice is situated in the context of a neighbourhood. Lisa is currently an interim professor for design studies (Verwalter der Professur 'Designwissenschaften') at Hochschule für Bildende Künste Braunschweig, works as a freelance designer, and has a background in communication design. Lisa and Judith are now working on *Teaching Design Conversations Continued...*, a series of conversations that will be shared through their platform [teaching-design.net](http://teaching-design.net), exploring the ways in which design education in the Netherlands reproduces discriminatory logics of sexism, racism, and classism.

**Iskra:** Teaching Design aims to rethink design education from intersectional feminist and decolonial perspectives. What does that mean in the context that you're in, as people with access to all kinds of resources?

**Lisa:** When we started Teaching Design, we intended to find out how design is situated in our societies, where it comes from, what kind of culture it is, what content we learn, who we learn from, who the designers are that we see, who is represented, what kind of objects we create, what kind of materials we work with. Who is producing objects and with what kinds of resources? In a way we take a very pragmatic approach to this framework, and also a very personal one. It's a whole system of related questions and structures; access comes together for me with representation, with precarity, with working conditions, with capitalism, with neoliberalism, with collaboration, with sustainability. But coming from an intersectional feminist

perspective means to me, and also in the framework of teaching design, to acknowledge that realities and lived experiences are different. And to acknowledge that there is a dominance of western eurocentric perspectives that we have to dismantle before we can imagine building and transforming the current state into a more just future. To work from a decolonial perspective means acknowledging that our world, specifically the western part of this world, is built on the exploitation and oppression of other cultures and people, and that those relations of power didn't stop when colonialism ended, in fact they are still shaping the way we think, the knowledge we mediate, the way we live. The design discipline as we know it today emerged at the same time as the production of industrial goods in the 19th century, along with the value system of modernism. Both are developed and interwoven within capitalist and patriarchal structures. Essential components of these developments are colonialism, and by implication, racism. So, considering these factors I am wondering: how can we implement our questions in design education? I don't want to teach seminars that don't address these implications anymore.

**Judith:** It is important to mention that I work in a very different context than Lisa. I have been teaching in vocational education, in a programme called Social Work. I explore with my colleagues and students where design, art, and social work overlap. I walk around neighbourhoods with students and show that cultural work can be social work. From what I see, vocational education is shaping students to fit within a specific job description without asking questions. In this context, teaching from an intersectional perspective means many things at the same time: finding ways with students to speak about the many forms of exclusion and oppression they face in their daily lives, giving or creating words together to understand how personal experiences relate to larger structures, but also stepping away from traditional disciplines and exploring how disciplines – like art, design, and social work – intersect. Vocational education is barely included in discourses around design education and intersectional pedagogies, partly because vocational schools don't offer research positions. When we talk about intersectionality, we need to include different types of education, especially in a world where the type of degree one has defines which jobs, salaries, and opportunities one has access to.

**Lisa:** In the beginning of studying design there are a lot of students from different class backgrounds. What I witnessed during my studies, and also observed as an adjunct lecturer, is that when students don't have a specific habitus, or have less 'cultural capital', it can become a struggle to stay in the design programme. There's a need to make the classroom more diverse also in terms of class, to be accessible and not overly academic, and to relate what we do back

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to our everyday lives, because that's what most design studies fail to do, in my opinion. There's this great article about graphic design as a factory that discusses what design education means today and how students are really educated towards functioning on the market – which also implies that there is less time available.<sup>(3)</sup> Less time to care for students, for teachers, and also for criticality.

**Judith:** A lot of education and knowledge production is based on writing. Coming from an academic environment – even within design – most assignments required writing texts, so when I started teaching in vocational education I also often asked students to write (in Dutch). But then I learned that it was difficult for some of my students to express themselves on paper. For most of them, Dutch is a second language. I also started seeing that all their exams required a written report. Some students told me that they had dropped out of school because they were told their Dutch was not good enough. It made me realise how writing-dominated education can be exclusive. Why is it that writing plays such a major role in all types of education? Are there ways of making space for languages other than Dutch and English? How do we want to deal with language in classrooms? How can we make space for forms other than writing?

**Lisa:** While writing is a thing that can be a gatekeeper, for me reading texts and also being able to express my thoughts, which I learned through reading texts, is really a 'power skill'. Even though I know that approaching texts can be scary, for me it's really important to ease my students' fear of reading. While working with a text, if there is something in that piece of writing that touches them – and a text can really touch you – and they get curious and start to realise that their hearts beat a little bit faster when they read a specific paragraph, then this is something that they should follow. It is okay not to understand everything and to just be open for the text to be touching, to feel it. Texts can be very liberating; they can liberate you from designing and all those dogmas that exist in design. I mean writing and academia and cultural studies, they all have their own dogmas, you cannot escape them easily. But for me, working with texts and the thoughts of other people – those who were there before you – can be so meaningful and be such a big support as well.

**Rosa:** Without meaning to reinforce disciplinary boundaries, in terms of education we were wondering if there's something specific about graphic design and design versus art education, in terms of what you want to do?

**Lisa:** Design has borrowed and taken a lot of very problematic structures and configurations from the arts, but because it's such a young discipline in comparison to, let's say, architecture, it may have

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just started to reflect on those things theoretically. There are specific mechanisms that design has borrowed from the arts, for example idolising certain design personalities, telling linear histories, heroism, focusing on specific styles, focusing on an elite, instead of, for example, focusing on everyday material culture.

**Iskra:** What does 'critical pedagogy' mean to you?

**Lisa:** The more I teach the more I realise that the term 'pedagogy' is being used often but is not really being discussed a lot in design education. I started to read up a little bit on the cultural history of the term pedagogy and what it means, and pedagogy is actually rooted in a very authoritarian way of educating students. And it is very interesting to read about the alternatives that have been suggested by, for example, Paulo Freire, Ivan Illich, Jacques Rancière, Frigga Haug, and other activists and thinkers. Sometimes it seems that in design there is actually no pedagogy. We're all doing something, we try to mediate knowledge, and there might be methods that are sometimes also very ancient, but there are really no pedagogies that we are consciously and purposely putting into practice. I think 'critical pedagogy' is about questioning the relations that people have with each other in a teaching/learning setting, the kind of knowledge that is being shared, and the way that knowledge is being mediated. Finding out what 'critical pedagogy' means to me is an ongoing process.

**Judith:** What does 'pedagogy' really mean? For me, it's super important to have room for doubt in the classroom. In my experience, so many things are organised around goals and in defining what students need to have learned by the time they walk out of the classroom. I think it's very important not to define goals sometimes, and to leave room for doubts, for not knowing things, and for unexpected situations. But for me it's also about being situated: to relate classes to the direct environment of the school and the students. I see my classes as a way of collaborating with my students. Most of my students tell me they have never met a teacher who does that.

**Lisa:** It's also about unlearning. As the students in Judith's classroom have never experienced someone who sees them as equals, the students that I teach mostly come from schools that are working on the assumption that students don't know anything and need to be filled with knowledge in a certain amount of time, which will then be measured by assessments. I see this manifest in practice for example when I am asking them for their opinion on what they'd like to learn and how: they get really overwhelmed. If you attempt to transgress this teacher/student relationship and try to create something that is based more on equality and exchange, unlearning the structures that you are socialised into is the first step. And that concerns ourselves too, of course.

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**Rosa:** Did any of you ever receive any training in teaching? What are the requirements in Germany in art schools?

**Lisa:** There are no requirements. You are basically hired if you have a specific practice or if you know someone. I had no training except the work that I was interested in like facilitating and mediating. I organised workshops and I could gain a little bit of experience because of that but basically it was learning by doing when I started.

**Iskra:** And for you, Judith? Being in vocational education there are a few more requirements here, aren't there?

**Judith:** Yeah, you have to have a teaching qualification, which I don't have. That's why I'm currently studying at the WdKA to get the art teaching qualification, which allows me to teach in elementary schools, high schools, and vocational schools. This is different from a BKO (*basiskwalificatie onderwijs*), which is a qualification for teaching in (applied) universities. It is super interesting because now I learn how teachers are trained. While I expected to learn to critically reflect on traditional education and explore other educational forms, we are actually educated to become art teachers who blend into existing structures. Programmes to become a teacher in the Netherlands – including the one at the WdKA – are based on this one book called *Handboek voor Leraren* (Handbook for Teachers). This book addresses many elements of teaching like keeping order, group dynamics, and theories on learning. The first chapter suggests that you're a successful teacher when as much information as possible sticks to the mind of the student. The whole book is full of very problematic methods and theories. Both teachers and students are always addressed as 'he', which is just a small example. I learned that the whole Dutch education system is based on the work of American psychologists like David Kolb, Howard Gardner, John Watson, and Benjamin Bloom. This is very questionable but at the same time insightful to learn.

**Rosa:** Very interesting. I've never heard of this handbook. I would say design education here in the Netherlands is based on (ideas about) Bauhaus – and perhaps that's also the case in Germany? Lisa, earlier you said "there is no pedagogy". Can you say a bit more about that?

**Lisa:** What I mean is that the way people come into design education is not by learning ways and methods and pedagogical tools. Most of us come from practice, some might have some experience doing workshops. Being a good designer doesn't make you a good teacher or a good mediator or a good facilitator, or even a very social person. If you become a teacher, you also become a very powerful person. You are put in front of students who listen to you, which gives you a responsibility. As far as I have observed, German design education is

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mainly based on Bauhausian ideas and the programme of Hochschule für Gestaltung Ulm. Apart from that, each school's programme and curriculum is being influenced by individuals who have their own ideas and interpret those into curricula. I couldn't find a red thread so far while investigating how curricula are built, or even how concepts for design programmes are made. To become a state-certified design programme you have to be accredited as well, which is done by an independent consortium of 'experts', who also bring in their own ideas. So I think it is a very complex process. But it is a question that I've been researching, because I am convinced that in order to change the very consolidated university structures you have to first find out how they work. It's easy to forget that in the end, an institution is made up of people, and people have stories and lives; conversations are possible. Then it all becomes less abstract and more hopeful.

(1) <https://teaching-design.net>

(2) 'Ideas for online teaching and learning design', collaborative resource. Accessed through: [https://docs.google.com/document/d/1C5XFUJnu2aVwAdESFkxnu-1A6786FYmLadsGI3\\_2d2eU/edit#heading=h.2uoiahcwzdf](https://docs.google.com/document/d/1C5XFUJnu2aVwAdESFkxnu-1A6786FYmLadsGI3_2d2eU/edit#heading=h.2uoiahcwzdf).

(3) Jacob Lindgren, 'Graphic Design's Factory Settings', in: *The Gradient*, The Walker Art Center. 2 January, 2020. Accessed through: <https://walkerart.org/magazine/jacob-lindgren-graphic-designs-factory-settings>.