

Design Education Podcast – Episode 44 – Jan Eckert

Lefteris Heretakis 0:01

Hello, and welcome to design education talks in collaboration with the New Art School and design podcast. Our guest today is Jan Eckert. Welcome Jan!

Jan Eckert 0:13

Welcome. Good morning.

Lefteris Heretakis 0:15

Fantastic to have you here.

Jan Eckert 0:18

Thank you. Thank you for having me, Lefteris.

Lefteris Heretakis 0:21

So, tell us about you and your work.

Jan Eckert 0:24

Well, I'm a design educator based in Switzerland. Originally, I was trained as an interior architect. And then step by step I transitioned into the academic world and started as an assistant teacher, researcher, PhD candidate. And now, I'm currently working as head of three MA programmes at the local university here in Lucerne: MA in Design, MA in Service Design, and MA in Digital Ideation. The latter being a collaboration between our computer sciences department and the design department. So that's quite a new programme – quite interesting, as well.

Lefteris Heretakis 1:04

Fantastic! So, what is the project you're working on, now?

Jan Eckert 1:08

I think the main project in the past, let's say four years, was really rethinking the MA curriculum in design. When I started my current position, as head of the MA programmes, we had this kind of very generic programme that used to be split up in so-called specialisations. So, our university tried to kind of, let's say, provide a specialisation for any BA programme they had, while packing them all into one MA programme. And as you might imagine, that comes with advantages, but also with some challenges having people from very, you know, different backgrounds, studying the same curriculum. So, I spent – together with my team – we spent around two years of redeveloping that curriculum. And (and) we did so by really studying the local design context, especially when it comes to the what (what) is called the creative economies. And at the time, the latest — or now there's been another one — but at the time, the Swiss creative economy report was being published by Simon Grand and Christoph Weckerle, in Zürich. And that helped us a lot because they really mapped out what is happening in the job world. And one of the main findings was (that) more and more designers don't stay in what they call the creative core. So, let's say a graphic designer, working in a graphic design studio. But (instead) they kind of slowly transition into other sectors: telecommunication, mobility, traveling, tourism, and so on. And we thought “Well, that's quite an interesting fact, because it might be useful preparing our future

students for this sort of transition". And so, our main curriculum really started being much more about collaboration with other disciplines than design. And I'd say that that is my main project that I'm kind of still working on, and that I've been working on for the past three years.

Lefteris Heretakis

Fantastic! That's that sounds very interesting. I mean, I saw you work on your distance education.

Jan Eckert

Oh, yeah. Right.

Lefteris Heretakis

And that was very interesting. Could you tell someone something, something about that?

Jan Eckert

Sure. Well, we're still in a remote situation here in Switzerland, since we had kind of an intense phase of the pandemic that we went through or still going through, from September on. But back in March, when the first severe wave hit Europe and most of the universities had to shut down, our University here in Lucerne decided to shut down any kind of activity for seven days. So, they said, no one really is giving or taking lessons or courses, we take seven days to kind of rethink how to transition to remote teaching. Which, at the time, was something that was rarely used. I mean, there have been – I know – some of my colleagues might, you know, record a screencast, having maybe an online session whenever they weren't on our campus. But we did not have any remote courses set up. So, what I did, since it was pretty clear that this was about to come, I started developing what is called the Distance Learning Blueprint. And basically, those who are familiar with service design blueprints know that it's more or less like a customer journey, or there's a timeline, let's say, of a process. And you have different channels of communication, let's say, (or) where you create touch points. And one of the major problems that we were going to face was that at the time, everyone was going online, right, every single University, all the companies, so bandwidth during daytime could become a critical resource, right?

And another thing that we realised is people are used to staying online all day, right? So, having, let's say — most of our courses are one day or two-day courses — so, staying online for eight hours and having a course that was something impossible. (So) so, we imagined, neither, you know, faculty members nor students would (would) be able to keep concentration and engagement up all that time. So, what we did, we really tried to keep the "live-time" — so also the time that requires high bandwidth, when a large amount of learners connect live with a course leader, let's say — we try to keep that time as small as possible or as short as possible. So, the blueprint, really foresees most of the activity going on in an asynchronous way. So, where people, let's say, watch a screencast, write a little report, and maybe use those digital whiteboards that became very popular in the past few months, and work together. So, the keyword here is really peer-learning, right? So, students teaching students or learning from each other. And that turned out as a very good experience, because one thing is, we rarely had to struggle with technical issues, we didn't need that high bandwidth with, let's say, a huge group of learners being connected. And the second thing is, we really had very short — maximum 40 minutes — live sessions and then a

lot of peer exercises. And that was a great success. And we (we) started doing that in the end of September, beginning of October again. Yeah. And those who are interested, it's, (it's) an open resource, you can go to my website janeckert.ch. And (and) there's a section called "learn online" (where) you can download the (the) blueprint. I also developed an Excel-tool that is meant for the course leaders to rearrange the courses so you can find everything.

Lefteris Heretakis

It's a really good really good work. So that that is that is applied to services and courses, or is it to courses — to arts and design courses in general?

Jan Eckert

It's, let's say, (it's) it's used all across our MA programmes in Design, Service Design and Digital Ideation. But mostly for courses that don't deal, let's say, with physical matter, because we all know that this is something hard to replace. So whenever and that's also one reason why, currently, our students have an exceptional access to the wood-labs or workshops. Let's say, so anything that doesn't deal with physical matter was replaced with that blueprint. So, let's say a course in design and ethics for instance, right, that works pretty well based upon that scheme.

Lefteris Heretakis

So that was more for the theory courses rather than the practice courses?

Jan Eckert

Well, you just mentioned a term I don't like very much: theory. And well ...

Lefteris Heretakis

Just to create the thematic.

Jan Eckert

Yes, sure. And not to, you know, I'm totally aware of design theory and history. But something we try to – ehm well – establish at our MA programmes is a certain attitude towards theory. And let me explain just a few seconds, because it's really part of my pedagogical concept also that I tried to convey to both our faculty members and students. Many students in our MA programmes, they join us from BA programmes from very traditional BA programmes. So, a lot of studio work, right, most of this practice-based, which isn't a bad thing at all, right? But on the other hand, some of them they come with the idea that "Theory? Ah: that's the boring part of my BA studies, right?" – "Oh, those were the lessons, I had to sit somewhere and listen to someone". And one thing: we never, we rarely teach in a setting here, in my MA programmes, where someone is talking and 30 people listening. So, most of it based upon workshops, even if we are the campus and peer-learning. And second thing, something that we try to tell our students "Look, so, there is theories, there's models, there is research approaches, there's a lot about design history, but don't split your head into design theory and design practice". Because at the end, everything should come together in your MA project. So that's why I wanted to give you a little note on that as well.

Lefteris Heretakis 9:31

Absolutely. But it's such a huge discussion right now about design education, and some universities doing physical, you know, learning some are doing blended learning 100%, you know, so it's all that discussion that we're all in right now. And it's very interesting about how we will afford the future of design education.

Jan Eckert 9:48

Oh, yes. Well, just named another interesting topic: "Future of design, education", or "Future of education as a whole" I think. Yeah, if you want, I can share some thoughts on that, because it was really part of the curriculum development to understand where is higher education heading as a whole, right. And I think at the moment, we're still in a quite comfortable situation, even if we had this entire trouble with the pandemic, but higher education institutions are quite well established. Even younger disciplines such as design are established now in most of the places. But if we think ahead like and, I'd say about 50 to 80 years ahead. (Some) something started, that has been already kind of anticipated, I would say, by people, like, well, of course, by people working in computer sciences, but also by great thinkers, such as Tomás Maldonado, the last rector of the Ulm School of Design, who started already in the 90s, reflecting a lot about digital technologies, you know, the entire, let's say, digital shift, digital transformation, as it is called now. And a lot of the job future, of course, is related to that, to that great shift there. And if you take a look at some of the reports, for instance, published by the World Economic Forum, it's called "Jobs of the future" – a report that is, I think, published biannually— it becomes more and more clear that many of the jobs or activities that are part of our jobs, might get replaced, right, by, let's say, let's call them "Intelligent Systems" – even if we know they're not really intelligent, but behind there is what we call intelligence, artificial intelligence, and so on. And this is, of course, you know, this process is getting faster and faster. And, and the more we develop in that, in that field, the more we get aware that the less we know about our future when it comes to what is really work, right? So, if we take a very extreme hypothesis here, let's say in 80 years, which is still far away, but you know, close enough, work as we know it today, won't have the same meaning to society. So, today, of course, we need to work for both sensemaking but also for existential reasons, right? Everyone needs to pay his or her bills. And (and) I think that might change or it needs to change. I mean, some of the countries — Switzerland included— we're voting for or against a basic income, for instance, and that makes clear that this entire thing called "work" will change. Now, if you take a look at education, most of education is really aiming at a career in the (in the) job market or in order to transition into the job or "work world", right? So, if we take that meaning of "work" away: what happens to education then? And I think that's quite an interesting question, because most of the students they are willing to invest time, resources and even money by acquiring let's say, not a security, but (but) by having this feeling "Okay. And after that, I'm ready to transition into the work world, right?". But what if this is away? What is this work world does not exist anymore? So, I think higher education as a whole is facing quite an interesting future here. And personally, I think it will be much more about sense making and purpose than about employability, for instance. And now the question is, how do we kind of integrate that big thought into our next curricula, which can start having some of these elements. And in design education, I think one idea or, let's say, two core elements that that became important for me as a design educator (that the) that I think can take us with baby steps towards this kind of uncertain future. Now, one element is stewardship. And if you take a look at that term in the dictionary, there's a fantastic example of "farmers pride themselves

on being stewards of the countryside". Right? So, they're not the people selling you potatoes at the market — no — it's much more: they are responsible, they take responsibility for a certain context that they work in. And I think that's a wonderful concept and stewardship in design would mean "Oh we're not the ones selling fancy stuff or designing fancy stuff. We're the ones taking responsibility for a whole ecosystem of services, products, and so on and (more) moreover, we also take responsibility for the people (ehm) that we design for, right? So, (one) one thing is stewardship. And the second element that I think we need to incorporate into design education is leadership and the readiness to collaborate with other disciplines than design. Because when I think back of my own studies, most of the projects were "Oh, I do something with my fellow interior architecture student" or "I do something with someone from graphic design" but it all stays in the same bubble. I rarely, you know, had to face let's say, a computer scientist or someone working in, in molecular biology or something. But these collaborations are becoming more and more important, especially if we take a look at the complexity of problems that we're facing as a society and humanity. So, I think both stewardship like this attitude of taking of being responsible for something, and leadership and collaboration, I think those are the core elements that, at least for me, as a design educated became very important when teaching others.

Lefteris Heretakis

Fantastic, that's fantastic. What are the challenges that you are facing right now in this current in this in the current paradigm?

Jan Eckert

I think it's very similar to many other places. Higher education institutions are used to be split up into silos, right? You have a department of this, a department of that, a faculty of this a faculty of that. So, per se, it's already kind of hard to break up those silos, especially if each and every one is running his or her own curriculum and needs to get his or her own funding, and so on. So, from a structural point of view, many of the higher education (institutions) aren't really well prepared to face those more kind of, you know, those concepts such as issue-based learning, theme-based learning, and so on, or in general: a post-disciplinary approach is not very supported by many of the structures that we face in higher education. So, I think that will be one of the main challenges in the next decade to rethink these structures or finding ways around as it already has in many places.

Lefteris Heretakis

The next question is about if you had a magic wand, if you could, if you could correct something right now, like today, what would we, what would you do?

Jan Eckert

Oh, yeah, it's the magic wand here, right?

(Ehm) when I think of the situation that I'm facing here in Swiss territory, it's really those silos. So, you have Universities, you have Universities of Applied Sciences and Arts, you have some, even some private institutions that are being part of the higher education landscape. You have more and more players coming up, for instance, offering programmes online. And so, this even breaks it up into many more things. So, if we would think of higher education as a real public good, right? So, I'm a citizen; I'm a European citizen or Swiss citizen, here. And I have the right to access these things. And they're really, somehow let's say, they are provided without this entire queue of administrative and also economic factors that are

bound to those silos. So, let me explain maybe a little bit further. For instance, if I take a look at the local situation here, even each of our departments is based upon different economical logics. So, salaries are different, the amount of hours that can be spent for teaching are different. And those things become quite a hurdle when it comes to collaboration, right. And if that was kind of blended away by saying “Look, we need to face this together, and we find a way to finance it” — because most of the time, it really comes down to money and resources— then I think many of the, you know, daily problems wouldn't be there. But it's a hard one.

Lefteris Heretakis 19:24

You referring to get to a greater independence of the schools, which is which is, which is a problem worldwide is that the schools are not independent enough, and they don't have the flavour. And if they were independent, then they would collaborate better, in a way.

Jan Eckert 19:32

It really depends what independent/independence means. I think some people perceive that the post-Bolognese model really helped them to become more independent. And I think in some way that might be even true, because I remember back at the time when I still studied before BAs and MAs were introduced in Germany — I was born and raised there— (Ehm) most of the schools had more the same more or less the same profile. So, the Bolognese system really helped them to create profiles. Right? So, I think from that point of view, they became a little bit more independent, right? What creates a little — or not “little confusion” — what creates a big confusion is the attempt to quantify what we call learning by assigning credit points to this, credit points to that. And I think that is something that no one really had thought through. And from that point, it's true. Sometimes, this becomes this, this kind of lowers the independence. Because — to be very honest— as the head of three MA programmes, most of the emails I receive from students are about credit points. And that's quite sad, because I think, well, instead of discussing this stuff, we could have a great, you know, discussion on real content.

Lefteris Heretakis 21:04

Yes, we're having this is a great discussion about great addiction that starts from early years. And of course, you know, there's, this is a huge, huge area there. Fantastic. So how can our viewers and listeners find you?

Jan Eckert 21:12

Well, they can find me on some of the social channels. I'm (I'm) on LinkedIn. And I'm also on researchgate, somewhere. But to be very honest, I'm not taking care of too much about (about) that one. But I have a website: It's called janeckert.ch. And — it's rather a blog than a website — sometimes, now and then, I publish some things about conferences, sure this, this fantastic podcast will end up there as well. And I share some of my resources that I developed as a design educator as well.

Lefteris Heretakis

Great, great. What advice would you like to leave us with?

Jan Eckert

Well, if I speak to, let's say, the community of design educators out there, I think (what's) what some of our students are going through can be described as the process of unlearning, right? And which does not mean you have to forget about everything you've learned, it really means replacing rather the mental model that kind of, you know, that makes you approach things. And I think and I wish as design educators, we should be also ready to unlearn some of the things that we might be stuck with as both from an institutional point of view, or from, you know, a pedagogical point of view and be ready to unlearn of that some of that stuff and change the mental model of design education in higher education. And if we are able to face that, I think then then really, we don't need that magic wand anymore, then magic will happen anyway.

Because there was a lot of magic people, out there!

Lefteris Heretakis 22:56

Thank you so much for your time, and looking forward to future collaborations.

Jan Eckert 23:02

Thank you, Lefteris! Thank you for having me.

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