

Lessons to Learn? Past Design Experiences and Contemporary Design Practices

Proceedings of the ICDHS 12th International Conference
on Design History and Design Studies

Edited by: Fedja Vukić, Iva Kostešić
Zagreb 2020

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EDITED BY

Fedja Vukić
Iva Kostešić

REVIEWS

Helena Barbosa
Jonathan Woodham
Priscila Lena Farias

PROOFREADING

Chelsea Alethea Sanders

GRAPHIC DESIGN AND LAYOUT

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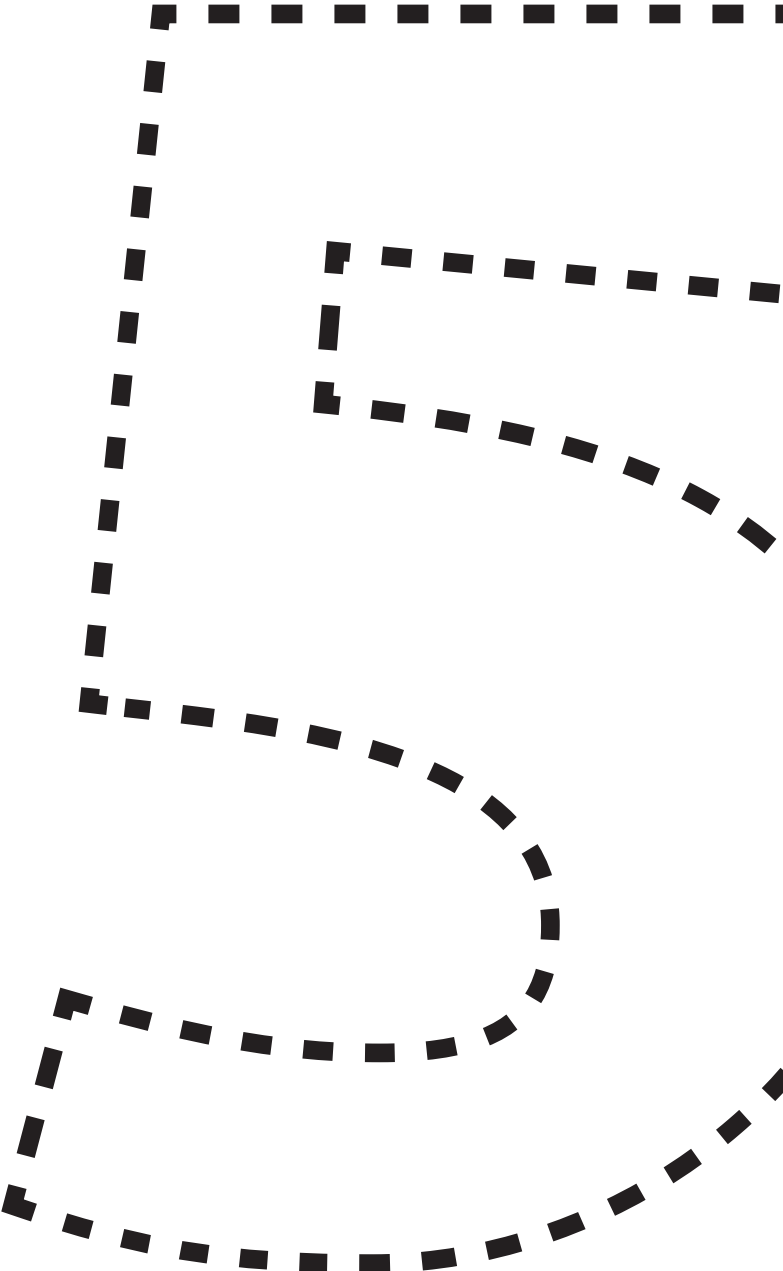
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Pansera, A. (2017). Anita Klinz. In R. Riccini (Ed.), *Angelica e Bradamante. Le donne del design* [Angelica and Bradamante. The women of design]. Padova: Il Poligrafo, pp. 77 – 90.

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Francesco E. Guida is an Assistant Professor at the Politecnico di Milano (Bachelor in Communication Design) and coordinator of the AiAP CDPC. He holds a PhD in Design and Technology for the Enhancement of Cultural Heritage. His main research activities are in the fields of flexible visual identities and graphic design micro-histories.

<francesco.guida@polimi.it>

Surface, Deep, Implicit. Basic Design as a Signature Pedagogy in Design Education

Ciliberto, Giulia | Iuav University of Venice, Italy

Scholarship of teaching and learning, signature pedagogies, basic design

Borrowing the concept of signature pedagogy from the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL), the present article transposes it to the domain of design studies, with the aim of questioning if, and how, the educational model of basic design could be considered as such. The first part of this paper deepens the notion of signature pedagogy, a conceptual framework codified within the SoTL in order to detect the fundamental criteria that organise knowledge into the multiplicity of its disciplinary and professional sectors. The second part of this paper shifts the attention towards the international landscape of design studies, observing how, in the recent years, a first body of studies and research acknowledging the concept of signature pedagogy from a disciplinary point of view has gradually been deposited. Finally, the third part of this study focuses on basic design, tracing its cultural origins and outlining a possible reading of such an educational model understood as a signature pedagogy, argued according to the three structures — surface, deep, and implicit — from which each signature pedagogy derives its own backbone.

Introduction

In the general landscape of educational research, the last decades have witnessed a reassessment of the role played by professional training in shaping disciplinary perspectives, interpreted as the particular viewpoint according to which single disciplines enact their specific process of observation, construction, and transmission of culture (Repko & Szostak, 2008).

This tendency has paved the way for the emergence of new academic currents, such as the **Scholarship of Teaching and Learning** (SoTL), which is focused on exploring and describing the dynamics underlying the production of knowledge through a 'systematic inquiry into both disciplinary ways of knowing and students' ways of learning' (McKinney, 2012, p. 32).

One of the most relevant contributions advanced by the SoTL, resides in the theory of **signature pedagogies** (Shulman, 2005), a conceptual framework aimed at detecting the fundamental criteria, highly characterised from a disciplinary point of view, that organise and structure knowledge in the multiplicity of its disciplinary and professional sectors.

Moving from these premises, the present article borrows from the SoTL, the notion of signature pedagogy, and transposes it to the field of design studies, with the aim of questioning if, and how, the model of **basic design** — intended as the introductory phase of the designer's training path — could be eventually considered as such.

Weaving together preparatory training and disciplinary foundation (Anceschi, 2006), this model has traditionally played a crucial role in the history of design education, rooting on strong historical, theoretical, and methodological instances, and undertaking wide acknowledgement also within the contemporary disciplinary community. In fact, as the article will subsequently discuss, the search for possible approximations between the concept of signature pedagogy and the domain of basic design could lead to a deeper understanding of the structural assets that become involved while teaching and learning to **act, think** and **know**, as design practitioners.

The Scholarship of Teaching and Learning and the Theory of Signature Pedagogies

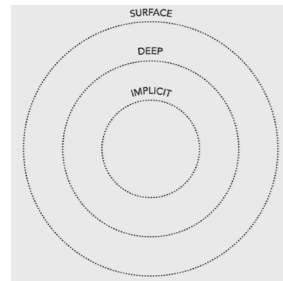


Figure 1. Schematic representation of the three main structures — surface, deep, and implicit — according to which signature pedagogies are articulated.

- 1 The concept was formulated in the context of an interdisciplinary program carried out at the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching Research Center based in Stanford (CA), of which Shulman himself was president at that time.
- 2 Etymologically speaking, the word **signature** derives from the Latin verb **signare**, related to activities such as those of marking, impressing, signing, or designating something.

The concept of signature pedagogy, which will be discussed later from a design-oriented point of view, has its origin in the early 2000s, in the context of the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL), a post-secondary stream of educational research that started to spread globally from the early years of the new millennium. By attributing success to professional training, a key role in the constitution of the disciplinary perspectives laying at the base of codified knowledge, the SoTL interprets teaching and learning as having a role in a further upstream discipline, into which it is possible to reflexively develop awareness and experience (Hutchings, 2000).

Over the recent years, the SoTL has developed a wide range of conceptual constructs aimed at supporting and addressing educational research in its sectoral multiplicity, in order to shed light on the most relevant models which take part in organising professional training in relation to each distinct disciplinary sector.

In this sense, a particularly interesting perspective can be achieved by taking into account the notion of **signature pedagogy**, introduced in 2005 by the American educator and psychologist Lee S. Shulman, who since then, has been pursuing an increasing consensus from the international scientific community.¹

According to Shulman, the concept of signature pedagogy refers to those educational approaches which, in a recurring and pervasive way, contribute to define ‘what counts as knowledge in a field and how things become known’, and the criteria by which these things are ‘analysed, criticised, accepted, or discarded’ (Shulman, 2005, p. 53). Recalling the most literal and intimate significance of the term², signature pedagogies inherently imbue training with sectoral disciplinary and deontological instances, thus consolidating ‘the architectural design of educational institutions, which in turn serves to perpetuate these approaches’ (Shulman, 2005, p. 54).

- 3 For a summary of applications of the theory of signature pedagogy to a multiple range of disciplines and profession please refer to the two anthologies edited by N. L. Chick, A. Haynie & R. A. R. Gurung: Exploring signature pedagogies: approaches to teaching disciplinary habits of mind (2009) and Exploring more signature pedagogies: approaches to teaching disciplinary habits of mind (2012).

Signature Pedagogies in the Field of Design Studies

- 4 For an essential review of the theory of signature pedagogies applied to the design field refer to: The design studio as teaching/learning medium — A process-based approach by M. N. Öztürk and E. Türkkän (2006); Critique as signature pedagogy in the arts by H. Klebesadel and L. Kornetsky (2009); Art and design and design and technology: Is there creativity in the designing? by M. Rutland (2009); Signature pedagogies and the built environment by D. Peel (2011); Understanding the signature pedagogy of the design studio and the opportunities for its technological enhancement by P. Crowther (2013); The signature pedagogies of creative practitioners by P. Thomson and C. Hall (2014). Learning — to and from — the visual critique process. New directions for teaching and learning by P. Crowther (2015).

While emphasising the existence of an indispensable bond connecting together signature pedagogies with their own respective field — or fields — of reference, Shulman's theory remarks, at the same time, how all of them share a similar conceptual organisation, structured according to three main layers of meaning: a **surface structure**, concerning the visible operations of teaching and learning, and their corresponding outputs; a **deep structure**, referring to the universal and personal assumptions underpinning the teaching activity; and an **implicit structure**, embodying the moral values that legitimise a certain discipline in the wider system of knowledge.

In the mutual exchange of these three levels, signature pedagogies reflect the cultural mindset which identifies the members of single disciplinary and professional communities, giving form to their cognitions and expectations about the ways of **acting, thinking** and **knowing**, to properly operate within the corresponding spheres of competence (Thomson & Hall, 2014).³

Since its emergence, the theory of signature pedagogy started to receive growing interest on an international scale, providing educators and researchers with an innovative framework which ‘confronts the ultimate learning questions of their disciplines in a much broader way than is customary’ (Ciccione, 2009, p. 13).

In very recent years, the design community has also started to offer an effective scientific contribution in this direction, and although the literature on signature pedagogy is still rather scarce and fragmented, a first body of studies and research acknowledging the concept from a disciplinary point of view has gradually been performed.⁴ From this point of view, one of the most relevant contributions is a 2016 essay by Alison Shreeve, in which the scholar introduces the concept of signature pedagogy in relation to the realm of design education to indicate ‘those ways of learning which help students to become designers, [...] in ways which are deemed to be professional and appropriate’ (Shreeve, 2016, p. 96). On this basis, Shreeve makes a first attempt at categorising the most specific features and formats that come into play during a designer's training path, such as **the spatiality of the studio, the appointment of the brief, the materiality of the outputs, and the performance of the critique**.

To properly understand the specificity of these formats, it has to be considered that the achievement of a **designerly way of knowing** (Cross, 2007), assumes the involvement of pedagogical approaches that are often rather distant from the paradigm of formal education commonly adopted in the context of many other disciplines.⁵

5 Formal education is mentioned here with reference to the institutional structure, which in many countries of the world, guarantees citizens the fundamental services of teaching and learning, covering the phases extending from the level of primary school to that of University. Generally organised according to a hierarchical and chronological system, formal education fosters a specific kind of physical and psychological settlement, of which the most common example is the **ex-cathedra** training model.

Basic Design as a Signature Pedagogy

6 Etymologically speaking, the word **basic** derives from the ancient Greek term **βάσις**, related to what lies at the beginning, at the origin, or at the foundation of something.

7 Reference is made, in particular, to figures such as those of Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi (1746 – 1827) and Friedrich Fröbel (1782 – 1852).

That is why, among other reasons, in drawing up her list of the most relevant and characteristic methods in design training, Shreeve also warned readers about how ‘as there are many different disciplines within design, it would be unusual if they didn’t have a range of different signature pedagogies’ (Shreeve, 2016, p. 95).

The inclusiveness of design discipline is indeed impressively wide, ranging from the ideation of industrial products to the development of communication artefacts or the fabrication of fashion items, with frequent contaminations with the domains of art, architecture, science, engineering, and business management. Looking back at the history of design education however, a certain kind of pedagogical approach seems to be recurring, regardless of the sphere of competence: that of basic design, in which ‘the great body of design educational experimentation of the twentieth century may be said to have crystallised’ (Oxman, 2001, p. 272).

Following this reasoning, could basic design be understood as a signature pedagogy in design education, and thus be interpreted as a filter to decode distinctive disciplinary peculiarities? And conversely, could the theory of signature pedagogies help design scholars to better understand the educational practice of basic design?

Coming to **basic design**, it is important to clarify that the locution is used with reference to a precise typology of structured approaches to design teaching and learning, which in spite of a marked diversification from the terminological and geographical point of view, share the same pedagogical assumption. In short, the term is employed to designate a particular phase, generally placed at the beginning of the curriculum, which promotes ‘holistic, creative and experimental methodology that develops the learning style and cognitive abilities of students with respect to the fundamental principles of design’ (Boucharenc, 2006, p. 1).⁶

Such a premise endorses the possibility to identify, and transmit through appropriately formulated exercises, the **elementary grammar** underlying the theory and the practice of design, providing students with a set of basic technical and intellectual skills that can be considered preliminary to any further specialisation.

The pedagogy of basic design has a long, and well-established historical tradition, which finds its cultural origins in the thoughts of some of the fathers of modern pedagogy,⁷ and whose earliest demonstrations are notable from when the first design academies were established across Europe, starting from the mid-nineteenth century (Simonini, 2006).

8 After the diaspora that, between the two world wars, led many of European designer emigrate to the United States, the basic design model was perpetrated in the context of seminal experiences such as those of the Black Mountain College, and the New Bauhaus (later Institute of Design) of Chicago. In the Fifties and Sixties, the model was further developed within the Yale University in the United States and the Hochschule für Gestaltung Ulm in Europe, paving the way for its dissemination in other continents, such as in the cases of the National Institute of Design of Ahmedabad and the Escola Superior de Desenho Industrial of Rio de Janeiro.

9 Mainly adopted within the fields of mathematical, natural and social sciences, basic research is oriented to the understanding of natural and artificial phenomena, and it is usually distinct from applied research, devoted instead to the development of strategies aimed at their alteration.

Surface Structure

To speak about the full codification of the method however, it is necessary to start from the early twenties of the twentieth century, with the famous **Vorlehre** (basic course) having been held at the Staatliches Bauhaus of Weimar by personalities such as Johannes Itten, Paul Klee, Josef Albers and László Moholy-Nagy. On the heels of the Bauhausian example, the basic course has subsequently spread as an iterative presence in the international scenario of design teaching and learning, rooting within countless social and cultural contexts, and undergoing relatively little change and evolution since its first inception (Lerner, 2012).⁸

By operating on the theoretical foundations of design practice, the preliminary course subjects the design discipline to a process of continuous revision and reprocessing, covering a function which in a certain sense, could be comparable to what in other sectors is defined as **basic research**. The impact of basic design reverberates not only ‘upon the designer’s intelligence of complex systems [...], but also upon the designer’s professional responsibility’ (Findeli, 2001, p. 13), and it is no coincidence that it has been interpreted as an essential educational phase by several of the most authoritative exponents of design pedagogy.

Returning to the pivotal questions around which this contribution reasons, the following paragraphs will try to outline a possible reading of basic design as a signature pedagogy, argued according to the three structures — **surface**, **deep**, and **implicit** — from which each signature pedagogy derives its own backbone.

In Shulman’s seminal exploration of signature pedagogies, the **surface structure** is related to the undisguised display of ‘concrete, operational acts of teaching and learning, of showing and demonstrating, of questioning and answering, of interacting and withholding, of approaching and withdrawing’ (Shulman, 2005, pp. 54 – 55). Although strongly influenced by the two deeper layers which will be subsequently examined, surface structure is the level where the signature pedagogy expresses itself with greater evidence and concreteness, supporting disciplinary and professional training through a highly specialised apparatus of tools, methods and strategies.

Characterised by an eminently **phenomenological** imprint, this level brings to light the disciplinary repository of executive teaching and learning practices, giving form to a material and immaterial deposit of experiences which allows to observe what, from a pedagogical point of view, may be defined as the **what of teaching**.

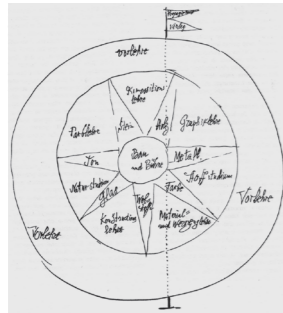


Figure 2. Paul Klee: Sketch of the Staatliches Bauhaus curriculum. In Wingler, H. (1978). *The Bauhaus: Weimar, Dessau, Berlin, Chicago*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Looking at the basic design environment, the predominant praxis is undoubtedly that of the **class project**, which simulates the phases of an actual design process in a simplified yet immersive manner, providing greater understanding of design and how to educate its future practitioners (Heller & Talarico, 2009). Given a design brief — which could frequently involve tackling wicked or unsolvable issues — students develop first-hand knowledge by undertaking a series of investigations to frame the problem, proposing a range of solutions through trials and error, and producing low fidelity models to illustrate their thought process.

Through the repeated exploration of abstract form and visual perception, occurring at both an individual level and in a cooperative manner, the pedagogy of basic design should inculcate students a fundamental design literacy, which in the words of Josef Albers (1969), would eventually lead them towards **learning to see**.

Deep Structure

The second layer considered in Shulman's descriptive framework, **deep structure**, refers to the theoretical profile of signature pedagogy, which involves 'a set of assumptions about how to best impart a certain body of knowledge and know-how' (Shulman, 2005, p. 55), leading to the preference of some approaches instead of others.



Figure 3. Josef Albers: Basic design teaching class at the Black Mountain College. Courtesy of the RISD (Rhode Island School of Design) Museum, Providence, RI.

At this level, the signature pedagogy embodies the **axiological** commitment underlying disciplines and their related professions, formally affecting the procedures through which the training activities are organised, delivered and assessed, and simultaneously addressing the educational theory from which they originate.

The teacher figure comes into play here, providing a specific and unique direction to the training activity, pointing out, that the **how of teaching** could often become unavoidably influenced by the personality and the ethos of **who** holds the leadership of the teaching and learning environment (Palmer, 1998). Taking a common feature in art and design pedagogy to the extreme, basic design tradition praises the figures of **designers-educators** (Daichendt, 2010), who, imbuing training with their professional knowledge, contribute to codifying an educational philosophy about how design should be learned and taught.

The main role of basic design teachers should be, as Johannes Itten stated (1963), that of helping students to release their individual creativity, guiding them along a path, unravelling through a preliminary phase of **tabula rasa** of prior knowledge, in order to enhance their proclivity to learn about, through and for design.

Therefore, in basic design, as the teachers' stance becomes more engaging, facilitating, and dialogic, as well as being open to providing and receiving constructive criticism, at the same time, their professional know-how, coming from years of field practice, renews itself by being involved in such an animated context of constructive interactions.



Figure 4. Johannes Itten: Basic design teaching class at the Staatliches Bauhaus of Weimar. In Itten, J. (1963). *Design and form. The basic course at the Bauhaus and later*. Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons.

Implicit Structure

Finally, the last significant level according to which every signature pedagogy is constituted, is described in Shulman's framework as the **implicit structure**, with reference to a moral dimension permeating teaching and learning with 'a set of beliefs about professional attitudes, values, and dispositions' (Shulman, 2005, p. 55).

It is within this dimension that signature pedagogies find their most intimate reasons for being, codifying the **ontological** principles which thoroughly address training theories and practices, and taking part in shaping — with only partial awareness — the mindsets of the next generation of students, educators and professionals. At this level, the signature pedagogy ultimately legitimises the **why of teaching** a certain discipline in the wider system of knowledge, and its deepest prerogatives can be especially decrypted as distinct from what could be defined as good teaching and learning within the training for any other profession.

In line with this thinking, the implicit structure related to the pedagogy of basic design would allegedly be concerned with the

expressions of a set of distinguishing pronouncements about what constitutes **good design**, widely understood as the conceptualisation, planning and implementation of man-made artefacts.

By virtue of its introductory role, the ultimate scope of basic design is to question the role of design in society, addressing the pedagogical need for supporting young designers in gaining an informed **vision** of the intertwined relations connoting contemporary world, in order to incorporate them into their own work (Moholy-Nagy, 1947).

Such a stance may be corroborated in view of the high degree of pervasiveness by which basic design pedagogy spreads within both the curriculum — as its experience keeps echoing throughout the design training pathway — and the profession — as its principles recall those coming into play in everyday design practice.

Conclusions

Although at an early stage, the considerations presented in the above paragraphs seem to endorse the validation of basic design in the role of a signature pedagogy, especially in light of the catalyst role it plays within the general design curriculum, and the circularity it triggers in relation to the professional practice. Bridging the level of theoretical speculation with that of professionalism, the concept of signature pedagogy in turn qualifies as a useful interpretative lens through which we can observe and describe the basic design model, highlighting its critical involvement in the processes related to the continuous formulation and reformulation of design itself.

In summary, the analogy linking together signature pedagogies and basic design offers an opportunity to **challenge the orthodoxies** on which we currently rely, in observing and interpreting design education, bringing to light the structures that come into play, and the ways these contribute to shaping disciplinary meaning. Moreover, if within the bounds of this reasoning such analogy has been advanced, corroborating a rather traditional view of design pedagogy, it is definitively not precluded to project it in a more progressive perspective, paving the way to a broader understanding of past, present and future expressions of the basic design model.

Further research on this theme could be carried out with an internalist approach, deepening the investigation about basic design as a signature pedagogy with the purpose of reframing the narratives according to which this educational method has been historically analysed, and addressing strategies for its implementation in the contemporary context.



Figure 5. László Moholy-Nagy: Basic design teaching class at the New Bauhaus of Chicago. Courtesy of the Amon Carter Museum of American Art, Fort Worth, TX.

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