

DRAFT – Training for (transformative) professional practice: unravelling the political economy of design

Design education is (at least in part) about preparing people to make a living by applying their design skills. Yet this education mostly neglects to empower people to proactively engage with how wealth is produced and distributed within and beyond the field of design.

To address these particular concerns we are proposing ten thematic strands that within design education allow for a contextual unraveling of the labour politics, power structures and hidden economies that run through this field. These proposals are meant to support designers in seeing these not as an unchangeable given but rather as targets for transformative (design) interventions.

IN YOUR OWN TEACHING AND ORGANISING

A) Make the economies of live-projects transparent

What is the transaction between the different stakeholders involved? Is money changing hands? How much? Where does it come from? On what is it spent? What else is being exchanged? What would be the real costs for such a project?

B) Ask guest speakers to also talk about the economies behind their projects and their practice

For example: What sources of income do they have? What free or cheap resources can they rely on? On what kind of free-labour do they count? Theirs? Others'? How do they access meaningful, fulfilling work? What is their work-life balance? If they have kids, how do they reconcile work and care? What organisational strategies and tactics are they using to keep their practice going?

For examples of designers unravelling their economies and modes of organising, see: <http://precaritypilot.net/interviews/>

C) Avoid the business straitjacket in personal professional development courses

What changes when talking about one's work as a business rather than a practice? What range of models for making a living through design work can be proposed? What models of career, success and achievement are there that go beyond what is honoured by the design press? Can the benefits of networks be framed outside instrumentalising business-speech?

Tools to tackle these questions can be found here: <http://precaritypilot.net/redefining-career-models/>

D) Diversify references and role models

Does your teaching repertoire, lecture series or event include design practices that challenge the male, white, middle-class bias of the field? Does it include practices led by women and people of colour? Does it include practices based in non-Western countries and in rural areas? If no such practices come to your mind, this is a good reason to do some research in order to contribute to diversify the field.

THROUGH SEMINARS, EVENTS AND TUTORIALS

E) Discuss what is required to work in the field of design (such as flexibility, professional networks, monetary savings, good health, enthusiasm...)

What are the positive and negative consequences of these requirements? How do they influence who can work as a designer and make a living from it? Who loses out? Who is it that we are not seeing in the design press? In

prominent positions? What would need to change to make the bunch of designers more diverse and inclusive? Why should we care about diversity and inclusivity?

See the essay by Valeria Graziano on the neoliberal requirements for cultural workers:<http://precaritypilot.net/valeria-graziano-organising-your-practice/>

F) Thematising healthy working habits

What are the main health problems designers face? What routines can help in preventing them? What strategies can prevent stress and overwork? What does a healthy set up of a workspace look like? How are issues of bad health systemically connected to the political economy of design? How are issues of psychological pressure tied to key affects (such as happiness, entrepreneurial spirit, competitiveness) demanded by a neoliberal economy?

G) Contextualise internships and work placements

What is problematic about un-paid and underpaid work? What sort of exchange and economy is one entering into as an intern? How to make sure internships and work placements become a valuable learning experience? What to look out for in order to turn an internship into a workplace inquiry? How to feed one's experience back to other students and discuss the pros and cons of it? What alternatives are there?

Lots of tools to tackle these questions can be found here <http://precaritypilot.net/from-university-to-work/>

H) Discuss and pass on the tools of the trade

How to negotiate with your clients? What does an estimate look like and what should it include? How do you calculate your fee? What does an invoice look like? What kind of basic contracts can a freelancer put in place? What professional associations or unions can one be part of that lobby for the rights of freelancers and small design studios?

Tools to work with can be found here: <http://precaritypilot.net/organising-your-practice/>

I) Thematising student debt and institutional economies

What are the consequences of student debt – for the debtors, for society? How can student debt be framed in ways that go beyond individual responsibility? How are particular design schools funded? What sort of contracts are people employed on?

Read more here: [The Debt Resisters' Operations Manual](#)

J) Explore the web of economies and chains of labour practices that designers are tied into and foster

Who produces the computers, technological infrastructures and materials we rely on? Under what conditions and with what ecological impact are they produced? Who cleans our classrooms and provides other invisible services? What labour relations and resource extraction does the production of our projects rely on? What aspirations and social relations do our design projects foster? Where do we see points for intervention to contribute to ecologically and socially just relations?

See the [Of Supply Chains](#) workbook that traces the life cycles of artworks.

What other areas and tensions would need to be tackled?

If you are already experimenting with how these issues can be tackled in design education, please get in touch to share your tactics and strategies: bravenewalps (at) gmail (dot) com.

Thank you for your comments and suggestions!

