

Un-/Blackboxing the creative potential of Dutch secondary vocational education

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Un-/Blackboxing the creative potential of Dutch secondary vocational education

materials

technology

Creativity becomes most meaningful when it is applied. But to measure the impact of any application, there must be room to put creativity to use. Both universities of applied sciences (HBO) as well as secondary vocational education institutes (MBO) contribute to this cause through practical research. As a creative vocational school with courses that are clustered as 'Design & Craft', 'Spatial Design', 'Design, Media & Technology', and 'Event Management & Media Production', SintLucas forms an eminently suitable breeding ground for the creative talent that is needed to be able to jointly, in collaboration with other disciplines, tackle the large and complex societal issues we face today and in the future. Unfortunately, to date, the full potential of creative MBO vocational schools such as SintLucas often remains unused.

One of the reasons for this is the fragmentation of Dutch education on MBO, HBO, and WO level. "Whereas the Netherlands used to be compartmentalized by political and religious beliefs, education is the new compartmentalization" (Bloem 2017). The country is currently struggling with this problem. Among themselves, the different pillars may have little contact, despite the overlaps each keeps operating within its own box.

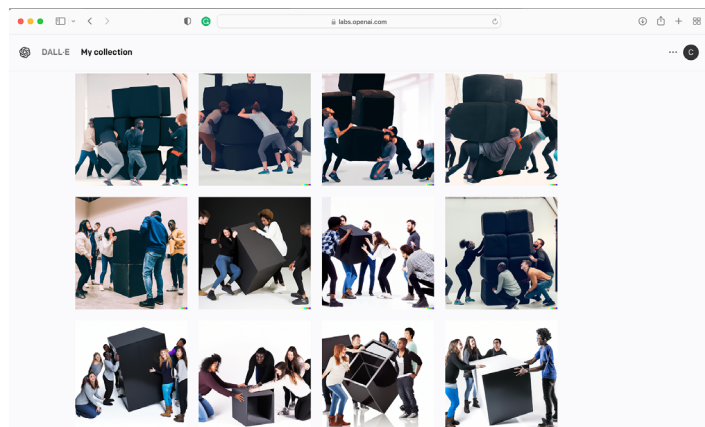


Fig. 1, Images by DALL-E generated from the prompt "a group of happy and diverse students hugging a huge black cube."

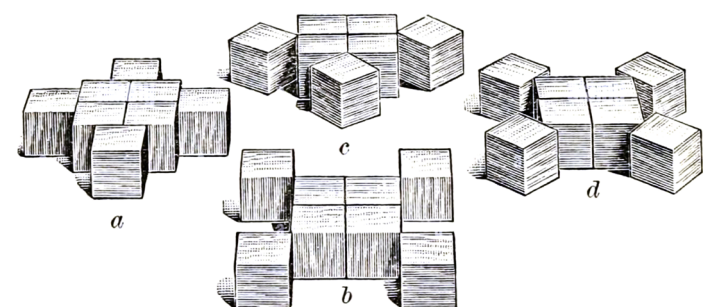


Fig. 2, Fröbel's Kindergarten building 'gifts'. Some of the first sets of wooden blocks developed specifically for young children to explore, create, and play with.



"How does the practical experience embodied today maintain value in the near future?"

Although design is taught in a range of settings within each pillar, the differences in levels between these educational streams are enormous. The fact that 'higher' does not always mean 'better' also becomes apparent from a tour of various institutions in The Netherlands where design can be studied. One quality criterion which can be used is for instance the amount of practical experience a student gains while studying at MBO, HBO, or WO level. To what extent do current (educational) practices still reflect the field(s) of work for what will be the designer of tomorrow? How does the practical experience embodied today maintain value in the near future? Recent research shows "that an excellence program involving an additional intensive internship may make graduates more attractive [to employers]. Employers also value a well-connected prior education" (Buisman et al. 2019). But as an educational institution, what do you train your students and tutors for? When do educational programs actually connect the next generation of designers to the future, if all we know about the future is that change is the only constant as a result of technological change and globalization?

Vocational schools are not alone, of course, in developing an adequate response to this changing world; there is also a need within the work field for continuous learning and resilience. This forms the starting point for a 'Lifelong Learning' pilot at SintLucas, in which the Professorship 'Meaningful Creativity' investigates the importance of critical reflection and research through design as a basis for alternative knowledge development and reciprocal knowledge transfer between students, tutors, and professionals. The easiest way to do this would be to keep the MBO 'black box' - in all its complex internal and external factors - closed, and look only at its conventional inputs and outputs: the demand of

the current work field on the one hand, and the employability of graduates in that same work field on the other. However, this obvious scenario is not the starting point of our practice-based research initiative. In the collaborations we are setting up with different open-minded businesses from the North Brabant region (e.g., Zinkunie, CSU) we do not rely on a fixed outcome, but rather we focus on a joint point of departure for a learning journey. Part of this starting point is that each of these businesses has its own specific residual streams and challenges ahead.

In this collaboration, we approach the pillars of Dutch education as a series of black boxes, containing various, at times contradictory, perspectives, objectives, and situated knowledge(s). Our aim is to unbox the hidden processes and machinery as a body of bits of knowledge that can be questioned and traced as a network of factors and interests (Latour, 1994), by ignoring the fixed expectations, resources, outcomes, and expertise as is.

“The output is hope for a more equitable, inclusive society in which the impact of all knowledge(s) combined is greater than the sum of their parts.”

Instead, we aim to unbox the full potential of Dutch creative secondary vocational education and use the residual materials of all three participating businesses to form the input of a co-creative, circular process of making and unmaking in which participants in both the role of learner and learning expert collaborate on a more desirable future. The output is hope for a more equitable, inclusive society in which the impact of all knowledge(s) combined is greater than the sum of their parts.



Fig. 3, Paint layers found by specialists of the Tretyakov gallery reveal a much more colorful version of the painting now known as Malevich's 'Black Square'.



Fig. 4, Images by DALL-E generated from the prompt "a group of happy and diverse students hugging a huge black cube."

Colofon

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