ETHICS IN DESIGN CURRICULA - TEACHING APPROACHES

Viktor HIORT AF ORNÄS[1] **and Martina KEITSCH**[2]
[1]Department of Product & Production Development, Chalmers University of Technology
[2]Department of Product Design, Norwegian University of Science and Technology

ABSTRACT

The main objective of design 'making things better' is not always achieved easily as conflicting values and priorities often leave the designer in the dilemma what is the right decision to take. This challenges design education to incorporate ethics in their curricula. The following article aims to identify approaches to teaching ethics in design courses based on interviews with design educators. Intended learning outcomes including ethics in design can e.g. concern value laden issues about the profession, personal positions, as well as practical application in design activities. Overarching teaching strategies comprise whether to teach ethics as a goal for reflection in itself (focused), or whether to treat it as one issue out of many (holistic). On a practical level design educators use strategies such as: Exemplifying, Externalizing, Contrasting, Pointing out alternatives, and Positioning. Approaching value-laden questions in design from the perspective of ethics rather than tacit and intuitive moral reasoning is an arduous task. It is however valuable since decisions about technological applications need a meaningful rationale and cannot be based solely on technological, legal, or institutional policy or on immediate emotional responses. Ethics enables people to argue for such a rationale, and to consider interests of different parties concerned.

Keywords: Ethics, design curriculum, workshops, teaching strategies.

1 INTRODUCTION

Designers often want to change things for the better; creating value. This can concern valuable outcomes in terms of new products that are more or less consistent with e.g. a set of company values, generating monetary value, and contributing to social values. There may also be values in the process behind a product, e.g. concerning who gets to be heard or whether a designer includes these voices in the development. Values imply priorities shared by a group or made by an individual. While aesthetic (design) priorities belong in the domain of perceptions and discourses on beauty, priorities of what is the right way of acting, belong in the domain of ethics. The goal of making things better is however not always easily achieved as conflicting priorities need to be reconciled, leaving the designer with a dilemma concerning what is the right action to take.

The term "ethics" comes from Greek "ethos" way of living, it signifies a theory about moral action, e.g. Do workers in the 3rd world have the same labour rights as workers in the 1st? If yes, is it then morally right to buy cheap clothes? If no, are all humans alike or not? etc. "Moral" comes from Latin "mores" and means "custom", "lifestyle". It signifies a decision about the right action. For example: When I believe, that all workers have the same rights and I buy cheap clothes, I have a moral problem. There are many reasons for acting morally, mostly based on values or principles of higher categories such as: *Religious*: Meeting a Gods/spiritual teacher' demands; *Emotional*: Feeling better when doing good; *Socio-cultural*: Rules and regulation by group or ethnicity; *Biologistic*: It's in our genes; *Aesthetic*: Immoral behaviour is ugly.

There are at least two possibilities of integrating ethics in design curriculum: (1) Recognition of ethical dilemmas through *informed discourse* and (2) intuitive understanding of these dilemmas through *reflective practice*, or according to Aristotle, 'developing one's moral and intellectual virtues' [1]. The former is discussing moral challenges by identifying, analysing and assessing ethical problems connected with products and services. The latter is applying ethics in design cases and getting an intuitive understanding of right and wrong.

Several authors [e.g. 2,3] have elaborated on the importance of ethical issues in design. Design educators commonly agree that ethical issues are relevant for design, with a central theme being that designers need to understand the position of others [4]. Higher Education is often concerned with aligning a set of Teaching and Learning Activities (TLAs) with Intended Learning Outcomes (ILOs) and Assessment Tasks (ATs) [5]. Education can bring about experiential learning through concrete experiences, reflective observation, abstract conceptualisation as well as experimental application [6]. In addition to enabling reflection in and on action [7], the repertoire of actions available to a person may be expanded by reflection on values and starting points, enabling double loop learning [8].

This paper is an extension of a series of texts arguing that different theories serve as lenses through which design can be viewed. Teaching students theory can help students frame problems differently, opening up a wider repertoire of possible solutions. While a long term objective may be to educate students towards reflexive independence, educational activities may need to be staged to engage students with certain content. Training students to see sometimes conflicting agendas may be challenging but rewarding. The authors have formerly reviewed literature on integration of ethics in design education, and also interviewed design program directors at Scandinavian Universities about the integration of ethics in overall curricula. Gathering and classifying examples of teaching approaches could help spread and evolve good practice. The goal of this paper is therefore to extend the earlier series of interviews with additional interviews about how ethics is taught in design education.

2 THE INTERVIEWS

Five participants were recruited among British and Scandinavian design educators signing up on a list after a conference session or approached after recommendations from peers, with the ambition to find participants with a strong interest in the topic. Semi-structured interviews were held either in person or over phone / videoconferencing and audio recorded. Questions concerned the practical aspects of organising teaching and learning activities. Participants were asked about personal experiences, ILOs, TLAs and ATs regarding ethics in design education, as well attitudes and motivations to deal with ethics, and overall relevance of ethics for the design profession. Both authors individually listened through the whole material, and negotiated categorisation.

2.1 Relevance of ethics

Discussing their own teaching situation, and more generally the design professions, participants brought up typically value laden examples; e.g. sustainability and design for the base of the pyramid. However, they also discussed ethics as relevant to any design project. At the *level of the profession*, interviewees mentioned that the designers have a moral responsibility to end users: 'Design has responsibility as it has consequences'. There is an awareness of value-laden questions; 'Ethics has been embedded in design for a long time', but there are not necessarily codes of conduct regulating it. While some design is always for the top of the pyramid, designers should also aim to serve humanity. Design can be seen as a practice to make a product better, but also as a philosophy moving to a broader spectrum of challenges. However, participants also pointed out that 'In practice designers are more constrained than in education. Most designers probably have an idealistic part wanting to create value but they also have to make money'. *Individual designers* take personal positions, in some case managing to affect companies, doing e.g. sustainable products through skunkworks rather than as a reply to client need. Designers, like other people, chose what kinds of projects they want to get involved with, though it may not always be possible to turn down clients. In *design practice*, e.g. identifying needs of stakeholders and translating those into material solutions, designers need to make decisions involving priorities between sometimes conflicting interests. Exemplifying dilemmas a student may face one of our participants described design in relation to the rehabilitation of injured people, to maintain dignity and not being exhibited as helpless for example "… one should not make a person walk using a walker with a catheter hanging on its side in a hospital corridor".

2.2 Manifestation of ethics

Participants discussed ethics as inherent to the profession, associating the topic of ethics with social issues, but were unsure whether to label what they did 'ethics'. A challenge brought up was that design does not have a strong tradition of verbal discourse. Engaging students with text and theory can be difficult, as many students have sought out design because of a strong interest in making things.

Commenting on the relevance to the profession, one participant describe how training students in providing rationale around ethics is important as her (Norwegian) students often end up working with sustainability, either in the public sector or running their own firms where they have to make their professional space and find their own projects. Providing arguments to other stakeholders may initiate a discussion and contribute to make ethical issues and tacit moral values explicit. The interviewees did not teach ethics as subject of its own. Rather it was brought up in other courses, especially concerning sociocultural issues such as 'identifying the ethics of the target group and taking that into account'. Participants found ethics as a natural part of the curricula following a need to prepare students for dilemmas, e.g. as exemplified by one of our participants 'How do designers act when a client asks for design solutions which are contrary to their own ethics?'.

2.3 Intended learning outcomes & Assessment tasks

Our interviewees expressed that design students have to be made aware of ethical issues, become able to reflect values questions in design projects, and able to justify trade-offs of their solutions. Several participants describe how design curricula have changed over time, with topics related to ethics gaining more prominence. However, ethics is one out of many things design students should learn, implying that there are trade-offs to be made around what to include in a course or program. In terms of *Learning objectives*, participants brought up a range of issues that can roughly be divided into; (A) Ethics of the profession, (B) Personal ethics, (C) Ethics as practice. In terms of *Assessment Tasks*, participants predominantly commented on activities linked to projects; e.g. presentations (final or interim) or written reports. Both seem to serve dual purposes; documenting the students work while triggering reflections. None of our participants brought up very explicit criteria but the lack of explicit rubrics was commented as a challenge.

2.4 Teaching and learning activities

Ethics was in a few cases introduced as an explicit *focused* goal, but more often as a part of the design process. The participants seemed to use *integrative holistic* approaches, contextualising questions in relation to design. Examples were given in relation to early stages: e.g. discussing the legitimacy of different projects or alternative starting points, but also late stages where comments would be made in relation to students' rationale described in presentations and project documentation. A frequently used, possibly intuitive, teaching approach concerned teachers giving feedback to student work 'we question things like how a design could be better for the environment'.

In addition to describing the overall approach to introducing ethics (using integrative or focused approaches, as something explicit or implicit, using deliberatively staged activities or reactive comments) participants shared descriptions of Teaching and Learning Activities at a concrete level. Some key moves are exemplified in the following:

- *Exemplifying*- Participants would in class share and discuss examples of responsible design as well as dilemmas; e.g. 'the issue of video protection versus surveillance in relationships or in relation to teenagers'. Exemplification was found to be especially important in relation to abstract content. Another participant describe 'I don't present solutions, may give examples. I'd rather let them face the problem as such and they should then think about what kinds of solutions they may come up with, and why they chose one as preferable to the other.'
- *Externalising* – Asking students to give a presentation or written account can trigger conceptualisation and reflection.
- *Contrasting* – Having students compare alternative positions highlights nuances; 'I put up questions. Students should discuss what this is all about and they might compare it to the solution of another designer'
- *Pointing out alternatives*: One participant used a roadmap from Einar Aadland 'for a conversation between a problem owner and a supervisor or supervisor group the rest of the students in the group. The supervisors or the team ask questions and reflect on a regular basis on possible interpretations of the situation, while the problem owner is listening. Another of our participants describe how she would have students working with e.g. product service systems or sustainable innovation think about different intellectual, financial, and societal perspectives'.
- *Positioning* Participants also exemplified how having students describe how important different issues such as research the product or project themes were to them on a personal level could trigger discussions on both personal ethics and ethics of the profession.

Combining these 'moves' with the different foci from section 2.1 a possible inventory of exercises emerges (table 1)

Table 1. Examples of teaching techniques

	Ethics of the profession *Learning about ethic values in the design profession(s)*	Personal ethics *Learning about oneself and ones starting points*	Ethics as practice *Learning about how to make priorities in projects.*
Exemplifying …	…responsible design projects … design manifestos	…values held by possible role models	… questions to raise …ways of solving problems
Externalising Having students give an account of …	…their perception of professional priorities	…what they prioritise	… key issues & alternatives in a case.
Contrasting Having students compare …	… starting points and priorities of various professional groups	… how they would act under different circumstances …their own positions to those of others.	… different approaches to approaching a design project
Pointing out alternatives Giving students a framework…	… for different design paradigms.	…covering possible positions on certain issues.	… covering alternative starting points and methodologies
Positioning… Having students take a stance and provide a rationale balancing …	… whether viability, feasibility or appeal is the most important for his/her discipline	… what compromises on personal preferences would be made if necessary	…priorities in design decisions

3 THE WORKSHOPS

In earlier work with students the authors have taken students own experiences as starting points for dialogue on ethical challenges and dilemmas. In a small group this worked well, but with a larger student group it was found difficult to realise. Inspired by how others have developed short scenarios illustrating dilemmas [9] as a way of communicating key points, the authors decided to try this with students, having them take and argue for positions in discussions.

3.1 Method & Results

Scenarios were developed portraying dilemmas where students would face conflicting interests e.g. providing salaries for employees vs. engaging with a possibly immoral project). The scenarios would unfold to gradually change conditions, e.g. whether students would actively have to intervene to create certain outcomes or if they could passively accept it. The scenarios were to show that prototypical patterns, which could be viewed from one perspective or another, were the fundament of many specific challenges students faced. Making students aware of some criteria for moral action, as advocated by different philosophers, could enable students to reflect on their own reflection

In the Master course 'Design for Society' at NTNU thirty-two students were divided into groups of 3. They were presented with a scenario of an ethical dilemma in which they were to decide on the right thing to do. The scenario was presented stepwise with new information gradually being introduced and three rounds of discussion based on: **(A) Intuitive reactions.** During this initial step, students were asked to discuss what would be an appropriate course of action. As information was gradually introduced students needed to elaborate and revaluate their positions. **(B) Relative positions**. During the 2nd stage students were first given a short introduction on ethic theory including a set of possible issues in conflicting interests. They were asked to return to the scenarios systematically considering a set of questions (Who are the stakeholders? What are the conflicts of interests? What are possible ethical positions? What could be solutions?) providing students with a structured way of engaging with dilemmas. **(C) Informed discussion**.

Students further worked in an assignment where prejudices and ethical challenges connected with 'Being Old' had to be identified and taken into account in a design concept. Students also discussed and submitted what they considered to be key dilemmas for the design professions covering questions such as: Should designers charge more to allow for them to work pro bono? How do we stop contributing to mass consumerism and still keep our jobs? Should we design products and services, which put people out of their jobs? Is it ethical to use dark design patterns (i.e. Exploiting your

knowledge of the user to achieve business goals)? The students demonstrated also in project reports that ethical questions were considered. All reports included explicit ethical positioning in relation to the concepts developed, such as prejudices against old people, exclusion and dignity in old age etc.

A similar workshop was held at Chalmers University of Technology. Between workshops adjustments to procedures have been made, mostly concerning how information was presented to students. The Chalmers students discussed the workshop in a seminar but had no course requirements regarding application in design.

Comments made in presentations show that students at least to some degree managed to analyse and discuss dilemmas in the way intended. Students were appreciative of the workshops but felt that time had ran short and that they would have liked a longer session to properly employ different perspectives in their analysis. While they possibly never reached a point where they were they effortlessly could use the different perspectives, they hopefully became aware of alternative starting points to take.

4   DISCUSSION: THE ETHICAL & MORAL DIMENSION IN DESIGN EDUCATION

Intended learning outcomes regarding ethics in design can concern the profession, personal positions, as well as practical application in design activities. Overarching teaching strategies seem to include whether to teach ethics as a goal in itself (focused), or whether to treat it as one issue out of many (holistic). Activities can be deliberately staged to trigger learning on ethics (proactive), or improvised in relation to some emergent issue (reactive). Teaching can be arranged in connection to other activities such as design projects (integrated) or as separate sessions (standalone). Furthermore, comments and discussions may be overtly addressing ethics (explicit) or have a more indirect nature (implicit). On a practical level design educators can use a set of moves; e.g. Exemplifying, Externalising, Contrasting, Pointing out alternatives, and Positioning. In retrospect the workshops can be described through the distinctions and moves identified in the interviews. While the NTNU workshop was Integrated, the Chalmers workshop was standalone. The moves from giving students some introductory examples through their intuitive reactions, relative positions towards informed reactions parallels the move from exemplification, externalisation, contrast and positioning in table 1. This possibly represents increased processing, with the latter steps possibly being more challenging but also rewarding.

A conceptual distinction between different foci and strategies enables development of educational approaches where aspects complement each other. Ethics in design education can take different forms, see fig.1. Two distinctions can be made (1) Design versus Ethic theory (sui generis), and (2) The applied tacit, exemplified vs the abstract, general. It seems that much design education focuses on the bottom left quadrant; taking cases as a starting point for discourse. Addressing also the other quadrants in a deliberate way opens up possibilities. Looking at generalisation beyond cases, manifestos etc. require some abstract conceptualisation. More general ethics may provide a background of elaborate arguments for one position or another and can ideally also provide conceptual apparatus as well as methods for untangling some issue, at the same time opening starting points for scrutiny. Generalisations may come off as abstract, but the translation from ethics to design cases can be illustrated and exemplified by the use of scenarios.
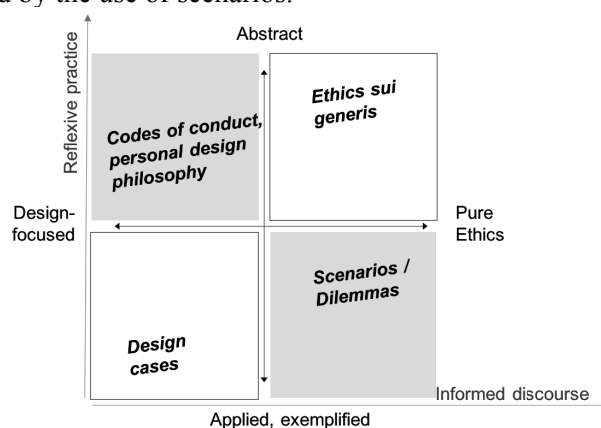

Figure 1. A model of ethics in design education

As in many other practice oriented disciplines (at least) two overarching (analytic) strategies for teaching ethics in curricula seem relevant. (1) The recognition of ethical dilemmas through informed discourse and (2) intuitive understanding of these dilemmas through reflective practice. An informed and critical discourse has to be cultivated through education. It aids the designer's personal ethics and development as well as argumentation skills. For personal ethics, each discourse implies, to varying degrees of consciousness, the presupposition of autonomy and dignity of one's counterpart thereby fostering e.g. empathy [10]. Regarding argumentation skills seeing ethical issues from different moral standing points might increase the ability to facilitate dialog and consent in design discourses.

This paper was based on a small number of educators. The authors would like to extend the interviews exploring the issues of professional, personal, practical questions in the future, using the outcomes from the current paper as triggers in in-depth interviews. A major limitation with the workshops concerned the available time. On requests from students the authors hope to run longer sessions in future courses. Further, rubrics on ethics should be incorporated so that students are explicitly assessed on it, aiming to create formative assessment that encourages students to engage with the material. It seems also relevant to elaborate the format with different scenarios. In order to make the material accessible to students, the own teaching approached tried to focus this time on *ethics as practice* in relation to two scenarios. It would have been interesting to vary the cases as to illustrate certain key dilemmas, allowing the students to further practice applying frameworks, and to include extended discussions on the students' *personal ethics*, and *ethics of the profession.*

5   CONCLUDING REMARKS

Educators regarded ethical discourse as a way to facilitate and encourage reflection and justification of decisions. By training students to think about what is 'just', in general and in a certain context, decisions on 'making things better' are facilitated. As a field, design has consequences, and as most interviewees pointed out responsibility for its solutions. Students seem to have a sensitivity regarding these issues, but may struggle when reconciling conflicting interests. Socialising students into a value system might be a way of transferring sensitivity towards this responsibility, while also making norms explicit could serve as a way of conveying ethics of the design profession and open assumptions to scrutiny. This implies a need to help students evolve their personal ethics, based on either e.g. guidelines from professional societies, general theory or a range of examples. Approaching value-laden questions in design from the perspective of ethics is an arduous task, partly due to the fact that tacit and intuitive moral reasoning is dominant in education approaches. However, decisions about technological applications cannot be based solely on technological, legal, or institutional policy grounds or on immediate emotional responses but need meaningful rationale. Ethics enables people to argue for such a rationale, and to consider interests of different parties concerned.

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