THE EU COMMENIUS

LAB*learning*
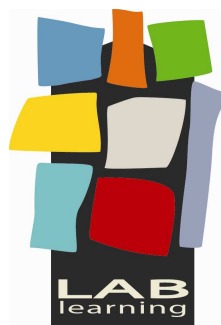Project

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The roles of

aesthetics

in media based learning

Is aesthetics only for higher educated people – or for artists?
Why on earth should aesthetics be relevant to lab learning for young people...?
Is aesthetics not simply about making things look nice, but basically an unnecessary interest?
This small input is not an extensive presentation of all sorts of complicated aesthetics, but simply a small input to allow reflections on
Active designing and aesthetic reflection

ACTIVE DESIGNING AND AESTHETIC REFLECTIONS CAN BE SOME OF THE MOST POWERFUL LEARNING EXPERIENCES FOR NON-ACADEMIC LEARNERS –
IT CAN ADD EPIC DIMENSIONS TO THE LEARNING

WHY TALK ABOUT AESTHETICS?

Few people in the educational sector are concerned with the field of aesthetics in learning processes. And if they are interested, it is mostly because the topics they work with are about art, and in that case art is "content" not the act of designing.
Aesthetics is exterior to learning, we think. Maybe even in opposition to learning, if learning is mostly linked to the idea of *science*.

Of course, we might understand that when we work with media, we need to pay attention to the way things look – a video, a photo series, an animation, a Power point, a website, etc.
In fact, what is typical to our mindset, and corresponding to the reality to a certain degree, is that the more a product is text based the less we are concerned with aesthetics, and the more the product is based on other media forms the more we are concerned with the "feel and look" of the things.

Many educationalists do not care for aesthetics at all: the only thing that matters is the knowledge, the "content" and stuff like that.

This mindset denies any internal or immanent relationship between learning, knowledge and the "form" in which the so-called "content" is delivered.
So, form and content are not really related. This statement is what we do not agree with. In fact we consider form, design, structure and organizing as elements at the heart of the learning process.

WHAT IS AESTHETICS?

Often we think that aesthetics is about making something already existing appear nice. We could put some nice graphics in a Power Point to make it look nice. Perhaps these graphics have nothing to do with the texts in the Power Point. They just look nice; perhaps even motivating for the audience.
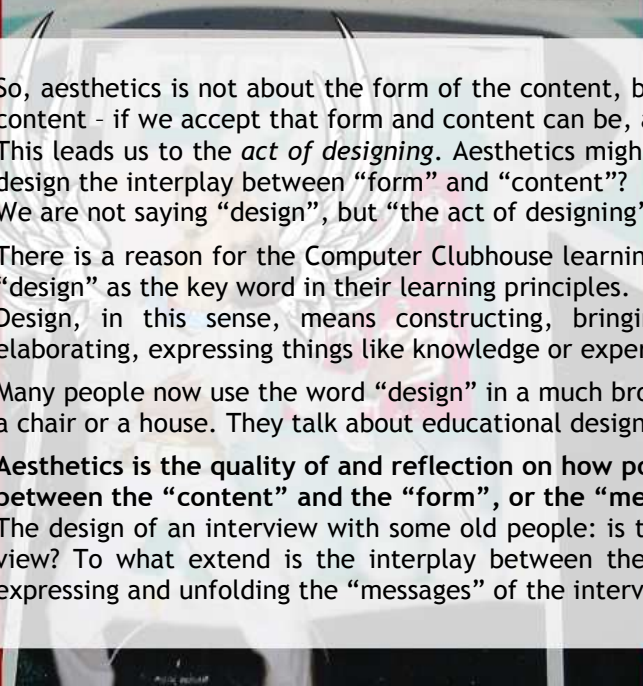In this case, the aesthetic critique would be harsh: the graphics should add new dimensions to the total message of the presentation, or enable the audience to perceive the message in different ways. There should be an interaction between the texts and the graphics and the total expression should allow a deeper understand of the message than its individual elements (the text, the picture, etc.).

We have an interesting parallel to this in the world of digital learning games. The people who developed "edutainment" games precisely wrapped traditional educational content in more or less entertaining forms (the "gaming"). It didn't work well. The result was educational, but no games. What was missing was exactly the immanent interaction between the educational dimension and the gaming dimension: the content was given entertaining forms, but totally extrinsic to the content.

So, perhaps we can define aesthetics, not as the form in opposition to the content, but precisely as the intrinsic and immanent interplay between the "content" and the "form". 1+1=3.
Aesthetics is, then, about the totality of the expression, the totality of the message, including both content and form and their interplay, and the quality of the deep relationship between this content and this form. The form should never be accidental, but express structures in the content itself.

AESTHETICS AND ACTIVE DESIGNING

So, aesthetics is not about the form of the content, but more about the *interaction* between form and content – if we accept that form and content can be, at least in theory, isolated.

This leads us to the *act of designing*. Aesthetics might, then, be: how do we actively and intentionally design the interplay between "form" and "content"?

We are not saying "design", but "the act of designing" or "active designing".

There is a reason for the Computer Clubhouse learning principles always, again and again, referring to "design" as the key word in their learning principles.
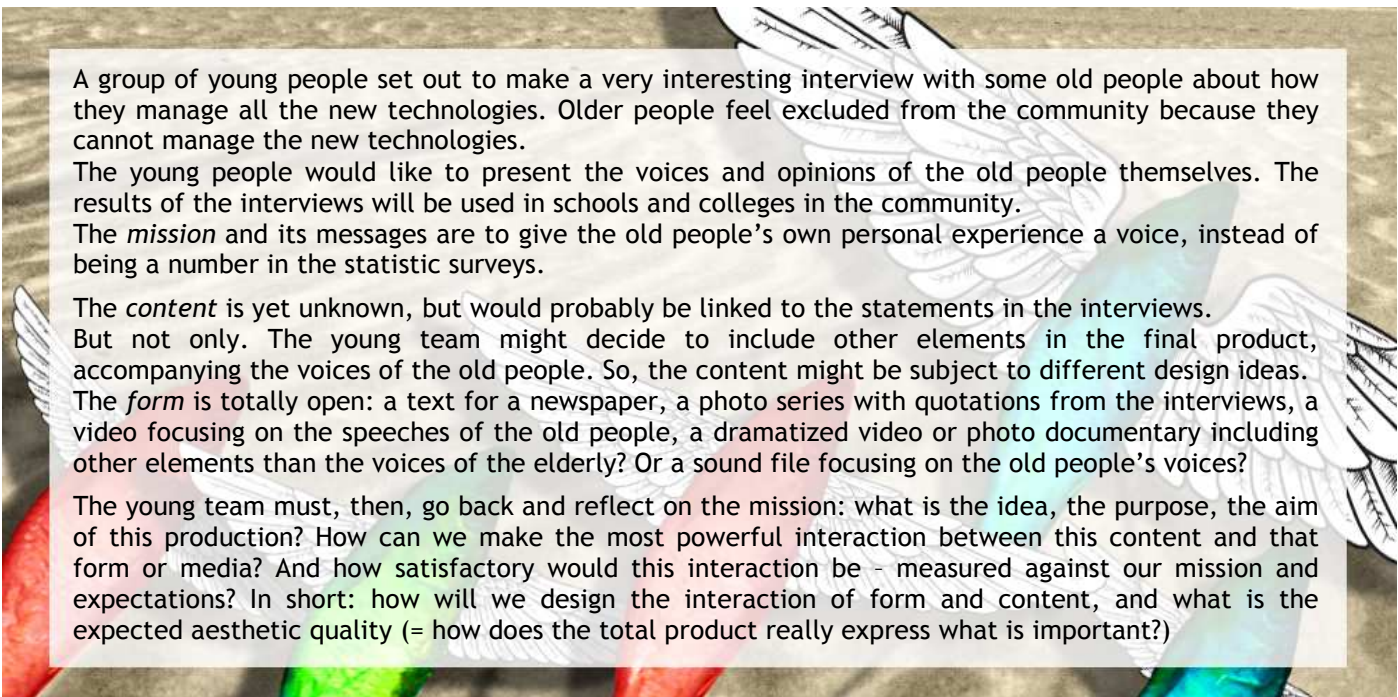
Design, in this sense, means constructing, bringing different elements together, planning and elaborating, expressing things like knowledge or experience in the most powerful ways, etc.

Many people now use the word "design" in a much broader meaning than the traditional way: to design a chair or a house. They talk about educational design, social design, design of innovation, etc.

Aesthetics is the quality of and reflection on how powerful we design and construct the interaction between the "content" and the "form", or the "media".

The design of an interview with some old people: is this design satisfactory from an aesthetic point of view? To what extend is the interplay between the "content" and the "form" really bringing out, expressing and unfolding the "messages" of the interviews? Is it powerful or weak?

AESTHETICS AND EXPRESSION

A group of young people set out to make a very interesting interview with some old people about how they manage all the new technologies. Older people feel excluded from the community because they cannot manage the new technologies.

The young people would like to present the voices and opinions of the old people themselves. The results of the interviews will be used in schools and colleges in the community.

The *mission* and its messages are to give the old people's own personal experience a voice, instead of being a number in the statistic surveys.

The *content* is yet unknown, but would probably be linked to the statements in the interviews.

But not only. The young team might decide to include other elements in the final product, accompanying the voices of the old people. So, the content might be subject to different design ideas.

The *form* is totally open: a text for a newspaper, a photo series with quotations from the interviews, a video focusing on the speeches of the old people, a dramatized video or photo documentary including other elements than the voices of the elderly? Or a sound file focusing on the old people's voices?

The young team must, then, go back and reflect on the mission: what is the idea, the purpose, the aim of this production? How can we make the most powerful interaction between this content and that form or media? And how satisfactory would this interaction be – measured against our mission and expectations? In short: how will we design the interaction of form and content, and what is the expected aesthetic quality (= how does the total product really express what is important?)

AESTHETICS IN THE MEDIA LABS

So, aesthetics in the laboratories?
The youth team will produce material about old people's personal views on how they feel excluded by the new technologies.
The youth team must reflect on:
- What will be useful to the schools and colleges to hear from the old people?
- How can we create this dialogue with the old people?
- How should we set up the interviews?
- How are we documenting the interviews? Video, sound, texts, photos? And how could we combine these expression forms?
- In what ways will the media combinations bring forward and make clear the personal experience of the old people? How can we at the same time make the messages clear and useful to the receivers?
- How can we design the visual or sound environment surrounding the interviews? How should we create the "look and feel" of the scenarios to make the statements from the old people authentic, personal and strong, and at the same time motivate the users (schools, colleges) to engage in the material?
So, the aesthetic reflections penetrate all the phases needed to produce the final outcomes.
The active designing must be accompanied by aesthetic reflections.
The youth team is thus challenged with a number of basic media reflections about target groups, end users, combination of media, the different techniques of photography, video, story-telling, etc.

AESTHETICS AND LEARNING

From this small example it is evident that **active designing and aesthetic reflections** are basic elements in the production of interesting digital material for the schools and the colleges.
But it might as well be a project for a bank, a kindergarten or for the local theater or energy company.
A useful example is a group of young people, from a very deprived community, collaborating with the famous Van Gogh Museum in Amsterdam: the young people were invited to study and explore the paintings at the Museum and to express their personal experience of Van Gogh through all sorts of modern media.
So, aesthetics is not about making something look nice.
On the contrary it represents very basic learning processes connected to design and production.
Imagine the same questions as in the case of the old people, but now linked to the production of a website…

Aesthetics is not extrinsic to learning, but at the very heart of the learning process:
- How can certain "things" be designed and expressed and given form?
- In what ways is the "form" interacting with the "content" of the messages?
- How can different expression forms and media be combined to produce powerful communication?
- How will backgrounds, colors, shapes, space and time influence and contribute to the total expression design and strengthen or weaken the messages?
- How can we use basic story-telling principles to support the interaction of form and content?

Explore interesting examples on www.sosuMedia.dk

Graphics by Lise Jensen, sosuMedia, for the LABlearning website