

RESEARCH

IN CONTEXT

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QUESTION 2: DEFINE SKILL IN THE CONTEXT OF YOUR OWN PRACTICE AND THE WORK OF 2 ARTISTS/ MAKERS/ DESIGNERS FROM THE LECTURES.

This essay will define skill and its implication in the practice of Product Design and further explore this definition analysing the work of other artists, makers, and designers, known as Victor Papanek, Richard Sennett, Nigel Cross and Don Norman. I will delve into not only how they describe skill, but also why they think it is important to be skilful during the design process.

Creating a good design is not easy. It is a messy and complicated process. And although great design requires great designers, is not always enough. It requires many processes and skills, that you can learn and gain through experience and practice. The amount of skill is what determines the outcome of what we are creating, so it is something we truly value as designers/artists.

But what exactly is a skill you may ask. According to the Oxford dictionary, skill is the ability to do something well or a particular ability or type of ability (Oxford University Press, n.d.) They are what we use and depend on to achieve our goal or carry out a task. It is a trained practice that comes from experience, education, and repetition. Which means we develop skills as we grow. This growth usually relies on controlled practice and the development of techniques. Therefore, skill development depends on the conflict between the correct way you do something and the willingness to experiment through error (Sennett, R., 2009, p.151) which is the only way to improve and learn those new abilities. As Richard Sennett says, “the full scenario of practice sessions that improve skill is thus, prepare, dwell in mistakes, recover form” (2009, p.151) and the confidence to recover from that mistake is not a personality trait; it is a learned skill.

They require hard work and are mastered through the course of time with enough practice and education but having a range of skills will enhance your performance in your domain.

The use of skills allows us to change and grow as a person in response to the new information. By working hard and doing things over and over again you can create a better value product that will be more precise and professional. And as we develop skills, the content of what we are repeating, changes every time, because once we see what does work and what does not, we learn how to solve the problem by finding the solution. So, does this mean that it is essential for us to be highly skilled if we want to be good designers or artists?



Fig. 1: Conrad Benz (2021)

I have always wondered whether there is such thing as being a talented designer. Or is being a good designer just a skill. Or maybe it is a combination of both, talent, and skill.

As we already know, skill is something that can be learned, acquired, and mastered over time with enough practice and experience. And talent is something that cannot be learned.

It comes natural and easier to an individual once they are born (Limcaco, J. 2011)

But why do some people appear to be better designers than others? There are some people that even though they are smart and hardworking, and have received design education, still produce poor designs, while there are other people who might have never received any education at all, yet they just seem to have a flair for great designs. See, someone may not have the ability to design great products even though they do have the knowledge to do so, but through practice and hard work, they could acquire the necessary skills.

I personally had not received any education about design until I started Product Design here in UWTSD, because while here you can choose what you want to study from a young age, in Spain our options are limited so we can only choose our practice of interest when we start university. I believe I have a certain facility for drawing and sketching, so I thought that having no knowledge at all would not matter, but as soon as I started the course, I realized how wrong I was. My 'talent' was not enough, I had to learn many other skills and processes if I wanted to be a good designer. Thus, I felt inferior and useless around my colleagues.

Now, I am able to analyse and solve problems in ways I could have never imagined. It is important to make mistakes. If you fail, try again. If you are stuck, try again. If you dislike your design, try again. Sometimes you come out with a usable product, but other times, everything can be a hot chaos. Just do not give up and you will be successful. Because that is how I learned everything I currently know.



Fig. 2: Paroma Sen (2021)

Nowadays, design is one of the most powerful tools with which we shape everything. Everything around us has been designed. And in agreement with what Victor Papanek says in 'Design for the real world': "All we do all the times, is design, for basic to all human activity", (p.4) I have realized that everyone possesses, to some degree, the ability to design. Just by planning and patterning towards a desired, foreseeable end, is considered design. Designing is something that we all people do, it is what distinguishes us from other animals, it is part of the human intelligence. If you think about all the different cultures around the world and the designs created by children as well as adults, you will realize that everyone is capable of designing. (Cross, N. 2006 , p.38)

Design is often regarded as a multi-faceted cognitive skill, that everyone, to some degree, has but you have to practice it in order to be able to do it. Just like you did to learn how to ride a bicycle, how to swim or even how to write and read. It is more a matter of "knowing

how “rather than “knowing that” (Cross, N. 2006, p.16). And being ‘educated’ involves knowing both, ‘that’ and ‘how’. Having said this, someone that is born with tremendous talent and ‘knows that’, still has to ‘know how’ through practice, if they want to use it wisely and skilfully. One thing I think makes a huge difference, though, is what kind of environment these skilled people learned in and began their work because as Cross suggests “things to know, ways of knowing them and ways of finding about them” (2006, p. 12).

Someone can be highly talented and still produce mediocre work and that’s because the design process requires a set of skills that will help us grow and gain the knowledge, we need in order to create new and original designs. That way we can learn how to work in the design environment and be able to use equipment and generate innovative ideas. My job as a product designer is to be constantly learning, adapting, and developing a better understanding of my work through different research tools and methods. We can say that skill can be defined in many ways as all different practice areas require different domain-specific skills, and problem-solving is one of them. Other practical skills that can be valuable are ideation, creativity, communication, and time management.

Ideation will help you come up with new ideas and concepts; having a structured process will help you think creatively, so you don’t just come up with great ideas once in a while; communication will help you bring value to your business and complete your projects on time; time management will let you be open to potential new ideas and changes in your project.

However, “the most important ability that a designer can bring to his work is the ability to recognise, isolate, define and solve problems” (Papanek, V. J. 1984) So, if skill can also be defined as the ability to produce solutions in some problem domain, that means design is a form of skilled behaviour.

Learning from the mistakes we make is not only a problem-solving skill but also a creative one, because we have to think of different ways, we can solve that mistake and adapt it or change it in order to improve the outcome. And this open relation between problem-solving and problem finding is what builds and expands our skills, as it occurs again and again until we realize what is wrong. We should analyse the problem trying to find what caused it and reformulate the process to ensure that it will never happen again. Errors happen for many reasons, but we cannot fix them unless we admit they exist. And as designers, we have to investigate the problem until the single underlying cause is found. Nigel Cross sees design as a meta-approach to problem-solving, that is why most of his work is influenced by design (Arango, J. 2019)

“Designers are trained to discover the real problem. A brilliant solution to the wrong problem can be worse than no solution at all; solve the correct problem. The good designer never starts by trying to solve the problem given to them: they start by trying to understand what the real issues are [...] Designers seem to be going backward when they are given a precise problem and instead of getting to work, they ignore it and generate new issues to consider, new directions to explore. And not just one, but many. What is going on?”

(Norman, D.A. 2013, p.218)

But we are creative and constructive individuals, so we are good at finding new ways of doing things and seeing new opportunities.

In product design we often use something called 'The Double Diamond', which helps us both; find the right problem and fulfil human needs. This double diverge-converge process is quite effective at freeing designers from unnecessary restrictions to the problem and solution spaces. The process is important in properly determining the right problem to be solved and then the best way to solve it. (Norman, D. 2013) Even though designers are solution-focused, not problem-focused, we can still ask "why?" as well as "how?" about any of our projects. Which makes problem-solving and problem-finding intimately related. (Sennett, R. 2009, p.15).

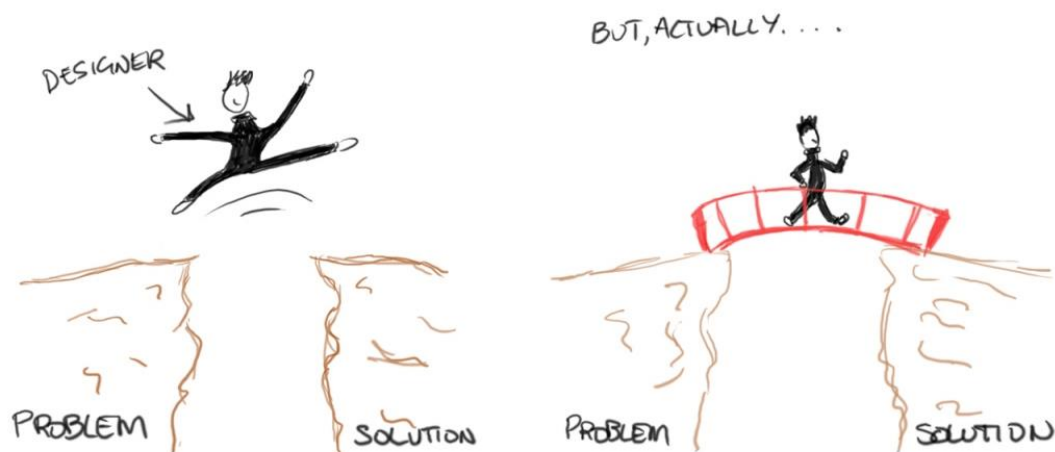


Figure 3: Wisa Sotrakul (2018)

As mentioned before, another crucial skill that a designer needs to know is communication. Being able to communicate with your client, management, and other people you work with.

It is the only way to get meaningful results and complete projects on time. In order to create something that will bring real value to your product. This is where I believe designers differ from artists. While we designers provide our work to our intended audience, an artist should express themselves in their work and nothing more. Communication is a way to understand what your client really wants, because, after all, we design products for people to use.

Design must be meaningful. And 'meaningful' replaces the semantically loaded noise of such expressions as 'beautiful', 'ugly', 'cool', 'cute, etc. In all of these we respond to that which has meaning. Yet, many wonder whether designs should be functional or just be aesthetically pleasing. Just a matter of wanting to look good or to work.

Being Design my own practice, I can confirm that it is much more than a way of making better products and services; it is also a way of thinking that works through making and testing and reflecting on the outcome (Arango, J. 2019) More than that, it is a particular way to analyse and intervene in the world allowing us to engage with the complex problems. That is why in Nigel cross's book 'Designerly ways of knowing', he posits as a third way of knowing that world, alongside science and humanities. It is not just a mere discipline anymore.

In fact, it could even be considered a form of natural intelligence, which everyone should possess, as it is recognised as having intrinsic values in the development of everyone's intellect. (Cross, N. 2006, p.5) being practicality, ingenuity, empathy, and imaginative, some of them. The ability of designers to produce efficient and stimulating designs is important to all of us. That is why design is a valid subject of study for everyone.

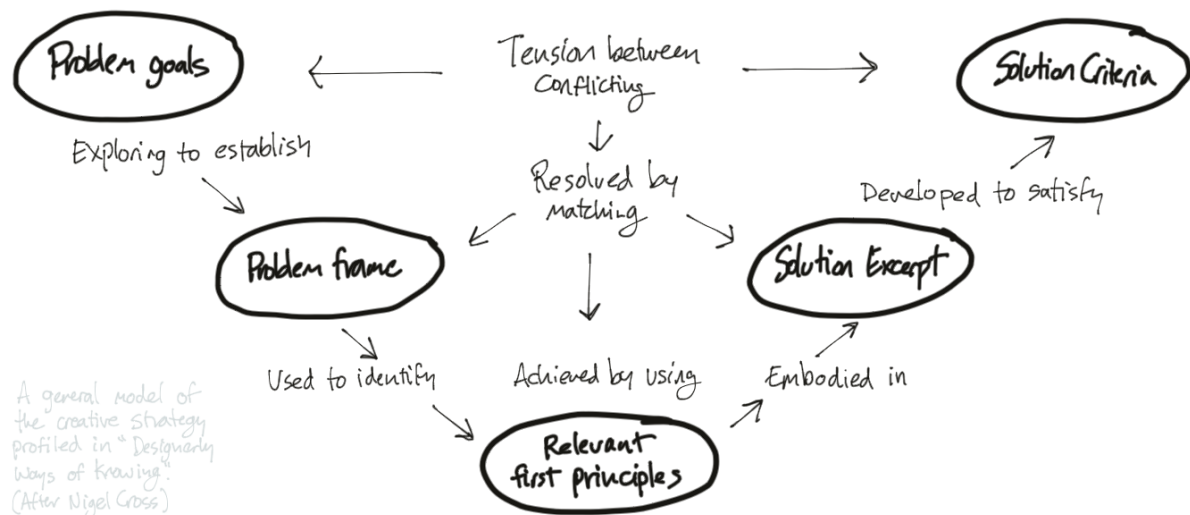


Figure 4: Jorge Arango (2019)

The argument I have presented in this essay is that skill can be defined vastly, as all practice areas require different skills. As previously mentioned, product designers develop our skills by finding different solutions to our problems. And we do that by repeating the process again and again until the primary cause is found. Through experience and trial error we grow and change as a person. Skills enable us to acquire new information and contrast it with the information we already know, leading to the creation of original and innovative ideas. Therefore, we designers really value their influence on the outcome of the thing being created. Yet, developing skills can be hard work.

To conclude, even though I consider skills are essential in the design process, there are many other people that say that creating great designs is something that cannot be taught or learned. You can learn to use CAD, or photoshop or illustrator, but great designs come from someone with talent.

For me, you need both, skill, and talent.

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Figure 4: Jorge Arango (2019) Accessed from: <https://jarango.com/2019/02/16/book-notes-designerly-ways-of-knowing/>