

## WRITING IN DESIGN: LESSONS FROM LUCERNE

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*Keywords: academic writing, writing in design, blog as learning tool, curricular development, design education*

### SUMMARY OF PAPER

Design and writing share many qualities. Both include drawing and discarding, composing and decomposing, draft and revision. Both improve substantially through peer-feedback. Both are often subject to constraints. Both need process orientation and process understanding. Both can be learned and trained as crafts. One may even claim that writing *is* design. Nevertheless, designers and in particular design students mostly dislike writing. They understand verbal language assignments as contrary to visually oriented design tasks. From their point of view, writing and design seem to be irreconcilable.

Today, this traditional writing reluctance among designers becomes problematic for several reasons. First, because, in design and design education, theory and method replace traditional approaches. Students need literacy to master design as a science. Secondly, because design practice has turned into a knowledge-intensive process. Future designers must therefore be equipped with appropriate intellectual tools, including writing. Thirdly, because writing competence is crucial to establish design as a serious academic discipline. Research findings and theoretical insights can hardly be communicated without using written words. Even though visual means gain importance in discourse, they cannot replace verbal language.

This paper examines how writing competence can be trained at MA level. It presents the use of an in-class blog as a powerful learning instrument. The first section looks at the institutional context of the studied case. The second part analyses the role of writing in higher education and specially in design education. The paper then briefly explains the development of a new master's programme. In the fourth and main section, blog writing assignments are scrutinised. Pros and cons are discussed to draw conclusions for best practice.

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## ABSTRACT

This paper examines the use of blogs in the context of a new Swiss MA programme in design. Design students regularly feel ambivalent and openly reluctant about writing assignments. They lack casual writing practice and a process-oriented understanding of the writing act. The installation of an in-class blog intended to break this aversion to writing by regularly assigning tasks on a blog. This approach was tested in the first and second run of the new programme (2008/09 and 2009/10). The results are promising and serve to draw conclusions for best practice.

To begin with, this practice-based paper outlines the historical and institutional background of the studied case. It then reviews the role of writing in higher education and particularly in design education. It also pays special attention to problems peculiar to writing education in German-speaking countries. The main part evaluates recent educational experience. It explains how blogs may help to loosen writing reluctance, to support collaborative writing experience, and to strengthen discourse competence. Finally, the design of writing assignments is scrutinised with the aim of developing best practice models.

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## INTRODUCTION

Writing plays an important role in research and in education. It is a knowledge-generating tool, both in individual cognitive process and in social discourse. Writing is akin to design: Both signify the performance of a central idea under specific constraints [11]. Nonetheless, design education often neglects the training of writing skills. In the curriculum, writing is commonly separated from design practice. This tradition raises problems when design schools aim for research and academic recognition. Design education has to break new ground if it wants to train designers for the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

This paper analyses how writing assignments for blogs may encourage design students to develop critical thinking. It first looks at current educational reforms in Switzerland. Design education, its history and actual challenges are examined with special attention to the recent introduction of MA programmes. In a second part, the paper takes a look at the role of writing in higher education. It focuses on writing in design and writing in German-speaking contexts. Finally, a case study provides conclusions for best practice.

## 1 EDUCATIONAL REFORM AND DESIGN RESEARCH IN SWITZERLAND

New legal regulations lead to major changes in Switzerland's educational system by the end of the 1990s. Vocational schools and technical colleges achieved academic status. Art and design schools as well became part of these so-called University of Applied Sciences and Arts (UAS; in German: Fachhochschule). To fulfill the requirements, research institutes had to be established; BA and MA programmes had to be developed [1].

In the context of these reforms, art and design schools face specific problems. On the one hand and independently of national educational politics, the challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> century ask for a fundamental renewal of design education. Design institutes will have to adapt their curricula to a changing world and its changing needs; fundamental theoretical, methodological and ethical issues need to be discussed [2]. On the other hand, institutional inertia limits the scope of any reform.

Swiss art and design schools look back on a long history with an explicitly craft-oriented tradition. While most European countries raised their schools for applied arts to the tertiary level in the 1960s, Switzerland only followed in the mid-eighties. Even then, technical and artistic colleges remained vocation-oriented and fairly remote from academic customs and research practice. The Lucerne School of Art and Design, for example, locates its origins in a drawing school established in 1784. Only recently, it received academic status, as shown in Figure 1. In particular, older faculties take pride in craftsmen tradition to date and seem to be slightly sceptical about academisation.

Another problem concerns research and its institutional implementation. Design research is an emergent and not yet well established field in Swiss academia [3]. The *first* German text book on design research methods was published only in fall 2009 [4]. Swiss art and design schools started their research activities hardly ten years ago. Even though respectable results were achieved in the last decade [5-7], most art and design faculties still lack experienced senior research fellows.

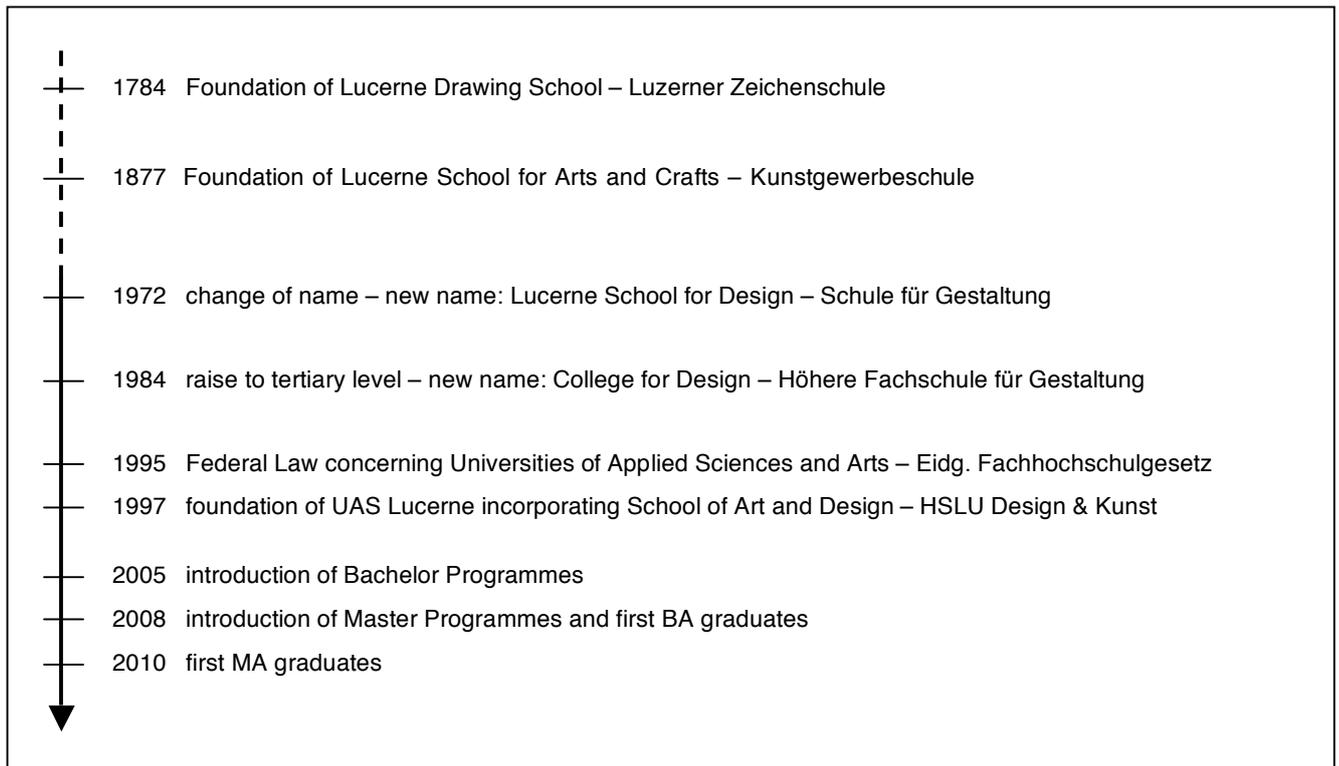


Figure 1. Lucerne School of Art and Design History

In summary, Swiss design schools ran through profound changes in the last ten years. An academic prevalent research culture as for example in the UK is not yet established. New research-oriented MA programmes have to cope with global challenges, local historical bias, disciplinary emergence and lack of experienced faculty. Writing competence, the topic of this paper, is just one of many aspects to be considered in this context.

## 2 ACADEMIC WRITING AND WRITING IN DESIGN

Reading and writing are crucial in academic discourse. The 19<sup>th</sup> century Humboldtian University assigned writing an important role both in research and education. Since then, seminaristic teaching has encouraged students to practice writing not as a knowledge-telling but as a knowledge-generating tool primarily. Writing practice turns students into independent, self-determined, critical and productive thinkers; it enables them to better understand the complex process of knowledge generation [8, 9].

Design education history, however, widely neglects reading and writing, or as Ken Friedman puts it: “Reading and research have not been prized in the art and craft tradition.” [10]. Traditionally, design education is studio-oriented and practice-based. Teaching mainly consists in one-to-one-tutoring; seminaristic learning as common in university contexts is rare. If at all, reading and writing take place

in theory courses separated from studio work [11]. In design education, writing is not a common and daily activity.

Even worse, design students reject reading and writing, and so do many experienced designers and design lecturers. Most often, designers do not regard reading and writing as helpful for their work. “Some state openly that ‘real designers’ do not use words.” [10]. Design students discern reading and writing as contrary to the creative process [12]. To them, writing and especially academic writing seems to be nothing but a hassle imposed by educational reform [13].

Without doubt, academic writing is demanding and difficult for any writer in any discipline and any language. Academic writing challenges the writer to coordinate several interlaced dimensions: the dimension of knowledge construction and content; the dimension of text creation, genre, and style; the dimension of subjective orientation and organisation; and the dimension of reception, discourse, and social interaction [9]. As is well known, a successful handling of the writing process needs experience, training and peer-feedback.

German-speaking writers encounter an additional problem. In the German-speaking area, writing is strongly associated with the image of the born genius. Writing is often misconceived as a “natural” and “given” talent, not as a cultural technique that can be taught, learned and trained. Process-oriented approaches as common in the USA are far from becoming standard [14]. German-speaking grammar schools still focus mainly on classical essay writing and the accuracy of the final product. Writing teachers abide an error-hostile learning culture and often put students’ writing pleasure off.

In a rather poetic reflection on her writing biography, a student remembers: “At first, writing was associated with fun, experiments and drawn lines. Later, the errors prevailed. All sorts of writing errors: orthography errors, syntax errors, style errors, comma errors, typing errors, structure errors, punctuation mark errors, hyphenation errors, upper and lower case errors, write-it-differently errors, not-on-the-line errors, not-readable handwriting errors, not-the-right-word errors (...)” (source: <http://blog.zhdk.ch/academic/2009/05/27/129/>)

Also, text production is understood as a lonely individual act and not as a social or collaborative experience [14]. In grammar school, German-speaking students are trained to focus on style, grammar and spelling, i.e. surface features. If lucky, A-level graduates are able to develop a personal writing voice and authority. But they hardly practice writing in collaborative settings. Starting higher education, novice students lack feedback techniques and feedback culture, they are missing process orientation and they have a hard time getting used to academic discourse [15, 16].

The following observations conclude this review:

- designers and design students seem to cultivate a general aversion to reading and writing;
- German-speaking educational tradition regards writing competence as a matter of genius; it tends to reduce text production to editing surface correctness;
- unlike US-American students, German-speaking students are not aware of the social aspects in writing nor do they know about the potential of process orientation.

### **3 THE DESIGN OF A NEW MASTER’S PROGRAMME**

This section addresses the design of a new master’s programme. It provides international readers with background information on the specific institutional context of the studied case.

In 2007/08, the School of Art and Design at the Lucerne University of Applied Sciences and Arts (<http://www.hslu.ch/design-kunst/>) developed a new research-oriented MA programme in design (<http://www.master-design-luzern.ch/>). Studies last three terms and are granted with a total of 90 ECTS points. The first 25 students entered the programme in fall 2008 and received their master degree in spring 2010. The second run started in fall 2009 and will conclude in spring 2011. The student majority is German-speaking; about five students per year have non-German backgrounds and are assessed in English.

The MA programme offers two majors: “Animage” merges animation and illustration; “PDM” combines product design and design management. The MA programme ties design disciplines offered at BA level in visual communication (namely: graphic design, illustration, animation and video) and in product design (namely: textile design, object design and design management).

According to Bologna regulations, modules structure the MA curriculum [1]. Most modules concentrate on design practice and skills, using studio-based and project-oriented didactics as common and well-proven in design education [17]. Three additional modules are dedicated to cross-disciplinary topics; namely “Design & Business”, “Design & Research”, and “Theory & Reflection”.

Table 1. Modular MA curriculum structure

1st term (total 30 ECTS)		
Project Module (18 ECTS)	Skills Module (3 ECTS)	Transfer Module (9 ECTS)
2nd term (total 30 ECTS)		
Project Module (18 ECTS)	Skills Module (3 ECTS)	Transfer Module (9 ECTS)
3rd term (total 30 ECTS)		
Master Thesis		

After the pioneer year, the curriculum was revised and restructured in summer 2009 as shown in Table 1. The three theoretical fields mentioned above are consolidated in a so-called transfer module. Contents such as marketing, market analysis, media theory, product semantics, design ethnography, empirical research methods, among others, are imparted in independent courses. The responsible “theory” lecturers mainly employ academic teaching methods such as lecturing and seminaristic teaching. Most of them have a university background and hold licenciate or master degrees or PhDs in sociology, cultural anthropology, media science, history, philosophy, economics or design studies.

#### 4 USING BLOG NARRATIVE IN DESIGN EDUCATION

Preparing the first run, the team responsible for courses framed as “Theory, Research and Business” decided to install a blog as learning and assigning instrument (<http://blog.hslu.ch/madesign/>).

A blog offers a semi-public platform for idea exchange and discourse. Blog technology is easy to handle and familiar to many design students. It allows writers to integrate other media such as images and film and it allows to link own texts to other resources. Writing on a blog is therefore closer to design than writing with a standard text processing software. Moreover, blogs are well-suited learning instruments thanks to their narrative character [18]. Narratives obtain crucial importance in learning processes. Narratives represent and organize individual experience; they are social constructions of knowledge. Blogs offer two kinds of narratives: the narrative of the blogger and the narrative of the reader.

If used in class, a blog may encourage collaborative learning. All of the participants can read the texts published on the blog. Students can compare their own solution to a given assignment with other solutions. This way, they learn a lot about text genre, text style, rationale and rhetoric. By commenting, they train feedback techniques and discourse competence. They learn that texts are negotiable and that text production improves through feedback. Blog writing would hopefully help students to loosen their writing reluctance, to improve discourse competence, and to advance research thinking.

The first run proved the didactic potential of this instrument. In the wake of two terms, students sharpened their written voices remarkably. Some contributions caused heated debates, others were commented with benevolence and humour. All participants learned a lot about topics they would never have come across otherwise. The blog turned out to be a flexible and adaptable instrument, well matched to design students’ favoured learning style as described by Durling et al. [17]. It was possible to work successfully on several writing problems typical for design students [12] and students in general [8, 14, 19], namely the misconception of audience, the disregard of peer feedback, the misjudgement of process, the perception of writing as opposed to design, and the obsession with surface features. Nevertheless, the assignment design has proven to be far from perfect. The following section presents several adaptations made along the first run.

Throughout the first term, students had to write a total of ten contributions. Assessment criteria and deadlines as well as guidelines concerning text genre, text length, style and content were published on the blog and explained in class. However, targets remained rather unspecified. The assignment for the „Design & Research“ course prescribed the following: “Write five reflections on visited events such as lectures, exhibitions, symposia or festivals. Text length should be min. 150 words and max. 300 words. The integration of images, films, and links is welcome yet not compulsory. Choice of text genre and style is free. Contributions may be published in german or english.“ (<http://blog.hslu.ch/madesign/design-forschung/>). The „Theory & Reflection“ course assignment was more precise in proposing a choice of three text genres, namely film critique, book review and essay

(<http://blog.hslu.ch/madesign/rahmen-und-regeln-theorie-und-reflexion/>). Still, the choice was left to the students; the assignment only constrained the number of texts not their content nor the genre.

The general aim was to encourage and enhance discourse, especially on students' common activities. This goal was attained satisfyingly. Students partly lost writing reluctance and writing became something more familiar to them during the term. But they did obviously not improve style and genre sensitivity. There was also a lack of peer comments on the published contributions. In a survey, students complained about the draconic workload. They classified blog writing as „informative“ but also as „irksome“. Assignment design was therefore revised after the first term. In the second term of the first run, less texts had to be written; targets were prescribed more precisely; peer comments became part of the task. In class, critical text reflection and text re-writing were stimulated. Thanks to these adjustments, students engaged more vividly in blog writing even though they were asked for less contributions. The quality of texts and comments improved considerably. A steady refinement of writing skills could be observed in particular among weak students.

In autumn 2009, the second generation of MA students started studying. As mentioned above (q.v. section 3), the curriculum was slightly restructured and new lecturers joined the team. These changes caused an essentially different use of the blog (<http://blog.hslu.ch/madesign09/>). It was no longer strictly used as a learning and assigning instrument, but opened for general communication and random notes – actually a more “blog-like” use. Assignments were given by various instructors, most of them not familiar with writing didactics. As in the first term, assignment description was quite open and did not envision specific writing related learning goals. Detailed definition of text genres lacked as well as staggered deadlines. Posted texts' quality deteriorated in matters of structure, style and genre sensitivity, but students developed a more informal, casual and dialogic writing attitude. The new class, almost from the beginning, used the blog as a platform for idea exchange and discourse, in other words: as a narrative for their learning experience in the MA programme.

The experiences observed so far point to a didactic dilemma. If blog writing assignments attain precisely defined learning goals students will use the blog mainly for assessment. Learning outcomes will be determined, observable, and comparable. But many students will maintain writing reluctance. If assignments are vague, there will be hardly any measurable learning outcomes. But combined with a more informal use of the blog, students may take pleasure in writing and lose writing aversion.

## **CONCLUDING REMARKS**

The studied case indicates the potential of blog writing in higher education and specifically in design education. Of course, this approach needs further examination and continuous revision. However, the pioneer experience is encouraging. Blog writing proved to enhance writing as a social and discursive process, to loosen writing reluctance and to strengthen a casual writing approach.

Best practice has to consider especially the design of writing assignments. A blog is, for example, not a convenient medium to assess longer text formats. Also, it is useful to assign monthly deadlines. If all students upload the required texts by the end of the term, the resulting text flood on the blog will overstrain readers. Frustrations on both sides – reader and writer, teacher and student – are programmed. A variety of assignments may promote expanded learning outcomes. While very precise, limited writing tasks foster specific competences such as genre and style sensitivity, open assignments encourage free and informal writing. Besides, accompanying writing workshops are necessary. A blog is a powerful training instrument but it cannot replace tuition in class.

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