

# Implementing Design for the Common Good in an MA Curriculum

Ulla Ræbild<sup>a</sup>,  
Richard Herriott<sup>a</sup>

<sup>a</sup>*Design School Kolding, Denmark*

---

This paper reviews the approach of NAME (hereafter “the School”), a third-level design school in LAND towards design for the common good. The expansion of the concept of design to include social goods and sustainability (protecting people and the planet) shows a profound shift in the focus of design teaching and design education. It follows from an earlier and perhaps not fully mature shift from “structure- and process-based to competency-based education and measurement of outcomes” (Carracio et al. 2002), the “disappearance of things” (Findelli, 2000) and “in response to new developments, new tools, new situations, and new technologies” (Friedman, 2019).

Design for the common good makes demands on the means/ends relation in design, the ontology of art school organisation and puts into focus the junction between non-legal stakeholder empowerment and legalistic, static approaches.

The change to design for the common good could be interpreted as a change from indirectly addressing the common good to directly addressing the common good. It can also be seen a change of what is considered to be the means and ends of design. In the traditional model, the means to design are the processes and methods required. The ends are elaborated goods and services. Under the new conceptualization, the means of design are the processes and methods *and* the goods and services. The ends are the social or common good.

The School has integrated UN SDGs into its curriculum. It is also presently renewing its commitment to accessibility in teaching and research. The result has been a re-engineering of the MA programmes. Whilst the BA programmes retain their classic division into industrial design, communication, textiles and fashion, the MA programme has been divided under notions of society, sustainability. Design for the common good thus adds to “the paradox of ambiguity at the centre of art school ontology” (Orr and Shreve, 2017).

In part this is reflected in the blending of traditional disciplines (an ontological structure) and the risk of loss of the handy short-hand the disciplines represented for communities of activity (fashion designer, communication designer etc).

This paper considers the organisation of the MA programme with regard to course structure, progression and modes of teaching and the impact on assessment and guidance. It is a consequence of the ontological shift of the “product” from ends to means that some reconsideration of the nature of design is required. The shift also necessitates the consideration of how economy, policy, management and law that may not be in-line with students’ skills or expectations. These things are implicit in the courses only. The students have to unravel the bigger picture though they might not have the ability to really grasp it.

Easing this transition has been the School’s long-standing focus on co-creation, participatory design and co-design. The intellectual framework can be seen as consistent with Buchanan’s notions of fourth order design (2001), David Pye’s concepts of design as recognition of the humanity of the users (1995, Ch. 13) and Arnstein’s concept of citizen participation (1969).

The aim of teaching design for the common good is set against the context of the legalization of culture (Hastrup, 2003) where legal norms replace moral and normative claims on “the good”. Work by Herriott (2019) also indicates that design thinking is possibly, though not necessarily, at odds with legalistic thinking and also legislative methods of the pursuit of the common good. Design for the common good runs into an interesting barrier as design (dynamic) expands into the larger systems of societal organisation that are typically the purview of law and legislation (which are relatively static).

The paper concludes by reflecting on the self-critical awareness needed to compensate for the ontological untidiness of design for the common good and how to orientate design in relation to pre-existing social structures also aimed at the common good (law, legislation and politics).

## 1 Introduction

---

Before launching into the topic, the authors wish to begin with a statement. That is: despite difficulties and the inevitable short-comings of design for the common good, it is worth it. We agreed that this was the essential message after which came the analysis of pedagogic shifts and re-structured ontologies. We hope a presentation of these points can make it easier for others in design education to teach design for the common good.

The change to design for the common good could be interpreted as a change from *indirectly* addressing the common good to *directly* addressing the common good. It can also be seen a change of what is considered to be the means and ends of design. In the traditional model, the means to design are the processes and methods required. The ends are the elaborated goods and services. Under the new conceptualization, the means of design are the processes and methods *and* the goods and services. The ends are the social or common good. This means designers may work on things or they may work on systems and things or only systems.

To conclude this section, we address how the common-good themes reshape the structure of the design education. And we also discuss how this structure plays out when it is implemented.

## 2 Then...

---

In this section we take a short look at design education generally, looking in particular at publications relevant to the School's case.

### 2.1 A short Look at design Education

The difficulty of designing design was recognised as long ago as 1971 when Papanek wrote "*Education for designers (like nearly all education) is based on learning skills, nourishing talents, understanding the concepts and theories that inform the field, and, finally, acquiring a philosophy. It is unfortunate that our design schools proceed from wrong assumptions. The skills we teach are too often related to processes and working methods of an age that has ended.*" Papanek was thinking back over the span of time from the emergence of formalised design at the Bauhaus through the post-war years of economic expansion. His 1971 book echoed the concerns of Carson's (1962).

Findelli (2001) makes a bridge from Papanek (1971) to more recent discussions. Findeli observed that design was, at the end of the last century in a period of stagnation but awaiting reform in the light of the problems inherent in the forces that formed it:

*"the determinism of instrumental reason, and central role of the economic factor as the almost exclusive evaluation criterion; an extremely narrow philosophical anthropology, which leads one to consider the user as a mere customer or, at best, as a human being framed by ergonomics and cognitive psychology; an outdated implicit epistemology of design practice and intelligence, inherited from the nineteenth century; an overemphasis upon the material product; an aesthetics based almost exclusively on material shapes and qualities; a code of ethics originating in a culture of business contracts and agreements..."*

If we fast forward, past intermediary landmarks such as the maturation of human-centred design and the emergence of design for sustainability, we find that we still grappling with the problem of fitting design education to a world beset by social and environmental crises.

Design teaching has also faced pressure to change from within [1]. During this time there has been the discussion of the merits of studio based teaching (Green and Donello, 2003). As third level education has expanded and the time allowed been reduced, the way the studio has been used has altered such that one course might be aiming to teach two or more subjects simultaneously. Sander and Stappers et al (2007) argue that the point that design has shifted from outcome-led to criteria-led (e.g. being sustainable). Edeholt (2015) discusses how demands for sustainability is pressuring design away from traditional concerns such as marketability and product competitiveness.

Lastly, design's very identity is an unresolved issue as the extended discourse on design's relation to the humanities and science demonstrates (e.g. Cross, 1982). Meyer and Norman (2020) conclude in their statement of teaching of design by saying that other disciplines may be assumed to be able to deal with the problems design is best suited to handle and in so doing tackle "the root cause rather than the symptom; emphasizing the role of people; considering the entire system; and capitalizing on the value of rapid prototyping, testing, and iteration. These fields are apt to focus upon technology, cost, and efficiency without a deep understanding of the societal impact, and the role that communities can play" (ibid). In short, the overarching constant in design education is change in why it is taught, what is taught and how it is taught.

### 3 Now

---

This section is about the MA programme at the School up until 2018 which was structured according to classic design disciplines: industrial design, communication, textiles and fashion design.

The teaching of design may be carried out either inside a larger research university or at a stand-alone institution. Mayer and Norman (2020) write that "stand-alone schools emphasize practice, while research universities emphasize scholarly work, evidence-based principles, and theory development." The NAME is an institution which is a hybrid of the former and the latter modes. Its work was originally practiced-based but in the last decade has moved more towards a university-style of education, accredited in 2010 as research based higher education. However, it is retaining its basis in design-by-doing even as it adds more and more theoretical support for its teaching.

[1] Perhaps this pressure is always with us.

### 3.1 The School's Early History

Like many art schools, the School was founded as a vocational institution with an emphasis on practical skills. The teaching staff were primarily drawn from industry. In the last 20 years the School has endeavoured to become a research as well as teaching institution. More of the staff are PhDs than in 2000 and a cadre of researchers joined since then and have carried out their work in parallel with teaching. And since 2006, the School has been awarding PhDs (in cooperation with another design institution, OTHER NAME), the first being in 2006. This change to a more academic profile allowed a stronger emphasis on the teaching of theory of design but also teaching the meta-level of the nature of research generally and the nature of design research in particular.

For many years, as noted above, the MA design education at School had four components. These exactly paralleled the BA education. Students of industrial design, communication design, textile design and fashion could graduate and proceed to an MA candidature with the same titles. Whilst the undergraduate course dealt with building up skills through course-based learning and drew from academic theory, the focus had a clear practical slant. On the MA level (table 1) the course had more theoretical and meta-level content. The School's conception was that the students on the MA distinguished their studies from the BA by means of the critical use of design theory and by a much greater emphasis on its role in their projects. However, as the teachers supervising project work and theoretical curriculum at MA level were not always the same, this intention was not consistently implemented. In some ways, the MA was merely the BA continued.

1 <sup>st</sup> semester	2 <sup>nd</sup> semester	3 <sup>rd</sup> semester	4 <sup>th</sup> semester
Internship	Longer disciplinary projects/ Exchange abroad  Theoretic module a cross disciplines	'one step closer' Pre-thesis project  Theoretic module a cross disciplines	Thesis Practical part and theoretical part (academic text)

Table 1: *Old MA structure before 2018.*

### 3.2 Preferences for the New MA Programme

In 2016 the School's management embarked on a course of renewal for the MA programme. The chief motivation was the sense that the design education at MA level was not reflecting the world into which the students were going to emerge.

As has been noted by Findeli (2001) product design was diminishing as a proportion of design work (and Findeli was referring to an exhibition on this matter in 1985). Social and environmental issues were becoming more pressing at the same time. This trend has only continued in the first decades of this century. Also, and

significantly, students at the School wished for there to be a stronger ethical relation to their work. There was also more and more cross-disciplinary project teaching at the School. So, these three developments – 1) less focus on product, 2) a desire for ethical design and 3) more cross-disciplinary teaching – showed good grounds for a thematic programme.

Additionally, there were changes in the School's internal structure, outside of teaching, that also suggested a re-arrangement might be needed. These changes also had an ethical, common-good dimension. The School had formed project development teams, staffed by professional designers and centred in the school's strategic focus areas: social design and design for sustainability. The groups gained the appellation of "lab". The labs worked from 2008 over a 10-year period with companies and municipalities to drive change through design - however, this was in complete parallel to the education. The designers in the Labs did not teach. Teaching was conducted by practitioners and researchers.

In 2018, by joining together research (academic), practice (consultancy, design and artistic development) and education (MA) under the strategic areas social design and sustainability the School aligned its activities in one swoop. The aim was to fruitfully capitalise on the potential synergies between activities. For the MA programmes, this change brought about obvious benefits in terms of alignment of knowledge foundation and practice understanding - as well as what was assumed to be a clearer profile under the new joint names for the MA programmes and Labs: Design for People and Design for Planet.

The change was radical, as it disintegrated the former disciplinary design hubs as primary organisational structure in the institution, and formed new multi- and interdisciplinary Labs to become the backbone of the organisation. Thus, it could with some conviction be described as a change in primary topics that foreseeably can spur discussions around hierarchies (within the MA structure and between the BA and MA) and ontologies (the relations of the elements of the design education are altered).

### 3.3 The Current Structure of the MA Programmes

The new programmes are cross disciplinary in the sense, that students from various design backgrounds can apply and will be taught in class a cross these. Students applying for the MA programmes are now applying for either People or Planet. However, applicants must document a BA in design (or design related) as a main criterion. Furthermore, applicants must indicate which one of the five design disciplinary hub they wish to be assigned to at School. These hubs are based from the disciplines at BA level, and formed to provide students with disciplinary tutoring and peer community along with the people and Planet communities. Teachers from Programmes and well as disciplines evaluate applications.

### 3.4 Programme Structure

The two new MA programmes (from now named People and Planet) follow the same structure. The 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> semester each comprise two courses. These four courses are used to introduce to key ways of approaching and working within social design and design for sustainability. In the 3<sup>rd</sup> semester People and Planet join forces to let students learn from each other and work together. First they work in a course on co-creation for behavioural change, and following, a course on research through design and scientific knowledge production. The 4<sup>th</sup> semester is used for the MA thesis work. (See table 2, below).

Planet	1 <sup>st</sup> semester	2 <sup>nd</sup> semester	3 <sup>rd</sup> semester	4 <sup>th</sup> semester
	Material Narratives	Preferred Futures	Behavioural Change	Thesis
	Learning from the Past	Holistic Systems	Deep Research	
People	1 <sup>st</sup> semester	2 <sup>nd</sup> semester	3 <sup>rd</sup> semester	4 <sup>th</sup> semester
	Situating Reality	Critical Framing	Behavioural Change	Thesis
	Empathic Equality	Collaborating Real Time	Deep Research	

Table 2: modules on the revised MA programme.

The first-year courses are structured as follows: three weeks introduction to theory and methods in workshops and assignments. This is often group based and supported by weekly disciplinary supervision. Then there follows four weeks for the students to explore and prototype in workshops. There are users/collaboration partners supported by supervision from programme tutors and the disciplines. Then one week finalising and presenting the work. The 3<sup>rd</sup> semester is taught by programme only (meaning no interdisciplinary work). For the thesis project, students can select supervisors and choose to combine programme and disciplinary supervisors, or work by programme only. It is always the programme managers that are responsible for the courses in terms of course descriptions, learning goals, briefs and examination. The discipline is represented in the evaluation and examination as censors, internal as well as external. In this arrangement the basic disciplines and the themed disciplines have varying degrees of prominence. However, there is still the need within the themed structure to support the students' discipline identity.

## 4 Discussion

After the fact, Meyer and Norman (2020) discussed the kinds of issues the School's MA attempts to deal with, especially its curriculum recommendations for design (ibid. p38). After underlining the value of both education for practice and education for a continued academic career, they write "Basically, we suggest that all students engage in a common, foundational set of courses, followed by a

specialization, which is where they would spend most of their time.” Meyer and Norman outline four types of knowledge needed for design to deal with “performance challenges, systemic challenges, contextual challenges and global challenges”. Interestingly, they clearly suggest that a combination of practical and academic knowledge aimed at these challenges “do not necessarily match with courses. Some concepts might require, several courses, some might be covered much more rapidly, probably best if integrated into other course material or projects”. This is pretty much what the School has found in its slicing and dicing of content. Some of it keeps coming back into play and some other parts need careful course construction so as not overwhelm the students with relevant parameters.

Design for the common good makes demands on 1) the means/ends relation in design. This table shows the change in the ontology of means and ends in design. The most important box is the lower left one.

	Means	Ends
Before	Design Methods	Products and services
After	Design methods, products and services	The common good

Table 3.

In the “before” condition, design methods which is all the skills and theory are directed towards an outcome, the design of goods and services that meet the demands of the market. Only implicit is the idea from this arises a social good or common good. And even that eventual outcome was predicated on another link, that producing competitive consumer goods was good for society: satisfied customers, profitable producers and economic growth. In the “after” condition, in the revised MA, the link from design to the common good is made direct: we are designing to be ethical. The product, the service become a means to an explicit end, the common good.

Design methods and products and services are grouped as the means for the common good. However, in the old “before” situation one had only to look at a final design proposal to assess it. Now we look at the process *and* the product and assess them against their expected socially beneficial outcome, a rather harder task. Or do we still look at the product and assume its goodness is a heuristic for its ability to improve the common good?

A second difficulty relates to examinations. Since a course as students from four disciplines at least one of the examiners must be from that discipline. This means a course in theme X has five examiners: one to assess the theme X and one of four to match the



student’s discipline. Arising from this might be problems of grading consistency. Thirdly, the programme must correctly describe the content both for teachers and students (Christiansen et al 2015; Katis et al. 2018). It will take time for the course descriptions and their operationalisation to align.

The consequence of teaching design for the common good is a change in the ordering of the curriculum which means the way the course content is divided. First, and most marked is redistribution (for want of a better term) of the traditional disciplines into new categories. First, this was done as part of the process of structuring the programme. The course leaders had to find a way to divide the elements and communicate to one another and to the school management. This then becomes an ontological issue. “Ontologies are used to establish effective communication between different agents. Ontologies specify the terms used in agents’ communication and provide the exact meaning of those terms relative to other ontology terms and within a specific context. Ontologies provide the agent with the domain knowledge and enable it to function intelligently” (Hadzic et al. 2009). We would say the ontologies structure the domain knowledge (what is to be taught) and enable that knowledge to be placed in a time sequence divided across the new programmes.

The diagram below shows how the course content was re-divided under the “common good” theme of the revised MA programme.

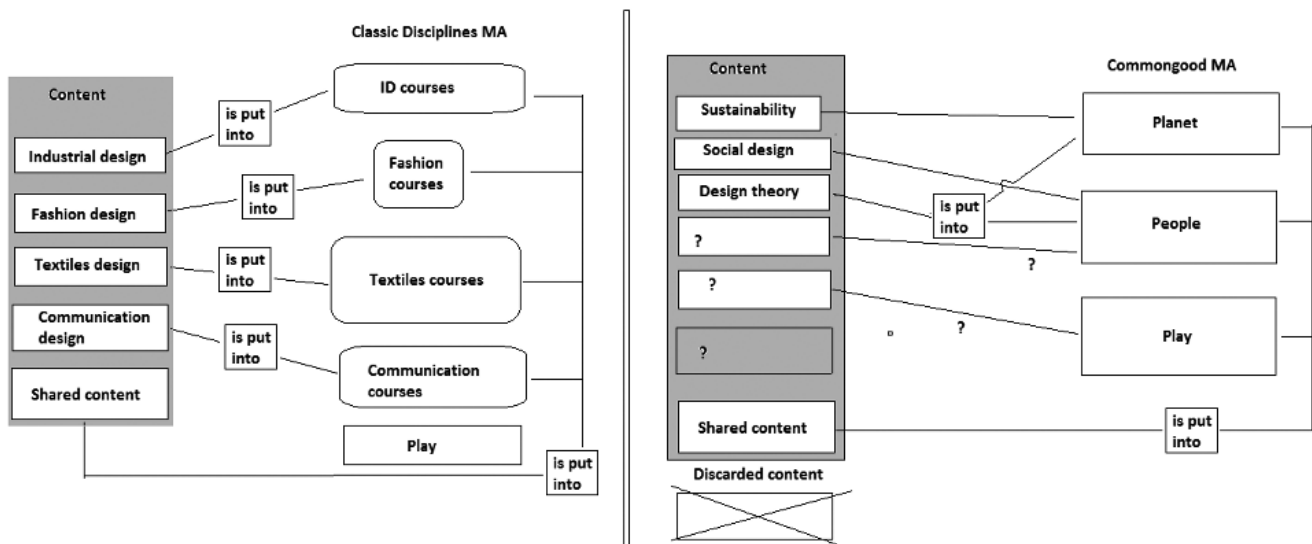


Fig. 1: model showing the arrangement of elements in the classic MA and the new, common-good MA. (The People and Planet courses are run alongside the MA for Play).

Gruber's idea of ontology is that it is "a body of formally represented knowledge is based on a conceptualization [...] A conceptualization is an abstract, simplified view of the world that we wish to represent for some purpose. Every knowledge base, knowledge-based system, or knowledge-level agent is committed to some conceptualization, explicitly or implicitly. An ontology is an explicit specification of a conceptualization." (Gruber, 1993). Gruber makes the point that ontology is a social relation, about the relation of knowledge being accepted by a group. The construction of the programme depended on the course heads reaching a common understanding of what was being constructed. The model shows that under the process of transition from the design-thematic "classic" MA to the "common good" MA, there were necessary redivisions of course content and a modified approach to the progression. The progression of, say, the textiles design content would have accommodate expected progression with either sustainability (Planet) and social design (People).

Redström (2020) writes "[...] I have argued that complexity and uncertainty are intertwined in design, but perhaps not necessarily in the ways one might initially think of. I have argued that the perceived increase in complexity in design does not (only) stem from external factors, but from an inherent, continuous and critical questioning of what design is and could be." It would appear design education can look as it does at the School, where the students can see design as another method to deal with issues normally addressed through legislative deliberation and regulated planning processes. Here one can perceive the manifestation of what might be a missing element in a thematic education addressing the challenges outlined by Meyer and Norman and dealing with the critical questioning suggested by Redström. If designers are dealing with systems, why does their advanced education not equip them with at least the outlines of political science theory just as they often have the outlines of engineering and psychology. Buchanan (1999) suggests design can deal with large order problems. Meyer and Norman (2020) dissect the structure of these and Redström asks about design's nature. Putting this together, one can see that design as a human-to-human endeavour must be based on a knowledge of the other competing methods of reconciling the conflicts of stakeholders. It turns out the 'internal' re-ordering of the design programme makes apparent the way design is related to *other* instruments of social deliberation. The next step is not only to ensure knowledge of those other instruments is part of design education but also to communicate that to our colleagues in other spheres (engineering, law and political science).

## 5 Conclusions

In line with Meyer and Norman (2020) we can see how design education should and can move from one structure to a new one, predicated on design as a means not an end. The structure of the programme at the School shows how design can meet the challenges set out by Meyer and Norman. What Meyer and Norman didn't hint at was the way in which thematic approaches can re-order the relations of the content of a design education. It also makes visible the conventions of design education. At one point it made sense to divide the subject by disciplines because that was where the skills were applied, rather than it being a natural division of the world. Ontology makes visible the way in which we conceive the world and if the world is more complex or we admit of its greater complexity then design education must mould itself accordingly.

## References

- Arnstein, S. R. "A Ladder of Citizen Participation," JAIP, Vol. 35,. No. 4, July 1969, pp.216-224. I .
- Buchanan, R (2001) Design research and the new learning. Design Issues, Vol. 17,No. 4. (pp3-12)
- Carraccio, C., Wolfsthal, S., Englander, R., Ferentz, K., Martin, C. (2002). Shifting paradigms: From flexner to competencies. Academic medicine : journal of the Association of American Medical Colleges. 77. 361-7.
- Carson, R (1962) Silent Spring. Houghton Mifflin, New York.
- Christiansen, F.V., Horst, S., Rump, C., 2015. Course design, in: Rie-necker, L., Jørgensen, P.S., Dolin, J., Ingerslev, G.H. (Eds.), University Teaching and Learning. Samfundslitteratur, pp.135–148.
- Cross, N (1982) Designerly Ways of Knowing. Design Studies. Vol 3, No. 4 October 1982 pp.221-227
- Edeholt, H (2015) Design as a New Futural Epistemology: Design Education Made Relevant for Climate Change and Development. Proceedings of the 3 rd International Conference for Design Education Researchers, 2015, Illinois.
- Findeli, Alain. 2001. "Rethinking Design Education in the 21st Century." Design. Issues 17 (1) (Winter): 5–17
- Friedman, K. (2019) "Design Education Today — Challenges, Opportunities, Failures." Research and Education in Design conference, Lisbon.
- Green, L., Bonollo, E.,. (2003). Studio-based Teaching: history and advantages in the teaching of design. World Transactions on Engineering and Technology Education. 2. 269.
- Hadzic M., Wongthongtham P., Dillon T., Chang E. (2009) Introduction to Ontology. In: Ontology-Based Multi-Agent Systems. Studies in Computational Intelligence, vol 219. Springer, Berlin, Heidelberg. [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-642-01904-3\\_3](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-642-01904-3_3)
- Gruber, T (1993) A Translation Approach to Portable Ontology Specifications. Knowledge Acquisition, 5(2):199-220, 1993.
- Hastrup, K (2003) Representing the common good. In Mitchell, J.P., Wilson, R.A (eds.) Human Rights in Global Perspective: Anthropological Studies of Rights. Routledge, London.
- Herriott, R (2019) Project scale and the wicked problem of fourth order design. EAD, 2019, Dundee.
- Katis E., Kondylakis H., Agathangelos G., Vassilakis K. (2018) Developing an Ontology for Curriculum and Syllabus. In: Gangemi A. et al. (eds) The Semantic Web: ESWC 2018 Satellite Events. ESWC 2018. Lecture Notes in Computer Science, vol 11155. Springer, Cham. [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-98192-5\\_11](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-98192-5_11)
- Meyer, M.M., Norman, D (2020) Changing Design Education for the 21st Century. She Ji: The Journal of Design, Economics, and Innovation, Volume 6, Issue 1, Pages 13-49, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.sheji.2019.12.002>.
- Orr, S., Shreve, A. (2017) Art and Design Pedagogy in Higher Education: Knowledge, Values and Ambiguity. Routledge, London. "
- Papanek,V.J. (1971) Design for the Real World: Human Ecology and Social Change, rev. ed. (1971; New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold Co., 1984), 285.
- Pye, D (1995) The nature and aesthetics of design. Herbert Press, London.
- Redström, J (2020) Certain Uncertainties and the Design of Design Education. She Ji: The Journal of Design, Economics, and Innovation, Volume 6, Issue 1,2020, Pages 83-100, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.sheji.2020.02.001>.
- Stappers, P., Hekkert, P, Keyson, D. (2007) Design for Interaction: Consolidating the User-Centred Focus in Industrial Design Engineering. In: E. Bohemia, K. Hilton, C. McMahon, A. Clarke (Eds.), DS 43: Proceedings of E&PDE 2007, the 9th International Conference on Engineering and Product Design Education, University of Northumbria, Newcastle (2007), pp.69-74.