# ▽ An Invitation, a Workshop, a Skype Conversation and Some Questions

*Rolf Engelen, Vanessa Jane Phaff, and Sjoerd Westbroek.   
In collaboration with Johanneke van der Ziel.*

As part of the ELIA Biennial Conference 2018 in Rotterdam, the Friendly Stalking collective organised a workshop for conference participants at Skarlokaal De Toermalijn in Rotterdam Zuidwijk. At Skarlokaal, Friendly Stalking collaborated with the Willem de Kooning Academy to facilitate practice-based research in primary education by students and teachers from all departments. Below is a fragment from a letter that was given to the workshop participants on their way there.

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Rotterdam, 23 November 2018

Dear Reader,

We are in a metro train, taking us to the southern part of the city of Rotterdam, on the left bank of the river Maas. We’re gathering today to travel to Skarlokaal, a former elementary school that started as artists’ studios, but is slowly developing into a central hub for a growing community of practitioners, working in the Zuidwijk neighbourhood.

We are delighted we have had the opportunity to show you the place where we work with our colleagues. We do not know why you decided to participate in this workshop, but considering the context of the ELIA conference, we’re assuming there is a professional interest and maybe even experience with similar projects. We’re interested to enter into conversation with you about what you observe here and what it makes you think about. But, even more so, we’re interested in hearing about your experiences as practitioners and as colleagues, who bring in knowledge that is as valuable as ours, so to speak. Skarlokaal is conceived as a learning environment for all persons involved, including the artists, teachers, organisers, children and parents. In thinking about what today could be, we decided to extend the idea of the learning environment to our gathering. Although we’re happy to share our experiences, we are not here to tell you how things must be done and we’re interested in learning from you as well. What questions, dilemmas or problems, do you encounter in setting up projects that have an artistic and a social side to them? How do you build new relationships in a sustainable way, resisting the pressure to achieve quick successes?

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One person came to the workshop: Danae Esparza, Head of Studies of the Degree in Design at ELISAVA, Barcelona. At first, we were disappointed that most of the registered participants had not showed up and we felt slightly awkward directing all our attention towards our only guest. However, the conversation that afternoon turned out to be wonderfully inspirational. Amongst other things we discussed the way space affects the functioning of pupil and teacher, processes of inclusion and exclusion or, to restate it in the most general terms: power and safety. We considered how practice produces knowledge, or rather how it undermines assumptions, and forces you to apply newly acquired insights in an improvised manner. How can we incorporate this space into didactic models? Who learns from whom? Can the adult’s studio (of the artist-educator) and the children’s studio be shared? Can concepts be blended and classes designed in such a way that they are challenging for both groups?

Moving through the spaces (the classrooms, the children’s museum, the U-shaped corridor interrupting the studio from door to door, as well as the studio temporarily handed over to a group of local women), we could demonstrate the practical consequences of the concepts we work with, and make our practice tangible, despite the absence of children, teachers or parents.

Danae showed us a YouTube video about a project she participated in, which, amongst other things, considered the differences between the design of public space in suburban Barcelona in comparison to areas with a clearly representative function, such as the city centre.

The encounter was warm and thought provoking. Quality instead of quantity, the latter being merely an image of success.

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Recently, we continued the conversation with Danae via Skype.

**Rolf:** We are very interested in the project you described last time, maybe we could start there. You were talking about city furniture and the pavement, the difference in quality between the city centre and the suburbs.

**Danae:** I actually participated in that project while I was working on my PhD at the University of Barcelona. It was a long term engagement with a neighbourhood, which resulted in a few subprojects. One of these involved the building of a model of the neighbourhood by teenagers who lived there, which was exhibited in a community centre and used as a conversation piece to identify problems in the area. Another subproject involved children expressing their perception of the neighbourhood in visual artworks. Let me also explain a project I’m working on at the moment, at ELISAVA. The university is located very centrally in Barcelona, on La Rambla. In that area, there is a lot of pressure on traditional socio-economic structures because of tourism. We have also seen the demographics change, because of migration. All these developments lead to insecurities, for instance rents going up and shops closing. It’s also a neighbourhood with many craftsmen, such as sandal-makers or glass workshops, so we started a project with students to understand and make visible the traditional forms of knowledge. We want to make the value of the city centre visible at a time in which less and less people want to live here—something the city council is also interested in.

**Sjoerd:** What exactly do you mean by making visible?

**D:** A concrete outcome of this long term project is a digital map, produced collaboratively by successive generations of students. This can be seen as a representation of economic activities in the area, as an ephemeral marketplace. However, it’s just the beginning, as we’re working towards organising events and other activities. We want to create relationships between students and the craftsmen, they can learn a lot from each other.

**S:** Does this lead to concrete collaborations in which an exchange of knowledge takes place?

**D:** Occasionally, on a small scale. For instance, a group of students who had interviewed social workers who run a workshop for unemployed people, created a card game which helped them to deal with conversations around delicate topics. The course, however, is only three months long, which is a challenge for everyone involved. As a university, we have 11,000 m2 in the city centre of Barcelona, but it’s like a fortress. How can this building, this institution, become more permeable? How can our students who come to this area every day also learn from the craftspeople who have knowledge of traditional ways of transforming materials?

**S:** So far we’ve been talking about the city centre, which implies there’s also a periphery, some place that is not the centre. Do you think this binary opposition between periphery and centre is still relevant? For instance, in the case of migration the question is rather: Who gets access to public institutions and spaces? There might be two people using the same area, one having access to what is there and the other person not. Is this something you’re thinking about?

**D:** Indeed there are peripheries within the city centre, and peripheral suburbs might be quite close to a neighbouring city. In that sense we’re only talking about administrative structures and there are many problems we share. In the city centre of Barcelona there is still a great diversity of cultures.

**S:** Sometimes you see constant flows of students going through a neighbourhood, to ‘solve’ problems. This can make one wonder, who is actually working for whom? How do you avoid exploitation?

**D:** That’s why we don’t ask students to solve anything, which is too complicated. We ask students to observe and learn. We teach them, for instance, to do interviews and compare various sources to understand the complexity of the situation. One aspect of an ethically sound approach is to not insist too much, or interfere in day-to-day business, and let people in the neighbourhood decide whether or not they want to participate. In this case the research is the project, which for many students is a new way of thinking. Students get introduced to various working methods by anthropologists and design researchers. So although we do present them with more artistic ways of working, we prefer to first introduce this more social-scientific approach before they develop their own method.

**S:** Do you decide what questions the students work on?

**D:** Yes, because students are not used to this way of working and we want to give them some concrete guidelines. We work together to find the right tools to make observations. As designers they often tend to start making straight away. There are five questions or areas of inquiry that focus on various aspects of these businesses, such as the material production process, the social networks they are embedded in, what kind of knowledge is required and how professional qualification works in their field. As part of the briefing we tell them to look at the map we’re building, to see what has been done the year before. They finish the project with a publication, which summarises their research.

**S:** This anthropological approach, and working on a repository of knowledge that can also be used by next generations of students, is interesting. In my experience it can be difficult for students to use this information in their design practices. As you said, designers like making stuff, that’s why they became designers. How do you guide students in thinking about how all of this might affect their decisions as designers? Or is this something that is up to them?

**D:** In the third year the emphasis is really on understanding what doing research can involve, for instance who are the actors and for whom are they working? We invite design researchers to show that being a designer means being a researcher too. One of the aims is to show the possibility of doing research as a practice, as an individual designer but also in multidisciplinary teams in companies. This map and the information we’re collecting is also interesting for the municipality. There is a municipal initiative to grant low rents to businesses who have a real impact on the area.

**R:** Of course the craftspeople themselves are also product-makers. Students and craftspeople can learn from each other, and in terms of innovating the product. The workshops at the academy and those in its surroundings could complement each other. Does this happen?

**D:** Not yet. I hope it happens one day. There are many students, and craftspeople don’t always have the time. We leave it to the student to build a relationship as it’s something we don’t want to push too much. We don’t want people in the neighbourhood to experience this as exploitative.

**S:** We think a lot about the learning environment beyond the academy, Skarlokaal being such a space, or the schools where our teacher training students do their internships. Building long-term relationships with these places is one of the most difficult things to do. This is acknowledged but not always acted upon, stuck as we often are in day-to-day business.

**R:** At Skarlokaal de Toermalijn it works because it’s my studio too. Projects like these require presence. We invite students to do a long-term research project, which sometimes results in some of them staying permanently. Slowly, this long-term relationship is being built.

**S:** We’ve been talking for an hour now...

**D:** I was thinking how once a year in December we organise a week with workshops by teachers from other universities. Students can sign up for workshops that are different from what they work on as part of their course. It could be interesting to invite you to do a one-week workshop with our students.

**R:** Yes, that’s really nice.

**D:** Just think about what you would like to do, and we can discuss it.

**S:** Let’s be in contact after summer, early September...

**D:** Great, so we’ll be in touch.

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As artists and educators, we don’t solve problems, we pose questions. Therefore, we conclude by articulating a few of the questions we take with us from the encounter, of which the above was but a partial report.

How can we design a structure to store knowledge acquired by students in projects in such a way that it remains accessible for subsequent groups of students and teachers?

Is it necessary to have students trained more systematically in existing research traditions by scientists before we ask them to develop their own methods? What would this mean for the art academy’s curriculum and staff?

How can we guide students in going through a more collaborative working process in which all actors involved collectively articulate a question? How does knowledge acquired in such a process inform research questions?