



Prototyping spoken here:  
artifacts and knowledge  
production in design

Åsa Harvard

Malmö University, Sweden  
<asa.harvard@interactiveinstitute.se>

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Artists and designers do not constitute a coherent group of professionals but they share a strategy of work where the artefacts are at the heart of the process. They are trained in a culture whose central activity consists in creating, interpreting, discussing and refining artifacts. Analytical knowledge is subordinated to the knowledge (or skills) necessary for the making of artefacts. In research, this situation is the inverse - analytical knowledge stakes precedence over making skills, and artefacts are not a valid research result unless they contain new knowledge.

Within academia, however, the notion of knowledge also undergoes change. This can be seen in notions such as tacit knowledge and reflection-in-action (Schön, 1983). Theories of distributed cognition (Hutchins, 1995) describe knowledge as context-dependent, situated in the interplay between persons, processes and artifacts.

I will use theories from cognitive anthropology about "distributed cognition" as the basis for an attempt to describe the relation between artefacts and knowledge production in a design project. Two design environments will be discussed. The first case concerns design education. It describes how students in Metal Design go about an assignment to develop concepts and prototypes for tableware. The second case describes a design-oriented research project, the Narrative Toys project, within the HCI/Interaction Design research field.

My point is to demonstrate how artifacts are used to create and communicate knowledge – first, within a specialized knowledge culture. Then, the way in which artifacts and the processes involved in producing them are instrumental for creating a kind of temporary "knowledge culture" within an interdisciplinary project, so that all participants have the means and the mandate to express their ideas in a designerly way.