

Eating with Type. Designing a Letterpress Workshop Based on Typeful Thinking Approach for Food Education

Carlotta Belluzzi Mus, Alessio Caccamo, Andrea Vendetti

Abstract

Starting from the observation of an evident precariousness in the contemporary relationship between man and food, this contribution is meant to show a new proposal of workshops for children in the K=12, Grade 4–5 category, aimed at stimulating in a creative and experiential way a critical and conscious thinking about food. Starting from the methodology of Artful Thinking and Object Based Learning, the project shifts the pedagogical focus from the interaction with the artistic object to the interaction with the design object; and in particular with the movable type, identified as an activating element of the educational process in the transition from Artful to Typeful Thinking. The Typeful Thinking workshop therefore represents a potentially innovative food education tool that leverages on the concretisation of critical thinking through five thinking routines that go from conceptual abstraction —through a physical artefact, the letterpress printing— to their tangibility.

Keywords: typeful thinking, letterpress printing, workshop, educational design, object based learning

1. Premise

In contemporary society, the relationship between man and food is part of a complex system that origins economic, social, cultural and value impacts (Corazza, Scagnelli 2016). The dangerous precariousness of this system makes innovation an imperative: new challenges require new learning methodologies (OECD 2018). Pedagogy, assisted by the discipline of Design, can contribute to the pursuit of social innovation, able to satisfy shared needs (Mulgan et al. 2007).

One of the most fertile experiences of this activity is precisely the use of workshop as an educational learning tool (Marzotto, Caotorta 2007); moreover, already in the past (Freinet 1973) it had been demonstrated that the use of typographic composition should be considered a valid pedagogical tool. In recent years, attention has been paid to the relationship between typography and food (Hyndman 2015), with a strong emphasis on the experiential question. Against this background, the research project to be presented here aims to highlight the possibility and effectiveness of the design object (typefaces) and its semantic value as a pedagogical tool for reflection related to the theme of food and its education through design-oriented workshops (Freeman et al. 2014).

In order to obtain effective outcomes from the project, pedagogical workshops belonging to the methodological field of Object Based Learning (Chatterjee & Hannan 2015) and Artful Thinking Program¹ —focused on up-close, hands-on and physical interactions (Schultz 2019)— have been taken as a model.

Compared to the state of the art of the above mentioned methodologies, the innovation element offered is the substitution of the artistic object —which implies the univocal fruition of the artefact— to the design object—whose fruition can match an activity— as an activating element of the educational process: *from Artful to Typeful Thinking*. In particular, the movable type is chosen as an iconic element of visual communication design.

2. The Typeful Thinking Workshop

The location chosen for the experimentation is the movable type printing house and research centre Slab² (Fig.1). The activities designed by us are aimed at a heterogeneous group of 10–15 children in the K=12³, Grade 4–5 category, and require experts skilled into pedagogy, nutrition, design, and letterpress printing.



Figure 1. Letterpress Workshop at National Central Library in Rome. Source: Slab, (E. Scotucci, A. Vendetti), 2020.

The *Typeful Thinking* workshop is based on the sequence of five stages (Fig. 2) able to stimulate in a creative and experiential way the critical and conscious reflection on the food issue starting from the statement that morphological attributes of the letters, like the roundness/angularity of the type shapes represents a key element in the crossmodal matching of tastes with shapes (Velasco, Woods, Deroy, & Spence 2015).

Typeful Thinking

Routines

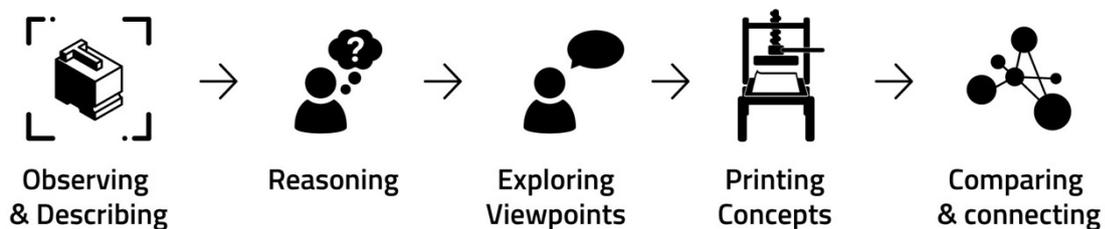


Figure 2. Typeful Thinking Routines. Source: Carlotta Belluzzi Mus, Alessio Caccamo, Andrea Vendetti, 2020.

Thinking routine 1: Observing & Describing

It represents children's first contact and interaction with the type-object. The structure of the *See, Think, Wonder*⁴ model has been chosen for the definition of the first in-depth activity. In the specific case, the object

of investigation is a series of single movable types chosen on the basis of possible morphological analogies able to stimulate an association/reflection on the food issue.

The selection is made up of 15 wooden types between 12 and 15 typographic lines (55-70 mm), arranged above a tablecloth (fig. 3), which offers a visual context that aims to highlight that the topic of the workshop is food. In order to represent the single typographic set in a coherent and neutral way, the letter 'R' was chosen, as it formally lacks direct references to the food—which is obviously not possible with other more connoted letters, such as 'I' or 'O'.

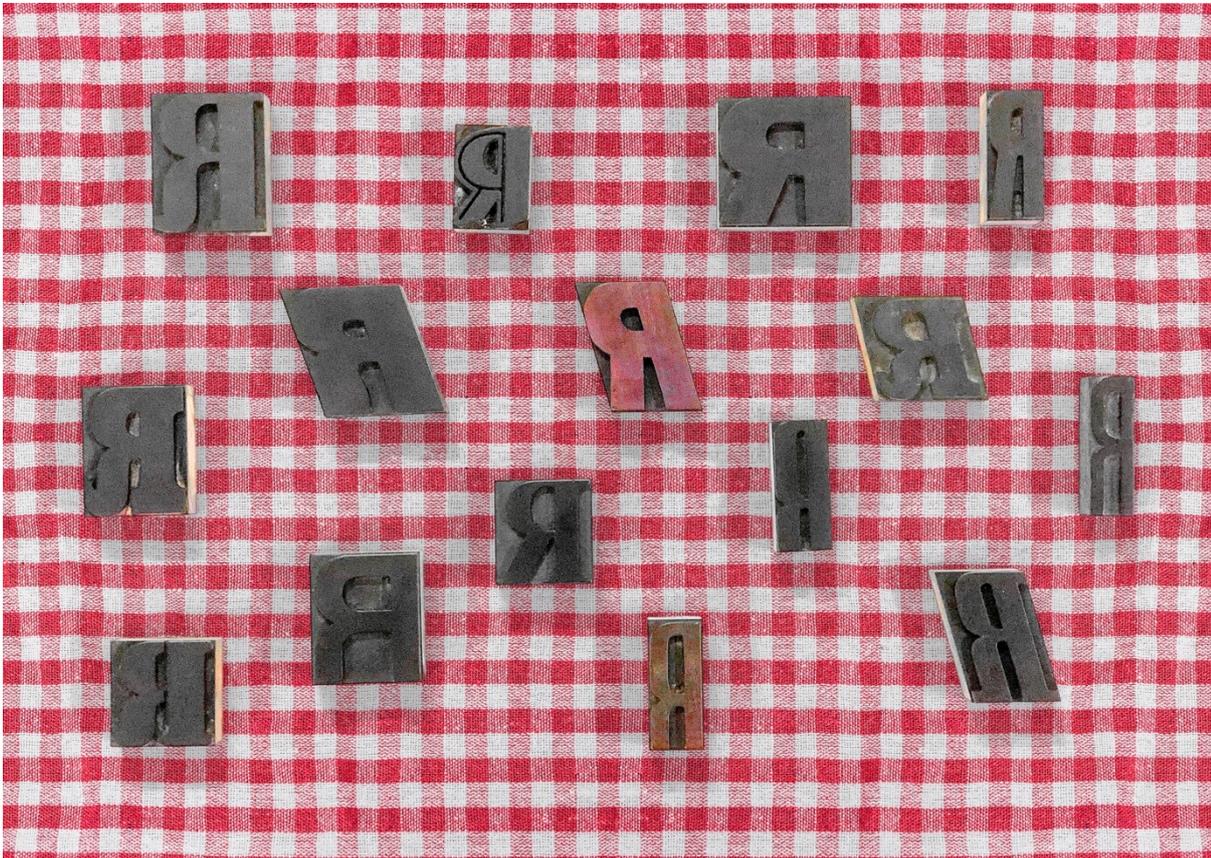


Figure 3. Typographic Mise en place. Source: Carlotta Belluzzi Mus, Alessio Caccamo, Andrea Vendetti, 2020

The group of children, once the kit is shown, will be asked to answer three key questions: what they see; what they think; what they imagine compared to what they have just seen/touched. For instance, a bold typeface could be associated with a fat food, rather than a thin typeface that could evoke, instead, a light food (Velasco, Hyndman, Spence 2018).

Thinking routine 2: Reasoning

After the first phase, the group of children will be asked to make a first reasoned formulation of free thoughts. The basic structure follows the *Claim, Support, Question*.

A series of statements will then be listed and recorded and will become the basis for the final reflection of the step in progress (Question). For instance, a child looking to a bold slab typeface could be brought to think that this typeface is linked to “hamburger” or similar food because of the visual connection between the form and the brand identity of former famous Fast Food Chain.

Children and educators will establish a dialogue on peer with the statements made, trying to highlight, strengthen, or modify the thoughts expressed at the beginning of the activity.

Thinking routine 3: Exploring viewpoints

The reference structure, in this case, is that of the *Headlines*. With respect to Artful Thinking, the participants are asked to try to synthesise the reflection of the previous phases through an adjective related to the world of food, that describes in a punctual way the concepts expressed in the *Reasoning*. For instance, if a child has developed a concept about *fatty* or *unhealthy food*, as burger, he may choose the adjective “fatty” or

similar (Velasco, Hyndman, Woods, Spence, 2015). In addition to the choice of the word itself, the children will be asked to choose the typeface that best expresses the concept they have identified.

Thinking routine 4: Printing Concepts

The greater detachment from Artful Thinking takes place at this stage through the materialisation of thoughts. The group of children will then be asked to compose the chosen adjective with the identified types and proceed with the printing process (Fig. 4). The final output will be the printed version of the chosen adjective composed with the letterpress technique. This stage plays a very important role in terms of pedagogical impact, as participants have the opportunity to follow step by step the process of conceptualisation, design and materialisation of their thinking. This possibility is offered by the letterpress printing, which by its nature allows a total control of the design phase (Caccamo, Vendetti 2019).



Figure 4. Example of printing during a Letterpress Workshop at National Central Library in Rome. Source: Slab, (E. Scotucci, A. Vendetti) 2020.

Thinking routine 5: Comparing and connecting

The artefact thus produced will become the object of reflection in the last stage of the laboratory experience. In this *Thinking Routine*, the children, starting from the observation of the printed concepts, will develop a series of thoughts based on the structure of *Connect, Extend, Challenge*. In this phase, it will be possible to reveal the first effects in terms of understanding the food issue on the workshop participants. In particular, the dialogue with supervisors and educators will in fact lead the children to confirm or reconsider thoughts and beliefs, in order to replace the instinctive and *superstructures-driven thinking* with a more conscious and objective knowledge of the characteristics of food: taste, quality, and health.

3. Conclusions

This contribution aims to highlight the possibility of an implementation of the Artful Thinking methodology through the introduction of a thinking routine, identified with letterpress printing. The past scientific results concerning the effectiveness and flexibility of the practices of Artful Thinking and OBL allow us to look with optimism at possible successful outcomes that, of course, will have to be verified as soon as the emergency situation due to Covid-19 will allow it. However, the research of new inclusive, experiential, and hands-on pedagogical approaches has already shown the capability to stimulate the minds of young people (Chatterjee, Hannan 2015). For this reason, unless later denied or extended, we believe that the introduction of the design artefact—and the related Typeful Thinking approach—as a pedagogical tool for active use in food education can actually play a role as an accelerator of the critical abilities and a proper knowledge of nutritional and cultural facts for the children involved.

Footnotes

- 1 The Artful Thinking Program—originally developed in 2013 by Project Zero at Harvard University—uses the figurative power of art to develop students' thinking arrangements, enhancing not only the critical thinking of the individual, but also his or her learning ability
- 2 Slab is one of the Italian realities involved in safeguarding and spreading the history and culture of typographic printing. Founded in Rome by Elettra Scotucci and Andrea Vendetti in 2019, it has already organised letterpress printing workshops. In particular, Slab organised letterpress workshops in the Biblioteca Centrale Nazionale in Rome.
- 3 The K-12 system stands for “from kindergarten to 12th grade”. This equates roughly to a school starting age of around five through to Grade 12 at around the age of 18. The system is broken down into three stages: elementary school (Grades K–5), middle school (Grades 6–8), and high school (Grades 9–12).
- 4 The structures mentioned are the result of the development of Harvard's Artful Thinking Model through Project Zero (2013). For further details, structures are available at: http://pzartfulthinking.org/?page_id=2

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Authorship

Carlotta Belluzzi Mus

Sapienza University of Rome, Dept. Planning, Design, Technology of Architecture
M. Sc., Product Designer
belluzzimus.1493638@studenti.uniroma1.it

Alessio Caccamo

Roma Tre University, Dept. of Education
M. Sc., Educational & UX Designer, Research Fellow
alessio.caccamo@uniroma3.it

Andrea Vendetti

Sapienza University of Rome, Dept. Planning, Design, Technology of Architecture M.
Sc., Letterpress Printer, Phd Student
andrea.vendetti@uniroma1.it