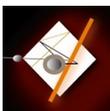connexions interview with

YVONNE ERIKSSON

Transcript of the interview with Yvonne Eriksson, professor of Information Design at Mälardalen University, Sweden.

The interview was conducted by Rosário Durão, via Skype, on January 23, 2017. The interview was transcribed from the recorded interview by Rosário Durão, *connexions*' co-editor.

The video of this interview is available on *connexions'* Vimeo channel at https://vimeo.com/24278192

How is your present career related to international professional communication, or IPC, which, for our journal, means communication between different countries, nations, and nationalities?

I would say my present career as a professor in information design, I do have collaboration and connection with, with people in the field of information design but I also have connection with people in other fields working with, with more professional in technical communication and I have PHD students working in that field. So yes I have some connections and also with industry there, we are trying, have done some research to have a look at, see how people communicate between… or between plants

in global companies and how the globalizations affect the communication within engineering and engineering design.

How have your past experiences in IPC prepared you for the work you do today?

It might sound weird to you because my background is in Art History, Visual Studies but very much into Visual Communication. So I will say, before I got my position as Full Professor in Information Design, I didn't have any experience of working with Professional Communication within the engineering design for some… in industry, at all. But, on the other hand, I have a long experience working with, with pictures, tactile pictures for people that are blind and also in in engineering professional education, so I, my experience of… I will say this kind of… of drawings, or technical drawings, came from, working how to transform visual drawings into tactile drawings.

How has that contributed to what you do?

I think it contributes very much because if you're going to work… if you're working with, with people that are blind and with visual communications, so to say, even if you transform it into tactile, tactile format, you really have to look into what does a drawing or a picture really means? What is the, the message you get from the pictures and how to simplify very complex pictures or to divide it into several pictures in order to make it understandable for, for a tactile, for tactile reading. So I would say, working with, with pictures and visual communication for, for people that are blind had really made me, made me aware of the meaning of visuals on, on a very deep level.

What are some key contributions of IPC research that you would highlight?

I would like to highlight both the challenges and also the advantages of the global communication and that companies become more and more global. And it is also expected that the production process should go faster and faster, at… from the idea to time to market become shorter, and you need to communicate in indifferent ways and you need to be skilled in communication both with, with your colleagues around you, but also to use different kind of ICT tools which you find, when it come to many, many manufacturing companies, that people are not that mature. So I think this is the…

yeah, I think it's a lot of research that has to be done in this field, and also the fact that even if you work in the same field you have different cultural backgrounds, different… you belongs to different traditions when it come to how to communicate. On the other hand, you are working in one company with often very strong company culture that also affects the understanding. And you also have the… which could seems trivial in a way, but you have the time differences which also affect communication. If you have a meeting with people on, on different parts of the globe, and one are in the meeting early in the morning and can take care of things and started to work immediately after the meeting, other people, often in Sweden because… in between or in Europe we have our lunch at the same time where we have the meeting, and then you have the ones that are on the way back, on the way home the end of the day. So I think this is a, it's a lot of things.

What experience have you had with companies with their own research projects, centers, or departments? What are your thoughts on this type of collaboration?

My university really works a lot with cocreation with companies and we have a lot of experience from that. I will say almost… it's very, very rare that we have projects around me that are not in cocreation with, with companies or with, often manufacturing industry, and we often work together with R&D departments. But we don't work really with, I will say, advanced research departments in the region where I belongs to. It's more small, medium enterprises. So we work together and they are working with groups. So, so if you mean, if you're talking about research as a kind of research exclusive… research center in companies, we don't really work with this kind of, of research… so we are more in cocreation together with employees in the companies.

What main challenges does IPC face today?

I think one main challenge is, except for the ones I mentioned earlier, is the big data and how to handle big data and especially data visualization when it come to automatic generation of visualization from big data. And I think this is, this is the main challenges when it comes to communication. And also, as mentioned before, the, the global market and the language obstacles between different… plants that are spread all over

the globe and how to communicate, and also, I think there is kind of… people think that, that visuals will, will overcome obstacles, and they can, in one sense, but it's also needed to, to go in together with, with the language—you need to give, to give some instructions. And I think this is, this is a challenge. And also that you have, that… the more data you got—because I think it's important to, to see the differences between, you have access to a lot amount of data, but it doesn't mean necessarily that it is accessible… so you can use and handle it. So that, that I think, this is a big challenge. But of course, it's, it's something that you can, you have to, you have access but if you learn how to make it accessible for people… another thing we have a lot of knowledge within the graphic, information graphics, that you can use that knowledge, but we tend to forget when we go from one area to another, so to say.

What challenges and rewards can people expect from working in IPC?
I think it's a kind of two, two faces, the same that is the challenges which has to do with, with… digitalization, digitization is also something that of course will rewards at the same time, but, but you have this, I think we have big gaps between those who are… these who are mature and they who not mature enough to, to, to use the new— it's not new any longer—but use the technology and we are working with project that we are trying to convince companies, small manufacturing companies, what they can benefit from trying to be more digitalized. At the same time, we do in the same region where I'm coming from, we're working in, we have the automation industry with, with departments that are very advanced and this is an imbalance between departments. But also within big companies, you have departments that are very advanced and, and those are less advanced. And yes, I think this is, this is the challenges that we have to face and we have to work with.

How has technology affected practice, research, and teaching in IPC in your region of the world or elsewhere?
Yes, as I mentioned before, in, in our region of the world, we, we do have, because our university is, is a two-town university and half of the university is situated in the high optimation region, I would say, and the other one is in with small medium sized enterprises that are not mature at all, I will say, all are not immature, but many

companies are—this is to find out how to balance the one, and to work together. And of course it, it affects also the education that we need to, to use and to be more prepared, we need to prepare our students to come out to… and… when they are prepared, when they will start to work, to be more prepared to see, to meet the challenges and not only think that… it's not enough to be skilled themselves in how to handle the technology, they also need to see how should they collaborate with other than unless skills in it. And I also think that we need to use it more, I will say more… in, in teaching how to work and how, we… at the moment, we are starting to work with, with online collaboration and we will try to, to prepare our students to be involved in, in own globally distributed product development projects, so we will have some collaboration with, with university around the world where students are… asked to work together with other students to see, to have the experience when they come out and see what, what does it mean to, to work on distance and to understand how to communicate and how to make it feel more close and how to solve problems together with people that you don't really… know and you don't have English as the first language and there is a lot of… different ways to speak English, as you can hear. So, it's something that we work on now to make them more prepared for, for the future.

Do you have those students do workplace-based projects. How many of them are actually working for companies or do projects onsite?

We, we have a lot of our students projects the way they are working together with companies. And we also have an international masters with innovation and design where we have invited companies and asked them to, to come with their future challenges to our students and let the students work with the challenges for the companies and they do it together with the companies. So, so we have we have a lot of this kind of, of project and we also have master theses for civil engineers. They always, always make these theses at companies so they have real problems to work with, and they work together with people that… and they have one supervisor from the industry and one supervisor from, from the university. So they have, of course there are different expectations from the university than from the industry, but also that we have started to work together with the supervisors in the industry so they know what we are expected from, expecting from the students from an academic perspective.

How much of that work involves international issues?

It depends on, because many of our students come from different parts of the world, for them it's a way to be, to get in touch with the Swedish society. So many of them are not so interested in, in working globally in that, in the students' projects because they wanted to, to root themselves here in, in Sweden. And I think that, since we have many global company in the region, it, it is a part of, it is part of the international communication, so to say. But it's not that it's explicitly discussed as an international project because it's, it's so, it's so common, so it's like natural things, so to say.

How well has higher education prepared students to work in IPC, and what else can higher education do to prepare students for IPC work in industry?

It's hard to say in generally how well. I think it could be better and I think it needs to be a responsibility that, that the academia and industry has to, to collaborate with and how to see what is needed for a future, and what can, how can the industry contribute to the education when it comes to this kind of questions and what can, what do we need to develop for the future. I think it's… I think here it's, it's a kind of a cocreation and then mutual responsibilities is necessary. Otherwise, I think it will be hard to solve the problem.

Besides co-creation, do you have other ideas?

I think that we can have maybe, I think it could be useful if we, if we, from the university point of view, have the ability to face, to face more of the daily problems that, that are out in, in industry, or challenges, what we can do, and that is something that we can have, and we do have in this assignment to some extent that we have people coming from companies and give lectures at our university and also the other way round that we can go from university into the industry and have a discussion and, and I think we also come here to the, to this question about lifelong, is something that goes the need to sol… solve for the future. I don't think it's, it's a… there is a big challenge and the university as it is structured today cannot meet the requirements from the society on long, in lifelong learning, but I think if we can have a much closer exchange, then we will learn from each other because there's a lot of, of skills and, that is also… will get lost if young people doesn't learn from, from elderly people in, all the people, so to

say, more trained people in the industry. They need to have some handicraft skills as well, an experience as, they don't have today. They are more prepared to come out and work in in more of a digital environment, and what do you need to have? What kind of competences do you need to have in order to make decisions in universal platforms, for instance? It's, it's many things that I think here.

Would you place this closer connection with industry at the graduate level (or undergraduate level, as you say in Europe) or the postgraduate level (or graduate level, as you say in Europe)?

I will say that we have it on, we have this collaboration on undergraduate level and we have it on graduate level and we have it on, on postgraduate as a… a research assistant or—not research assistant but postdoc, postdoc level… we have, we do have a lot of industrial PhD students.

How has industry helped higher education prepare students for IPC work, and what else can industry do to help higher education prepare graduates for IPC work in industry?

I think that the industry could be helpful if it, to also to formulate what, how they work today and what they, what they expect the challenges in that part is… they think will come in the future. And if they formulate the, the requirements of the future employees, this could be of great help for us to prepare our students for, for future work. But on the other hand, we do know that the university system is in one way a slow project it process. If he wanted to change the program, for instance, it takes a while and if you want to change a course, it takes a while. But still, if you have, you always have some courses and you also can give opportunities to students to have an internship. If, if the companies can offer internships, it will be very valuable because then the students know how to use their skills and their knowledge in a better way, and so they can be prepared. We do have this kind of longtime agreement with, with some companies, our university do have this kind of agreements where they also have a kind of, they, they can offer internships for the students, which is very good.

Would you say that there is a midpoint where the university cannot go any further with professional, workplace skills, and the industry cannot go any further with academic skills, so it's up to the students to learn and go past that point?

I will say, yeah, in one way it, it exists because we also have different… would you say, requirements? I don't know if it's the right word, but we do have different requirements because the universities, we, we need to have a scientific base in our teaching, in our education and we also have, have to stay independent from, from the economical influences and political influences in that sense that we need to give students, or they need to learn basic theoretical skills, which is something that should be also international and the same level. And the industry, their requirements and what is asked, what is required from them is to produce and to be economical, successful, to generate money for, for the society, yes, so they could be able to have employees. But I think it's important to, to learn to find a balance and to see how you exchange knowledge between the industry and the university in, in order to be prepared, especially, I think, as a young student… where as a student it's important to learn how to use their theoretical knowledge in a practical way, and also to be able to, to transform practical problems into more theoretical problem, to generate new knowledge on, on a more general level, as well. It is a tricky balance and if you come for instance to, to engineering design or to design research and things like that, you can do very much intuitively, but it is not possible to repeat it if you don't have an idea what you have done. And is it a coincidence that it was a successful product or service or whatever, or is it because you have made some conscious decision why you go one direction or another. And if you don't can go back and evaluate your own work, it's very hard to say if it was a success, real success, depending on that you're, you're good designer or communicator or whatever, or if it was just "I have to do this," over a coincidence that you were happy to solve the problem.

If you were running a program in International Professional Communication, what would you do with it?

Oi, uau, I think I will, I will bring up a lot of ideas that we have about the kind of, that we are, that, for instance, the visual communication is, is globally easy to, to understand,

I will bring up differences, but I will also problematize around what is a culture, what is, what is a company culture, and what is a kind of… ethnic geographical culture. And I will also discuss what does the language mean? What does it mean the word, the wordings and how we use it and what does it mean to speak… English as a second or a third language, and what other parts… and how do you communicate and how do you meet and understand with in, in born… both on the more… human being way, emotional way, but also in the professional way and how it can affect, and also to, to problematize also that we have some pre-expectations or pre-knowledge about people and about cultures that it could be that we are human beings and we can meet on different levels. And also that the common interests and common understanding of something, it could be very limited, but this could really make us overcome other gaps when it comes to language, culture and so on. So it could unify people.

Would you make experience in industry, or science, or any field outside the academy part of the program?
Definitely. I, I would make it part of the course. But I will also make it part of the course that people should have some, some course in Humanities and Social Science to, to learn about culture and to understand as, such a thing as different religions, how it's affect our behavior and how, our understanding and how we communicate. I think this is very important. I think that we, we live in a global world and we think that the world is like… us, the rest of the world is like us and we don't understand. And if we don't understand, there is something wrong with… their culture or religion or things like that. So I think it's very, very important to have respect and to understand different perspective. ◼