Teaching as defuturing in design education

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ABSTRACT

This paper reports on a pilot investigation into the nature of teaching within the field of secondary design education in New South Wales (NSW), Australia. Its purpose is to identify structural elements that enable the reproduction of cultural dispositions that undermine the capacity of human societies to establish viable futures. Pierre Bourdieu’s theory of practice, particularly his concepts of field, habitus and illusio, are used to inform the interpretation and discussion of the results. The theoretical framework also draws on the work of design theorist Tony Fry, particularly his concepts of defuturing and redirective practice. Ethnographic methods are used to derive an account of teaching practice from the perspective of a current practitioner. The study provides a provisional sketch of the structure of the field of secondary design education. Outcomes include the development of empirical data for the interpretation of teaching as defuturing, an improved understanding of how design educators develop an interest in sustaining the unsustainable, and a contribution to the conceptualisation of teaching as a form of redirective practice. These findings are significant for design and technology educators who must increasingly grapple with the question of how their work either strengthens or undermines a collective ability to sustain.

INTRODUCTION

The study, to which this paper refers, addresses the unsustainability of design education. Two driving assumptions are that design education must change in order to effectively develop “sustain-ability” (Fry, 1999: 8), and that teachers hold a unique position that may be legitimately exploited for the purpose of redirection. However, the study itself deals with the task of understanding why educators come to have an interest in contributing to unsustainability. The rationale is that if we are to help teachers redirect the influence of institutions involved in the NSW secondary education system, we must understand how the social reality of teaching encourages Technology teachers to adopt practices that amount to a form of defuturing.

By applying Pierre Bourdieu’s theory of practice to the interpretation of empirical data, this study proposes that good design educators become so absorbed in the objective stakes of their practice that changing these conditions becomes extremely difficult – not least because it would threaten personal investments in identity, social standing, and career.

I. THE CONTEXT OF SECONDARY DESIGN EDUCATION IN NSW

This study focuses on design as it is taught within the Technology Learning Area. This learning area was established during the 1990’s through the homogenisation of subjects with a technical or vocational focus under the generic methodological concept of ‘design process’. The current NSW Stage 6 Design and Technology syllabus (2007) asserts the economic and cultural relevance of design, particularly in terms of an ongoing need for innovation. However, the issue of unsustainability is significantly underplayed – framed as a question of ‘sustainable development’ rather than developing a condition of sustainment (Board of Studies, 2007: 6; Fry, 2007a: 75). In this capacity, it reflects the function attributed to technology education by government and academics (NSW Ministry of Education and Youth Affairs, 1989: 56; Board of Studies, 2002: 7; Seemann, 2006: 35).

Seemann (2006) for example valorises the ongoing shift from vocational skill towards ‘generic competencies’ as vital for improving economic productivity through innovation (p. 35). He equates this to producing more things, more cheaply, and the increased proliferation of new products for consumer markets. Ignored in this discourse is the questionable sustainability of unlimited quantitative growth. This rationale neglects a necessarily political concern for the consequences of maintaining cultures of shortsighted economic expansion over the development of economies that use design to sustain long term futures.

It is important however not to attribute power to the syllabus without acknowledging that its interpretation is a product of its practical significance to practitioners. In one sense syllabus documents are only ever brought to life in unique classroom contexts. These classrooms, however, operate within the influence of educational systems and the NSW Board of Studies, which facilitates standardised outcomes through, among other things, the syllabus and support documents and HSC marking. Additionally, exhibitions such as the Powerhouse Museum’s DesignTech, function as significant reference point for successful outcomes within the HSC.

II. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS

A. Bourdieu’s Theory of Practice: Field, Habitus, and Illusio

Bourdieu’s theory of practice is useful for understanding how individuals develop an intuition for profitable action
within social contexts. *Field* refers to the objective social conditions in which individuals conduct a practice (Bourdieu, 2004: 19). Fields consolidate around common forms of knowledge, meaning, skill, and experience, such as religion, sport, or fine arts. Using the conventions of fields, members work to procure economic, cultural (knowledge, symbols), social (relationships) and other forms of capital (Bourdieu, 2004). The conditions for non-economic capital accumulation often require members to cooperate in the misrecognition of individual and collective interest (Bourdieu, 1998: 94). A clear example is gift exchange, whereby the reality of expense and the expectation of reciprocity is denied through polite euphemism (‘Oh you shouldn’t have’, ‘It was nothing, really’).

*Habitus* relates to an individuals sense of what kind of person they are within a normative social space, and the social competence for acting within that space (Bourdieu, 1997: 53). Through their involvement in a field, individuals become psychologically and physically disposed towards thoughts and behaviours conditioned by the field. As the literal embodiment of social norms, habitus provides an intuitive basis for good practical judgement. Through the concept of habitus, Bourdieu understands human action as a non-conscious attunement to social conditions, rather than a simple product of rational thought (Bourdieu, 1998: 24).

An individual who performs with a high level of practical facility possesses a habitus in tight synch with the conditions of the field. At such a point an individual operates under what Bourdieu calls *illusio* – the enchanted involvement in a social ‘game’. The ‘game’ operates according to socially objective stakes that are meaningful only to those with a ‘feel for the game’ (Bourdieu, 1998: 77). As an embodied phenomenon, this enchantment can have the effect of ‘carrying along and carrying away’ individuals in pursuit of objectives that make little sense to those outside the field. Understanding the logic of the ‘state of play’ within practices is therefore key to understanding the practical logic that disposes people to act as they do.

**B. Fry on Design, Defuturing and Redirective Practice**

For Fry, *defuturing* is the condition of undermining viable human futures through our contemporary modes of habitation (Fry, 1999: 12). The trajectory driven by the current dynamic of behaviours, desires, social relations, technologies, institutions, and systems of material and cultural production, constitutes a condition of defuturing. These elements are fundamental to our sense of ‘being’, and are all influenced by design. Fry challenges designers to critique and reform their practices in order to counter the effect of defuturing. However, this agenda is hindered by the tendency of design education to:

- Aesthetise designed artefacts and glamourise the practice as an avenue towards wealth, fame, or entertainment (Willis, 2000: 5).
- Perpetuate uncritical expectations for technological solutions in lieu of applying design to transforming cultures, social relations, and economies (Fry, 2004: 33).
- Misrepresent the social practice of design as a technical process (Fry 2009: 2) – obscuring what is political within designing.
- Misrepresent the role of design in structuring practices – obscuring the ontological function of design (Willis 2007: 92).
- Fail to instill habits of relational thinking (Fry, 2009: 31).
- Fail to help students understand the dialectic of sustainment (sustaining people and things must always be a matter of creation and destruction (Fry, 2009: 4), or to grapple with its ethical consequences (for instance, does the sustaining capacity of what we create justify what is destroyed?).

Fry argues for redirective practice as a practice-based project of changing the directive force of design (Fry, 2009: 55). He proposes that there are three kinds of activity required for individuals to engage in redirective practice: (1) gaining a perspective on the structure of one’s practice; (2) deliberate action to reform one’s practice in the light of this new understanding; and (3) transformative (political) engagement through practice (Fry, 2007b).

Thus, this study can be characterised as an application of redirective practice to the field of design education which engages in the first of the three activities: understanding the structure of the field that structures teaching practice.

**III. THE DESIGN AND METHODS OF THE STUDY**

In order to investigate the cultural knowledge of an expert practitioner (Ericsson & Charness, 1994), an exemplar teacher of five years experience, referred to under the pseudonym of ‘Ms Vittoria’, was invited to participate in the study. For these five years Ms Vittoria has taught Design and Technology at an independent Catholic school for girls located in metropolitan Sydney.

Ethnographic methods were used to characterise Ms Vittoria’s practice in what Spradley calls a native or folk language (1979: 104). The methods followed a customised version of Spadley’s (1979) developmental research sequence. They included two interviews, each recorded on video and transcribed for the purpose of analysis. Transcripts were analysed for the presence of domains, or categories of cultural knowledge (Spradley, 1979: 100). Domains are derived by identifying significant folk terms which are arranged in semantic relation to a common cover term. Results were triangulated against observations in the classroom, the original video recordings, corroboration by Ms Vittoria, and cross-checking with emergent results. The development of domains was audited by the research supervisor. These methods cumulatively worked towards building the validity and reliability of the findings.

**IV. RESULTS OF THE STUDY**

The results of the study took the form of four key domains. While neither exhaustive or definitive, the domains provide evidence for the conceptual schema that affords Ms Vittoria her practical facility. Balancing the need to inform the
discussion against the brevity of this paper, two of these domains, having an edge about you and being taken seriously, are presented below in a summarised format.

A. Having an edge about you

For Ms Vittoria, having an edge about you is a virtuoso quality crucial for helping students produce good results. In the development of the investigation, edge was initially described as an attribute of teachers with design experience, who could present examples of their work in classes as a way to motivate and inspire students. She said, for instance, “I find that very useful – showing the kids some of my own design projects – they get really inspired and it shows them what you can achieve”. During the second interview Ms Vittoria broadened the term to include an ability to establish a rapport with students that facilitates a productive relationship. For instance, she stated that “if you’ve got their respect then they’ll listen to you and they’ll believe every word that you say”. Edge, therefore, appears to signify an ability to foster a particular kind of aura or respect with students, based at least in part on generating a perception of ‘real-world’ credibility.

B. Being taken seriously

Being taken seriously includes terms that concern the status of the subject. Being taken seriously, or being seen as an area of study equivalent status and value to say Mathematics or Physics, is important for attracting academically ambitious students and ensuring adequate resources. As it stands academic students are often made wary of the subject due to perceptions of negative scaling effects in final year exams, and the risk that projects may absorb a disproportionate amount of time needed for other subjects. This is at odds with Ms Vittoria’s view that the subject is a serious and rewarding challenge, both academically and practically. Despite admitting issues relating to perception and status, Ms Vittoria expressed a positive view of the subject’s future within her school.

During the interviews Ms Vittoria’s initial impulse was to affirm the supportive relation between subjects, however, and without denying the truth of this relationship, she also conceded that subjects within the school must compete for students and resources (“It’s a fight … its very competitive”). This competition generates promotional activities that are designed to attract high performing student students. However, Ms Vittoria was adamant that the quality of classroom teaching is the most effective way to attract desirable students, saying for instance that “the best way to maintain your classes and maintain your numbers … is by teaching”.

V. INTERPRETATION AND DISCUSSION OF THE RESULTS

A. A provisional sketch of the ‘state of play’ in secondary education

A somewhat taboo reality for teachers like Ms Vittoria is the competition between subjects over students and resources that contribute to success. While the motivations of teachers cannot be reduced to any single objective, it is nevertheless true that university entrance scores are a source of tremendous consequence for teachers. For example, it is common practice to track student achievement as part of assessing teacher performance (DeCourcy, 2005). However, the rivalries this system creates must operate beneath the necessity of maintaining collegiality, and gestures towards the democratic function schools are expected to serve by instilling egalitarian values and ameliorating social inequality (Pilger, 2010).

Despite 1990’s reforms that established the mandatory learning area (NSW Ministry of Education and Youth Affairs, 1989: 60-61), the inferior status of the Technology within schools remains an intractable reality. Enforced through the attitudes of students, parents, and teachers (Paechter, 1993: 352; Williams, 2003: 5) Design and Technology’s standing is invariably linked to HSC performance (Williams, 2003: 6) – a major influence on student subject selections (Thomas, 2009: 65). This attitude suggests that, unless a student has a heartfelt interest, there is little academic benefit in electing the subject. In contrast, subjects like English (Advanced), Mathematics Extension or Physics, may attract students precisely because they have a reputation for instrumental academic value (Reid, 1984: 73).

The reality of subject hierarchy means that if Ms Vittoria wishes to compete within the dominant logic of secondary schooling (and not simply the lower status domain of vocational education), she must find a way to instill within students an interest that subverts the effect of the dominant logic, for example, by fostering interest in a career within the design field. We might infer then that having an edge fulfills an important function of developing trust, obligation, commitment, imagination, and desire; qualities that Ms Vittoria can then use to generate a mutual profit for her and the student. A reliance on this kind of strategy however would remain a reflection of the subject’s inferior standing, as does Ms Vittoria’s ongoing battle against perceptions originating from the subject’s vocational history.

B. The interest in unsustainability, or, the dilemma of being good

Between the peculiarity of the school setting and the objective stakes of the HSC, teachers make strategic judgements as to what provides comparative advantage for them and their students. By guiding the ability of students towards success within the field, Ms Vittoria contributes to the enculturation of students into the dominant concepts and practices of the design field. For instance, Ms Vittoria uses examples of work by famous designers, such as Ed Hardy and Marc Newson, to provide models of successful production within the field. However, following Fry’s argument, the culture of contemporary design is largely a system of significance disconnected from an ability to sustain. Willis summarises the defuturing inherent in contemporary design culture:

Those for whom questions of style, taste, fashion and the making of fine discriminations loom large are driving the turnover of trends. Their cultural labour is being channelled towards the creation of new markets and new modes of consumption, this in turn fuelling
material production and its impacts ... But immaterial impacts are just as pervasive and perhaps more damaging. ... Aesthetically designed products, clothing and environments ... design those who buy them, wear them and live in them as the ‘design aware’, increasing the visibility of design while obscuring its structural presence (Willis, 2000: 5).

Ms Vittoria is already a highly accomplished practitioner while being a valuable asset to her department, school and students. A dilemma exists, therefore, in the way her practice appears to play a part in reproducing an instrumental and aestheticised culture of design. This comment should be set against the positive work students do regarding the social and environmental impacts of design. However, these efforts are hamstrung by the field’s expectation for ‘solutions’ that are technical, commercial, and product centered. The inclusion of eco-design content is also significant, but in a marginal sense. Eco-design discourse can also reduce sustainability to a kind of technical consideration within the design process (Fry 2009: 184).

As a consequence, it is speculated that young designers may only understand ‘sustainability’ as a depoliticised technical factor rather than a complex socio-technical challenge. Fry’s alternative – that informed consideration of what should be sustained be allowed to determine what is appropriate to produce, market or sell – is not something Ms Vittoria need contend with in order maintain her current advantage within the field.

VI. CONCLUSION

As a small pilot study, this investigation does not provide results that back a substantial interpretation of secondary teaching practice. However, it does provide provisional evidence for interpreting teaching as a practice structured towards reproducing dispositions that defuture. If this observation holds, then it is fair to suggest that teaching itself is currently a form of defuturing. The interaction between field and habitus draws good practitioners into a deep and intuitive involvement with the dominant stakes of the field. This absorption makes it impossible for practitioners to obtain a disinterested perspective on what they do, or to take action that is without personal risk or consequence.

However, the reality of constraints cannot absolve teachers of responsibility. The structure of a field can never fully determine what an individual is capable of. Because social actors constitute a field, its structures can be affected by the actions of influential individuals and groups.

Part of the agenda of redirective practice is to articulate constraints, in order to aid the political objectives of practitioners. Responsibility and opportunity still lies therefore with teachers to use whatever “marginal freedom” they possess to counter the defuturing force of their practice (Sociology is a Martial Art, 2001).

REFERENCES


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