Provoking our futures: an activist pedagogy for transformative experiences for design agency, ethics and change-making

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Research Domains

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Abstract

Higher Education is an appropriate site for the "redirection" (Fry, 2009) of student designers away from bolstering consumerism and towards ethical social responsibility (Resnick, 2016). H.E. should enable citizen-learners to "evaluate continuously and negotiate the core values of their professions" (Solbrekke and Sugrue, 2012, p209). However, blueprints for redirection are few, as are longitudinal studies of design students' perspectives of being transformed.

During a four-year research study of undergraduate graphic designers (*n*= 45), a conceptual framework of teaching for transformative experiences (Pugh, 2011) enabled redirection through activist pedagogy intended to empower students' ethical agency and their own social activism in design practice.

Specific critical-activist interventions from that study, allowed students to have transformative experiences (TE) in which they re-saw design's paradigms, experienced value in compassionate design, and thus transferred their practice from conventional consumer-based paradigms, to being agents for an ethic of care and activism as social design.

Full paper

A redirective pedagogy is necessary for design students as the design industry "defutures" (Fry, 2009) by upholding consumeristic, material ideologies that enable resource overuse (Boehnert, 2018), and extinction of species (Kahn, 2010). Designers should instead operate through the lenses of ethics and care (Fry, 2015; Vaughan, 2018), professionalism that serves others (Solbrekke and Sugrue, 2012), compassion (Manzini, 2022) and community co-design (Triggs, 2016).

Design activism inspired a pedagogy that sought to stimulate the re-seeing of design's purpose and social affordances amongst students who were invested in traditional design norms. Pedagogy had to enable student agency as ethical change-makers. It was because of its ability to design for and evaluate re-seeing, value and agency, that Pugh's model of Transformative Experience (TE) became the

conceptual vehicle for activist pedagogy and research. Pugh outlines TEs as engendered by three components:

1. expansion of perception
2. experiential value for that re-seeing of the world
3. transfer of reseen content into everyday lives (agency).

TEs are memorable, deep-learning events that enrich experience (Pugh, 2011), can support ethos change (de Búrca, 2024) and the social aims of design activism (Markussen, 2013). Thus, delivering an activist-critical pedagogy chiefly expanded students' perception of design's potential harm, but also enabled value and motivated agency to use its affordances ethically.

Case studies of activism from art, design and elsewhere were instrumental in increasing student's value and self-efficacy by demonstrating how to act, and supported vicarious experience of action (Corcoran et al, 2004). They provided hopeful affect to counterbalance the shock of critical pedagogy.

The definitions of design activism as stated by Fuad-Luke (2009), Thorpe, (2011) and Markussen (2013), can also apply to critical pedagogy in that they both utilise transformative, and contentious actions to question hegemony and to effect systemic change. Both expand perceptions by their re-framing of norms and presentation of issues, and call for change-making action, especially in striving for the disadvantaged or excluded. Moreover, activism can work outside of regular channels, such as in using the affordances and aesthetics of design to disrupt, provoke and engage.

Moreover, combined with the concept of catalytic validity (Lather,1986) which validates pedagogical research when it conscientises its participants, as in Freire's critical pedagogy (2017), the interventions were activist in that they intended to empower the students to become agential citizens who practiced design professionalism through the lens of an ethic of care.

Over four years, a variety of activist interventions were made. These included exploring social injustice caused by lifecycles of familiar products, debating worldviews and activism in design history, or designing displays about nature versus the Anthropocene in the "radically local" (Hoelting, 2010, 2017), as without "radically" experiencing nature an individual might not care to save it (*ibid*).

Annually the entire design cohort participated in critical pedagogy in *Project X*, where mixed-year group teams, undertook an extended ideation workshop to develop socially conscious, challenging design. In *Project X: provoking our futures*, teams constructed 'provotype' designs (Manzini, 2015) for a public display. Provotypes are 'provocative prototypes' of strange or challenging designs with which to engage the community in discussions prompted by the 'weird' nature of the artefacts. These included a *No to Recycling* campaign, how to make a seed bomb, samples of polluted seawater, local currency and subterranean city roads. The aim of public events was to allow student-community collaboration to conscientise that community through affordances of design.

Students responded to the activist nature of the pedagogy by optionally undertaking more of it. For example, the following *Project X* saw students develop 'gentle' activism for mental health, such as a post-natal depression campaign, *I Can[t] Do This*: posters of expressions from mothers showing the words Can't and Don't with the T dramatically crossed off. The *Men in Pubs* quiz kit brought gamified

mental health conversation-starting to where men were. Illustration questioned Hollywood's sexualisation of women's mental health.

Applying phenomenography (Åkerlind, 2012) comparatively over two years showed that *Project X* enabled expansion of perception across the cohort, developing from a focus on the self as learner, to a focus on helping or even empowering others and, for some, focus on systems change. Student interviews demonstrated positive responses to the pedagogy, with some 'recognising' its ethos. The majority experienced value, sometimes gradually. Moreover, students undertook free-choice, proto-professional, as well as personal, acts of agency and activism off campus. However, expanding perception through activism was found to be necessary but not sufficient for ethos change, with experiential value in reseeing being the motivator of student agency for ethical design practice (de Búrca, 2024).

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