

Beyond Ideology: Retrospect and Prospect

Summary

The paper takes as its platform the centrality of ill-defined problems in design educational activity. From an appreciation of the nature of these states of affairs, two meta-aspects of design educational developments are offered: one, retrospective, the other, prospective.

In the retrospective aspect, interpreting data collected by NADE and the RCA's research project team (1974-1976), seven features are associated with 'design education' developments in secondary education (when construing the activities of designing as an aspect of human action in general, rather than with Design as a school subject).

Related to these seven features, a characterisation of a possible secondary curriculum is offered. In a speculative passage, a possible organising focus for such a conception of the curriculum is nominated in: man, his nature, his responsibility towards himself and others, and his habitat. Against this, some implications are introduced in terms of the nature and functions of the school (as institution) and the formal curriculum programme. A shift in general orientation towards curriculum 'content' is proposed, with a shift of attention towards seeing the learner as being the agent of responsible and responsive action — developed through experience of design educational activity. A pedagogic approach to this is seen in 'problematization'. It is suggested that reflecting on the experiencing of design educational activities may reveal and illuminate paradoxes; in particular, the co-existence of conservative and potentially subversive views of the design activity in human affairs. Hence, it is proposed, axiomatically, that agents of action should be properly sceptical towards the *status quo* and proposals for 'innovation'.

In the prospective meta-view of design educational activity, it is proposed that a focussing (through problematization) on the nature of design educational activity may lead to a reflexive and continually re-structuring pedagogy: that is, towards the emergence of a curriculum discourse which would be part of being a teacher.

At a large conference gathering, a questioner asked one of the main speakers: what was at the centre of his Department's teaching-training course? The speaker replied that 'the basics' were at the centre of his Department's course. This response was not pursued through a supplementary question although the questioner had not been answered. The response appears to say something; and indeed it does say something. But the questioner, assuming he was being honest, was, it may be supposed, attempting to elicit something more significant than the apparent answer could offer. The speaker failed to recognise the questioner's need to pose the question, and failed anyway to answer the question he did pose.

The difficulty may be indicated thus. To say that 'the basics' are at the centre of a course is perhaps to do little more than illustrate our weaknesses,

rather, that is, than to recognise the complexities of teaching and learning. For we can effortlessly agree (albeit only as an opening step) that 'the basics' are important: they are, by definition. The questioner was concerned perhaps with something substantially more significant. Perhaps, for instance, he was trying to ask: In what do 'the basics' consist? (though 'the basics' was a term that he did not in fact use). The educational world is full of phrases such as 'the basics', 'traditional' and 'progressive' (often erroneously polarised), 'standards': all of which appear to be offered as having self-evident meanings and agreed values, and as having a kind of automatic 'explanatory' power. And yet the phrases say little or nothing. They are however open to analysis, to clarification, and to interpretation. Interpretation is not easy. The activity of interpreting is towards increased understanding, and, speaking methodologically, contains the difficulty of the interpreter 'distanced' somewhat from his subject matter, and the language which is the vehicle of his interpretation.

There is a need to be able to recognise labelling; and the significance of its effects. There is also a need to recognise ideology in curriculum matters. Consider, for instance, the term 'design education'. As a label it has been in common use for the past fifteen or so years. Within that period, its usages stand for practices which are, presumably, considered to be an expansion of, or different from, or alternative to 'former' practices'.

Further, the term is often used in an implicit and largely hidden conjunction with 'radical' and with 'revolution'; and 'design education' can appear, in some undisclosed way, to be separate from 'traditional' practice. In many such instances, 'radical' is used as though it were synonymous with 'revolution' and 'traditional' is also subtly misleading. Of course, radical activity may be in effect revolutionary, but that is quite another matter. On this view, some critics of 'design education' and some proponents of 'design education' use the term unwittingly ideologically and mis-use 'radical', both sides being victims of ideology.

No doubt, however, sharper discriminations are being made in the use of terms, and no doubt the usefulness of sharper discriminations will become more apparent. It seems desirable that distinctions be recognised between design activity and design educational activity (which latter is necessarily related to curriculum activity); between design activity, a 'design process', and loose-fit procedural approaches; between problems and puzzles; between

design capacity (as a distinguishable capacity in, and aspect of, human action) and design awareness; between designing and discourse *about* designing. It may even be that *design activity in education*, although unwieldy, and *design capacity* offer more specific and neutral renderings of our concerns than the label 'design education', which may too frequently be an unexamined, because unacknowledged, ideological label. In this sense, this paper might have been entitled, *Beyond 'Design Education'*. But all this, of course, is matter for discussion.

The starting point consists in the recognition that design activity and design educational activity are located and exemplified in those states of affairs which have been categorised as 'ill-defined' problems (Archer and Roberts 1979). In their educational context, such problems are to do with the activity of the person as the agent of action-in-the-world. These ill-defined problems may be characterised as: existential: to do with individual and social creation of meanings, identity, and value; having open, fluid 'boundaries'; complex, and systematic; located in a societal-cultural, real-world matrix view of the design act; requiring heuristic activity to resolve.

Some appreciation of this is the starting point. Then, deriving from this, the substance of the paper is divided into two aspects — meta-aspects of curriculum developments — one, retrospect and two, prospect. In the retrospective aspect, some features relating to 'design education', when 'design education' is seen primarily as a would-be reforming movement, will be nominated. Then, a descriptive characterisation of a possible curriculum will be offered. Finally, some issues that are consequentially raised will be indicated. The prospective aspect will consist in indications of the possibility of a reflexive design pedagogy deriving from the perceived nature of the design activity: a pedagogy having as one of its functions a continuous reviewing of practice by those working in the field of design educational activity. A definition of 'design education' will not be offered. Conceivably, an attempt might be made to articulate the nature of design educational activity through a contrasting of putative exemplary activities against exemplars of 'not-design activity'; or by proposing that members of the design education movement are essentially concerned with formulating a meta-language — a discourse of critique — in order to facilitate a general discourse concerning the design educational curriculum.

But now, adopting the retrospective view, we shall first consider 'design education' (when 'design education' is the label for, apparently, a would-be reforming movement).

In 1973, the National Association for Design Education carried out a national pilot questionnaire-survey of 'design education developments' amongst the members of the Association (NADE 1973). The survey and its report, when further developed, formed part of the basis for a further questionnaire-survey carried out during early-1975 by a member

of the Royal College of Art's team working on the research project, 'Design in General Education'. Later again in the same research project, a series of visits to schools was carried out; these visits included a further questionnaire. The material collected was little used by the research team and, in considering 'design education' in association with curriculum reform aspirations, use has been made of access to the enormous amount of material.

The interpretation of the data which is offered here is based largely on reflecting upon the comments attributed to the teachers visited. Inevitably, the interpretation is somewhat impressionistic. The responses are problematic to assess and interpret, partly because a respondent may have given 'objective' answers which are contradictory factually or philosophically when compared. Similarly, where a group of teachers responded from a single school, their responses may show incompatibilities within the raw data.

Although the material was collected during 1975, observation since that time suggests that the larger part of the interpretation still stands in respect of much current practice. It is divided into seven points, following.

One, 'Design Education' tended to be 'defined' and practised according to the specialist frameworks provided by the individual teacher's education and initial training. That is to say, the perception of what constituted 'design education' reflected the particular area of design activity in which the individual teachers had trained. It is possible to suggest that 'subject based' teachers had not yet worked together for a sufficient length of time for generalisable models of design educational activity (that is, models not bound by a particular subject-view) to have emerged from practice. Nevertheless, there were some indications that features which might be developed into such generalisable models were being perceived by a minority of teachers.

Two, the activities of 'problem solving' were seen by some as being central to design activities. It was noticeable that the phrase 'problem solving' was used, and not 'problem-centred'; which might suggest that the concept of 'solution' (and resolution) had thus far received little scrutiny. A wide variety of conceptions of 'problem solving', and the practices to which it might be pertinent, was held. Experience in 'design education' teaching appeared to attribute importance to those activities that had the intent of being more explicitly grounded in first-hand experience and a more-conscious awareness of societal context. How far this was real (which might be shown in the responses to a test question such as, 'What constitutes a 'real problem'?) and how far possibly rhetorical was not clear. But generally, 'design education' appeared to be distinguished for, if not necessarily by, many respondents by an identification with (almost any) changes from what they saw as being 'normal' practice. It is possible to suggest that some may have glimpsed signs of a coherent generic model of design activity in education — one that would not be subject-bound,

even if subject-based — but it is probably more accurate to suggest that a generally formulated and generally understood model relating to a design education curriculum was perhaps emergent rather than had been articulated. (This would appear still to be the case.)

Three, the titles of schools' departments (Design, Creative Arts and Creative Studies, Design and Technology, Technical Studies, Art, Craft, Wood, Metalwork, Home Economics, Textiles, Fabrics) did not necessarily denote any particular educational policy on the parts of individuals, schools, or local education authorities. Further, within a particular 'subject-view' no necessary agreements were apparent. The use of the term 'design education' appeared to signify, for its users, that changes were happening or had happened: changes, that is, from the individual user's conception of normal practice. Generally, the nature of this differentiation was neither made explicit, nor was it necessarily agreed between practitioners.

Four, it had been the practice in most schools visited to have institutionalised the bringing together of some school subjects through timetabling. The significance of this bringing together in relation to the development of design activity in education was not clear, although some timetabling activity of this kind seemed to be considered 'necessary' to development of the curriculum, even if not sufficient.

Five, in the large majority of schools visited it was the case that some kind of 'rotational' organisation of pupils was in use for the 'design subjects', especially for the first two years of the secondary level of education. Why this 'should' be the general practice seems not to have been examined. This kind of organisation was often associated with, or even identified with, 'design education'. In relation to the latter, this is to say that no discrimination appeared to be made between an institutional organisation and the activities that the organisational patterns might be intended to support. (In both these points, four and five, some consequential criticism of 'circus organisation' and of 'so-called Design Faculties' can be seen as a product of the critics' own ideological labelling of design activity in education as 'design education'. In other words, when followed up, such criticism may be more revealing of the critics' perceptions than informative concerning design activity in education.)

Six, in distinction from the two-year period noted above, a majority of respondents indicated that they worked with other subject areas of the curriculum at some stage of their courses. Five indicated some co-operative teaching with sciences; others put forward joint teaching with mathematics, religious education, English, history, music, drama, geography, humanities. As to whether 'any other subjects might be added to design education', nominations included (not from the respondents of the last sentence): drama, history, geography, sociology, biology, science, economics, rural studies (seen as being beneficial to landscape design),

mathematics (from a home economist), and 'any in which problem solving occurs'.

Seven, 'changes' or developments acknowledged as 'design education' which were considered 'successful' appeared to depend on particular individuals' abilities in relating people and specialist perspectives constructively.

Having in mind these features which are associated with the conception of 'design education' as a would-be curriculum reforming and development movement, I want now to move towards indicating the character of a possible curriculum, in a characterisation whose outline has been emergent and dimly visible for some time. The characterisation will be of the 'whole curriculum', not only of a design dimension.

Two comments are necessary as preface. First, it may be supposed that the 'holding structure' of a technologically-transformed and continuously evolving culture depends on some commonality of concepts, values and information being held generally by the members of society. Second, it may be asserted that our societal matrix is transforming from one having a relatively closed character towards one having a more open and pluralist character. Then, we propose that the necessary centrality of the participants' action in design activity and in design educational activity has an anthropological quality (and is also, because of an increasingly 'ecological awareness', anthropocentric in a weak sense). When therefore it is enquired from where a possible organising focus of change in educational practice and curricula in such a pluralist cultural context and for such activity as designing might be derived, it can be proposed that it is to be found in man himself: in his nature, in his responsibility towards himself and others, and in his capacity to improve or destroy his surroundings. Such an appreciation of the place of man is central to the conception of curriculum implicit in the emergent 'design education' paradigm.

The practical implications are considerable: what might be some of the practical implications of accepting such a view?

Generally, the educational institution itself — the school — would be characterised by being problem-centred, future-centred, and change-centred. More powerfully — and a lengthy exposition would be necessary to show it properly — education would be centred on meaning-making. On this view, the institution of school could be construed as an instrument of cultural and political radicalism: again, such an assertion is one that merits lengthy consideration: it would point, for instance, towards a political theory of design activity. But in this paper, the immediate concern is more with the implications for the formal curriculum programme in the institution.

Perhaps the main implication is for a shift of general orientation, and specifically, of orientation towards curriculum 'content'. It is possible to see developments in design educational activity as primarily methodological in their 'origins': they are

concerned with questions and with issues requiring, evidently, some development of familiar procedures and practice. Put simply, this is a shift away from subject content and towards process. In designing terms, away from the familiar apparent superiority of the product (though not dismissive towards it) and towards a greater awareness of the underlying process, or the ordering of changing and forming. Additionally or alternatively, this may be seen as a shift towards a meta-level activity in curriculum activities, and, pedagogically, a shift towards the development of professional discourse.

Such a stance more consciously (or possibly even explicitly) relates curriculum content – through an anthropological-anthropocentric perspective – to the responsibility of man. Pedagogically, the shift of attention is towards the learner as being the agent of responsible and responsive action. The strategic approach and the concepts appropriate to this consist in problematization. The problematization is of the relations between two realities: the reality of the concrete situations of *these* pupils, and the reality – the ‘theoretical context’ – provided by the school. Descriptively, the problematized curriculum would be characterised by being pupil-centred in its appeal (that is, deriving from *their* existential situations) and man-centred (anthropological-anthropocentric) in its content. An illustration of the shift from a subject and content view of the curriculum towards a pupil and man-centred view of the curriculum may be offered thus.

In the former, a question might be found relating to, say, the principles of kitchen planning: that is, an impersonal and generalised question and an impersonal and generalised task. In the latter on the other hand, the shift might be illustrated in a question inviting pupils to consider critically the arrangements for the serving of school lunches as presently organised in their school. It is at this point that the potentially radical nature, inclusive of its political dimensions, of design activity become evident. The criteria for specialist teaching in such a conception of the curriculum would set ‘learning situations’ in a personal as well as a societal context: the specialist perspectives on lived situations would demonstrate those specialist contributions as reinforcing aspects of the curriculum, the curriculum now being conceived more holistically.

In what might be seen as a summarising passage to this notion of the whole curriculum, Maxine Greene writes:

... learning must be in some manner emancipatory in the sense that it equips individuals to understand the history of the knowledge structures they are encountering, the paradigms in use in the sciences, and the relation of all of these to human interests and particular moments of human time. It should be possible as well for people to learn the significance of technique and to understand the dangers of instrumental controls through confrontations with some centres (sic) of technology, even with bureaucracies. The idea is to enable them to pose searching and significant questions with respect to

what works upon them and conditions them – to learn how to recognize mystification, whatever the source. (1978, p.19).

It is worth considering an idea suggested by the phrase, ‘... how to recognize mystification ...’. It raises the question: Might reflecting on the experiencing of design activity, and the recognition of the fundamentalness in designing, enable teachers to recognize, as well, ideological views of ‘design education’?

For there is an ideological view of innovation (innovatory practices often being associated with the phrase, ‘design education’) which can appear to suggest that most if not all ‘traditional’ practice (‘traditional’ being used pejoratively as well as ideologically) is to be accorded scant respect, if not entirely dismissed. This is an ideological position – an extreme one – disregarding the plainly obvious culturally maintained and shared traditions of practice. But in contrast to such a position, reflection on the experiencing of the heuristic working-out of design educational activities may contribute to an awareness of ideological stances. Furthermore, paradoxes may be revealed.

For, in practice, design educational enquiry can reveal implications which shift the focus of attention between the particular and the general. Briefly, the heuristic mode of designing-as-learning may, in effect, question established practices and patterns of thought. The activity can then be potentially disruptive of, and even subversive towards, the *status quo*. Such an activity, on this view, generates threats (or possibilities, according to position): the relativism of the particularity of the established view; familiar practices; the sheer predictability of the artefacts which are to be achieved; all these are brought sharply into focus. Further, the notion of problem-centred learning carries with it the possibility of a process of social critique. This process may be signified by the popular phrase, ‘bringing into consciousness’.

Now, the paradoxes which are found in real radicality are recognized when we find ourselves asking: When – or at what level – does this bringing into consciousness ‘stop’? The question arises because of the awareness that problem-centred activity, continually burrowing into its subject matter, carries the possibility of destroying the individual’s peace of mind; (though, from another aspect, this may of course be construed alternatively as liberating). Design educational activity can be seen as potentially politically subversive and morally disturbing. And yet, further reflection suggests the necessity of order and continuity. This is order not as a coercive and externally imposed force, but as a necessary condition for social life.

The latter point may be illustrated in relating it to a familiar concept in the ‘design vocabulary’. In design activity, consideration of the meanings associated with ‘function’, along with questioning of the dogma of functionalism (wherein, admittedly to risk gross over-simplification, there is a simplistic

acceptance of the slogan, 'Form follows function'), suggest that, for many, an important qualitative aspect of function in the man-modified world is that of familiarity. Another qualitative aspect is continuity.

As a concrete instance, we can consider an artefact, taking as a rather stark example, a milk jug having the form of a thatched cottage. To one persuaded that form does indeed follow function, the measure of its value might be insofar as the jug 'fits' to formal criteria in reference to the pouring of liquid. On the other hand, it is possible that to the owner of such an artefact the notion of function (in relation to this jug) is not simply utilitarian. This is to say that functionalism is not enough. For, clearly, function may have an existential aspect: that thatched cottage milk jug may carry associations which are to be remembered, and it is the carrying of those remembrances which are part of the idea of function, and which are integral to that artefact. Continuity, on an individual and family basis, is associated with familiarity; and continuity and familiarity can be aspects of function.

Indeed, this sense of continuity may be an aspect of function, revealed through design activities, which is especially important in an age of evidently rapidly and completely changing institutions. Further, to focus hard on the nature of change and on the concept of progress may be to more clearly suggest the necessity of continuity – continuity which may be carried by objects being associated with particular actions and events.

Design activity, then, may be revealing of an anthropological necessity for social continuity and conservation. These may appear to be in a paradoxical relation to the apparently disruptive logic of heuristic design activity and enquiry. The continual questioning in the 'problem identification stage' of the activity may therefore reveal, by extension from this societal level, the necessity for institutional order. That is, it can be suggested that design enquiry may also – alongside and even derived from its questioning of the taken for granted – suggest the necessity of routine patterns of activity and behaviour on the more particular institutional level of the school. The awareness of this proposed necessity is the conserving aspect of the potentially challenging questioning within design activity. So we have a view of design educational activity, the activity having a potentially radical character. Such radicalism would have two aspects: one, possibly disruptive of, even subversive towards, the *status quo*; the other, conserving of, or conservative towards, the *status quo*. Radicalism is not synonymous with revolutionary; nor is radicalism anti-tradition. The 'deep structure' of design activity is revealing of paradox, not one-sidedness.

The paradoxical proposition – perhaps even having an axiomatic status in relation to the activity – deriving from these co-existing aspects is that the agents of action (that, is the participants in design educational activity) are to hold an open-

minded questioning stance towards the *status quo* as well as looking sceptically towards proposals for 'innovation'.

This has moved us from the retrospective view to the prospective. The prospect offered is peculiar in character: it is to do with the teachers' perception of their practices. Essentially, the proposition is that a focussing on the deep structure of design educational activity may lead to a reflexive and continually re-structuring pedagogy: that is, to the 'possession' by teachers of a continuous appraisal model of their practices, and, hence, of the field of curriculum in general. It has been indicated that focussing on the nature of problem-centred activity leads to a shift from the particular artefact-model of design activity towards a generalisable process model; that is, towards a meta-particular activity model. The shift is from the surface of problem-states-of-affairs towards the underlying order of their transforming. The focus on the surface leads to the problematization of its codification, this codification being embodied in artefacts.

In working through towards a resolution of the problem-states, the learner de-codifies and comprehends more fully the underlying order of change.

The artefact-model in the field of design education (which is sometimes offered as design educational activity: that is, the model grounded in the technical difficulties and puzzles of the making of a range of conventional artefacts) remains on the surface and fails to discover the underlying structure.

But the dynamic between the codification of the problematized states (consciously beginning in the formulation of a sufficient, tentative, statement of 'the problem' or 'the brief') and de-codification involves participants in a continuing re-construction of their knowledge and understanding. Certainly, as a pedagogic device, it can be reasonable and proper to 'start from' a conventional artefact. But subsequently, to problematize the concrete situation – that is, to see what lived states might be indicated by that artefact – is to lead into the deep structure of design activity.

The longer, and the more consciously, the process of problematization, the more the subjects enter into the problematized object, and the more they are enabled to enter critically into reality. On this view, the design educational activity, as a knowing activity, would suppose not only a theory of knowing but also an educational practice corresponding to the theory. It supposes

- 1 a condition of dialogue between learners and teachers as equally knowing subjects;
- 2 the school as the means of encounter between the school-as-theoretical-context and concrete lived situations; and
- 3 the possibility of an approach towards the raising of a critical methodology in relation to a content drawn from this lived experience.

This is indicative of the potential value in the development by 'innovators' of 'problem solving'; of

the playing against each other of problem and solution concepts; and in the 'working back' from particular artefacts already existing to their possibly 'originating' and generalised problematized states. The forms of modelling devised and employed mediate between the concrete and theoretical contexts of reality.

A peculiar (and generally, the most important) contribution to curriculum praxis by developments called 'design education' is that it is meta design activity. The meta-activity offered is the enablement of reflection upon the activity and the development of professional discourse. For problematization effectively challenges familiar routines of practices; and the implications go beyond design studies. The possibility of a critical and restructuring practice offers a model of the teacher as action researcher. In raising the consciousness of the teacher, the taken for granted realities of, and relations between, the institutional management structure and the curriculum in its varying aspects are rendered as problematic and become accessible to questioning. Such a perspective on the curriculum and educational

practice is indicative of a praxis appropriate to a sense of a transformed and transforming context of human action. But it would also be genuinely radical, and that would raise disturbing questions: Can, or to what extent might, educational institutions be radical? (which is not to say revolutionary). If they cannot, should the educational process raise radical questions? If fundamental questions were raised, what might be the effects on educational, and other, institutions? Is there a distinction to be explored between the conserving and preservative aspect of education and, in contrast, inertia? As education is institutionalised, isn't that, by definition, to contribute to inertia? What institutional forms, kinds of college or school are appropriate if what constitutes knowledge is changing from a singular, particular view to one that is more complex and pluralistic?

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