The Design Studio as a Place of Study: Critique as Hermeneutic Conversation

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Abstract

As postsecondary design educators, are we providing students a place of study or are we just instructing? Educational theorist and historian Robert McClintock's "Toward a place of study in a world of instruction" (1971) was published as a critique of the instructional culture in education in which he observed an overemphasis on pedagogy and the role of the teacher in student learning. In McClintock's conception of study the student is not a passive being reliant on a teacher to provide learning opportunities, but rather an active agent in their own self-cultivation. With the ongoing academization of design education and the outsized impact of communication design on society, there is an urgent need to consider how our own understandings of communication design, its history, and design education impact the future of our discipline and larger society. As part of a Master's thesis conducted using a hermeneutic approach and interpretive analysis to gain a deeper understanding of the lived experience of design educators, two communication design educators in a Canadian university were interviewed. Amongst the revelations was the value and significance of conversation, including within the design critique, as a necessary foundation for a student-teacher relationship that supports learning for both parties. This presentation explores Gadamer's concept of the hermeneutic conversation (1960/2013) as one approach that may help teachers and students transform the design studio into something closer to McClintock's "place of study" and open possibilities of self-formation for students and educators.

Keywords: Design Education, Design Critique, Design Pedagogy, Study, Hermeneutics, Conversation

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Introduction

Teaching and learning might impart knowledge, whereas study led to understanding, whereby things known were made one's own and became a part of one's judgment... (McClintock, 1971, p. 162).

To instruct relates to training. To educate is to foster the development of judgment, personal initiative, and the conscious adoption of values. This distinction is essential. To be a good designer in the broadest professional sense, in addition to the technical knowledge, one has to be a good citizen, that is, a socially responsible person. For this, technical instruction, however good, is insufficient, let alone faith in intuition (Frascara, 2007, p. 68).

Despite the increasing complexity of the work of designers and of the impact of design on society, and as graphic design education is increasingly academized, it is, as Harland (2017) states in his introduction to a special issue on graphic design education, "bemusing" that there is a relatively small pool of research on design pedagogy. Of the research available on design curriculum and pedagogy, many touch on topics that focus on what is taught (Goldschmidt et al, 2010) and how that is taught, and what research exists is mainly from American and British perspectives (Souleles, 2013; Harland, 2017). This may be in part due to the history of design education (McLean-Knapp, 2015); its close association with commerce and industry and the privileging of practice (Masuda, 2022); and in the relative newness of design education to the academy. Perhaps for these and other reasons, there is limited scholarship reflecting upon what it means to be educated and to educate in graphic design. With growing academization and the growing number of specialties (such as user experience design, service design, and information design) within and related to the graphic design discipline, it is now more important than ever to critically consider whether we are, in Frascara's (2007) words, only "training" (p. 68) designers rather than educating them.

If design education is to move beyond just building skills and gaining knowledge, to encourage and contribute to the self-cultivation of students as designers and as individual human beings, training will not be enough. In order to gain a deeper insight into why design education is the way it is currently, it is important to critically reflect upon how who we are— as practitioners and educators and as individual human beings with a past—affects the design classroom and curriculum. As part of a Master's thesis, I conducted a hermeneutic inquiry into the lived experience of design practitioner-educators, which included two hermeneutic interviews with design educators. One important revelation of these interviews was the importance of conversations in the classroom, both between teacher and student, amongst students, and also between students and both their own work and the work of others (Masuda, 2022). In the process, one conversation in particular that impacted me was the one I had with the seminal 1971 essay "Toward a Place for Study in a World of Instruction" by American educational theorist Robert McClintock. In it McClintock argues against a myopic conceptualization of education represented by training and instruction and instead champions study as the conceptual heart of education. I propose that the design critique as hermeneutic conversation based on the work of Hans-Georg Gadamer could help design educators to see the design critique as an opportunity for such study for both students and themselves.

Study and self-cultivation

In "Toward a Place for Study in a World of Instruction'" (1971), McClintock provides a historical overview of the concept of *study* and argues for it as an alternative to teaching and

learning. Referencing the writings of philosophers such as Michel de Montaigne, Erasmus, and Seneca, McClintock critiques the educational culture of instruction and makes a case for study as the path to achieve greater understanding, both of the world and of the self. Citing Montaigne, McClintock states that in teaching and learning, the student is made over reliant on a teacher to impart knowledge, rather than doing the "work of finding out" (p. 162) for the self. It is this work of finding out that leads to understanding and self-understanding, things that cannot be imparted from teacher to learner. Understanding must arise from within the individual student. This is echoed by Erasmus, for whom study was an art of "both discipline and delight" (McClintock, 1971, p. 164) and as such, a phenomenon that must manifest differently for and from within each student. For both philosophers, teachers were there to guide and encourage, rather than to instruct. Study acknowledges the individual's motivations and interests, unlike instruction which seeks an outcome to which students are required to conform (McClintock, 1971).

Although self-cultivation is often emphasized at the beginning of any educational movement, there is evidence throughout history that over time, a culture of instruction creeps in and overshadows a culture of study. In ancient Greece and Rome, with the growth of empire, so too did the need for well-trained bureaucrats and military officials and with it, a greater reliance on instruction (McClintock, 1971). Jesuit Christian education too began with a focus on study with the teacher's role mainly to encourage and facilitate self-discovery, yet with time, external pressures and accountability "for the people they produced" (McClintock, 1971, p.177) forced teachers toward greater emphasis on instruction. In more recent history, population growth, industrialization and its fixation with measurement, along with accompanying changes in societal views and values have all contributed to the growing culture of measurement and instruction (McClintock, 1971; Pinar, 2004). In my own context, the provincial government in Alberta, Canada, requires students in elementary and junior high school to take provincial aptitude tests, the results which are used by private organizations such as the Fraser Institute to "rank" schools (Fraser Institute, n.d) ostensibly to inform parents. At the higher education level, publicly funded universities are required to meet curriculum-affecting key performance indicators that have little to do with subject matter understanding or self-cultivation beyond workforce readiness. A focus on instruction can be thus seen as a homogenizing and conforming force that supports those in power, rather than one that respects the autonomy and creativity of diverse individuals.

It is important to mention here that instruction has its place and will always do so in some proportion to study (McClintock, 1971). In design education for example, students will need instruction in specific skills and knowledge (such as those taught in many foundational courses) to be able to solve more complex design problems later in their studies. However, while instruction focuses on atomic particulars—a skill, a unit, a course, or even a degree—study is a lifelong endeavor of understanding. Study also recognizes the autonomous creative student as a human individual and the initiator of understanding, rather than the teacher (McClintock, 1971). As a process of self-cultivation, study goes beyond curricular outcomes or the acquisition and assessment of skills and knowledge to understanding and self-understanding. McClintock's conception of study as a site for understanding also recalls the curriculum theorist William Pinar's words. Pinar eloquently states that "understanding is the raison d'être of the curriculum" (2015, p. 112) and that such understanding, is at once "intellectual and emotional", "individual and social, directed to the present as it is informed by the past" (p. 112). If study is truly the "site of education" (Pinar, 2015, p. 14), we would do well to try and understand what this could mean for design education.

As higher education everywhere faces challenges such as relevance, corporatization, and funding cuts, and even the pandemic, McClintock's critique feels more relevant than ever over fifty years after its writing. For my part, McClintock's essay has forced me to contemplate whether I as a design educator too often depend on instruction instead of supporting students in study, thereby stifling their autonomy and creativity. What does instruction look like? What can study be? How can we help students to find their own motivation in the art of discipline and delight? As one who teaches undergraduate students, however, I cannot just contemplate. I want to do what I can to support study, not only for students and colleagues, but also for my own self-cultivation. As Frascara (2007) urged:

> We have to set the bar high enough that we abandon the idea of training designers, and get on with the practice of educating them, even if, in the end, they begin to think differently than us. At least they will think, and will not just copy, like trained monkeys, the miserably superficial look of things. (p. 68)

In understanding our practice of educating students, reflecting upon whether we truly are educating them or only training and instructing them, we may be better able to respond to Frascara's call. Afterall, the word studio shares the same Latin root as study, which has meant such things as "eagerness", "to strive toward, devote oneself to cultivate" and "apply oneself" (Etymology Online, n.d.). The studio should therefore be the perfect site for study as envisioned by McClintock, Pinar, Montaigne, and its other advocates. Further, in the design studio, I believe that the design critique in the form of a hermeneutic conversation may be one way to engage in and encourage study.

Hermeneutics and the Critique as conversation

Hermeneutics is the study of interpretation and is closely associated with German philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer. Moules (2002) states that hermeneutics is at once "the tradition, philosophy, and practice of interpretation" (p.2). The main concerns of hermeneutics are meanings and understandings of taken-for-granted phenomena within a specific context, and how these are affected by our own history as interpreting beings (Gadamer, 1960/2013). In the context of research, hermeneutics is not so much a research methodology, but rather an approach to inquiry (Moules et al., 2015). As hermeneutic inquiry aims solely to better understand a phenomenon more deeply, the goal is not to find a universal theory, but rather to deepen our understanding of the particular. As such, it does not seek to remove the researcher from the research but acknowledges the researcher as an important part of understanding the phenomenon. It is the research topic that leads the researcher, rather than a hypothesis. To this end, inquiry is always in conversation—with texts of all kinds, with interviewees, with images, and with the self as an active participant in the inquiry. This conversation is at the heart of hermeneutics.

A hermeneutic conversation, however, is not just any conversation. It is not idle talk. It is not a debate where one wins or loses an argument, nor is it about coming to an agreement. A hermeneutic conversation is one that holds the participants to the particular topic being discussed, and one that is entered into with an ethical orientation to the other (Dostal, 2021; George, 2020; Moules et al., 2015), humility, and openness to the possibility that one might learn something new, and even if they are shown to be wrong. In this way, a hermeneutic conversation is not easy for those who have fragile egos, insecurities, ambitions, and the like—which sums up most human beings. Further, although it may be the case, a hermeneutic conversation does not need to be between two people, nor does it have to be strictly verbal. It

can be a conversation between text and reader, such as a researcher trying to understand a journal article. It can also be art and viewer, or perhaps a concert poster and someone trying to decide whether to attend. As long as there is room for interpretation and the desire for understanding, there is the possibility of a hermeneutic conversation.

In the case of a design critique, there is the possibility of a hermeneutic conversation, insofar that it is a conversation about a specific topic—the work, be it work in progress or a finished product that the student brings to the studio. A critique is meant to guide students in making sense of their own work and their relationship to it (Scagnetti, 2017), and by extension help students to connect to the world at large. It helps participants to make explicit and explore values, both as individuals and as a community (Orr & Shreeve, 2018). It is meant to cultivate not only the intellect but also the emotions, connecting the individual to the past and present world, (Pinar, 2015). In doing so, understandings arrived at can also become a launching point for further inquiry, new understandings, and more self-directed study beyond our time with them. Approaching the critique in this way with a view of the student as a whole individual with a life beyond the classroom and beyond "design student" may better cultivate the desire to study. The design critique as hermeneutic conversation therefore has the potential to be a site of study.

Conversational critique as site of study

As part of my own inquiry, I interviewed two design educators about their experiences of being practitioner-educators. One important finding was regarding the value they placed on building relationships with students, and the value of conversation both as a way to teach and learn, as well as to establish trust. The design critique was among such conversations (Masuda, 2022).

One interviewee, Frank (pseudonym), speaking about both first year and senior level courses, referred repeatedly to having conversations with students to understand the student's "intention" (Masuda, 2022, p. 48)—both for the task at hand and beyond the class activities—while also trying to guide them in the formal aspects of the subject matter. He speaks not only of observing the work, asking questions of the student, and listening carefully to their responses, but also of observing the student—their body language, for instance—for signs of how they can provide the academic and other support the student needs at that particular time.

From a hermeneutic perspective, both the verbal exchange and Frank's non-verbal reading of the student as text can be considered conversation (Gadamer, 1960/2013). Through these conversations, Frank comes to better understand the student's motivations and interests, allowing him to "contextualize the content for the individual" (Masuda, 2022, p. 49). In this way, the critique is always a conversation for Frank and rooted in a deep respect and care for the individual human beyond the label of student.

George (pseudonym), who teaches mostly at the senior level also speaks passionately about the students—their intelligence, capabilities, and potential. For him, a critique is a conversation in which he and students can ask questions of each other and themselves. It is an opportunity to draw on the diverse experiences of the participants and explore one another's assumptions, so that perhaps they may arrive at new understandings (Masuda, 2022).

For him, the technical aspects of design, though not unimportant, are always in service to the larger questions of life—both as a designer and as a human being in the world. George talks of trying to guide students to a "magical weird hard-to-access intangible space" (p. 52) beyond the concerns of knowledge and skill acquisition. In this place he feels the students begin to gain a deeper understanding of themselves as designers and their relationship to the world through the subject matter. Much like in McClintock's conception of study, the heart of Frank's curriculum seems not to lie in technical mastery, but instead in the goal of student self-cultivation.

Like any critique, the ultimate topics of the teachers and the student's discussion is the work itself, both in its conceptual and formal qualities. For both interviewees, however, the conversation around the artifact is simultaneously an opportunity to guide the student in their understanding of design as a subject matter and what it means to be a designer, as well as a space for the student's—and often even the teacher's—self-understanding. While both are careful to make sure that students have the opportunity to learn the knowledge and skills needed to continue their studies, how they approach the critique is not only as instruction but rather as a conversation. Despite their different styles, both approach the student and their work with curiosity, humility, and openness that they too may learn something about and from the student who they regard as whole individuals beyond being a student in their class. This new understanding can further help them to engage and encourage the student in their studies. Their approaches to the design critique—a hermeneutic critique—can be seen as good examples of the role of the teacher in study as one whose "purpose [is] hortatory and heuristic, rather than didactic" (McClintock, p. 176).

Barriers to conducting a Hermeneutic Critique

Despite the possibilities, and despite the humility and openness of the teacher, there may be many factors that could make having such generative and genuine conversational critiques difficult in the design studio classroom.

First, for a hermeneutic critique to lead to new understandings, the student too must be an active participant who arrives at the conversation with curiosity, openness, and humility, and already possess some desire for study. After all, in higher education, the assumption (and hope) is that students have chosen their path of study. However, there are many reasons why a student will not or cannot participate as we would desire. They may feel that a particular project or course is irrelevant to their long-term objectives. Expectations about what it means to be a design student and subsequently a designer may be far removed from the reality of being one. There may be a language barrier. Or perhaps their life outside the classroom, such as work, family, and health issues might be hindering them from participating fully. Regardless of the multitude of reasons, the result may be that a student may not be intellectually or emotionally available for the sometimes-difficult conversations that arise in a hermeneutic design critique.

The current culture of education itself may also be a barrier to such a design critique. Growing up in schools with an emphasis on instruction itself may mean that students have had little opportunity to exercise their autonomy before coming to higher education. I often see students who have come directly from high school struggle with the ambiguous nature of design, where there is often no one correct answer. On the other hand, the culture and inherent values of the design discipline and design education may also hinder genuine conversation. As an example, Frascara (2007) suggests that the design educators' inability to

"articulate empirical knowledge verbally" (p. 62) continues to uphold the myth of the intuitive designer as "magician". Simply, without being able to articulate why one design solution is better than another, we cannot have meaningful conversations about design. Finally, the responsibilities of an educator in an academic setting may themselves hinder a design critique from becoming a hermeneutic conversation. After all, part of our work as teachers is to assess and evaluate student work. We must therefore keep in mind that although ideal, we can never be truly equal partners with students in this conversation—a reality about which students are keenly aware.

Another major barrier to a hermeneutic critique is time. Time and the lack of it is something that the two interviewees mentioned on numerous occasions, and a common topic of conversation amongst design educators (Masuda, 2022). Not only does the work of designing take time, but so does critically engaging with it. Furthermore, student-teacher and student-student relationships take time to develop. George, in particular, comments on the importance of rapport, and how over "two or three classes" (Masuda, 2022, p. 78) there is a greater possibility of establishing a trusting relationship that allows for more genuine conversations. But for many of us, this may not be a possibility. In addition, cuts to educational funding, competition, and corporatization have led to reduced studio time and programming, and even school closures (Seltzer, 2019). In Alberta, recent funding cuts combined with reduced contact hours has meant that we have less time with our students than we had a decade ago. Without the time to come to understand one another beyond the roles of instructor and learner, it becomes more and more difficult to engage in hermeneutic conversation.

Finally, our own very being can also stand in the way of a hermeneutic design critique. Our experiences, self-understandings, and even our outward appearance could hinder genuine conversation. In the day-to-day, even the traffic encountered on the way to work may put us in a bad mood, closing us off from genuine conversation. The narratives we create for ourselves may also affect our ability to be open and curious. An example I often come across is the student who is convinced that they are not good at something (e.g. writing) because of past experiences, making it difficult for them to be open to new understandings. Further, one interviewee expressed that at times they have felt stereotyped by students because of their age, gender, and their professional background—none of which can be changed. With so many possible barriers to a critique as hermeneutic conversation, the road to self-cultivation through study is not an easy one.

Conclusion

Despite the many challenges, a design critique based in hermeneutic conversation is an ideal worth striving for as we support students in not only their design education, but also their self-cultivation. If we do not, as Frascara says, "set the bar high enough that we abandon the idea of training designers" (2007, p. 68), design education will not be able to support students over the long run as they are tasked with increasingly difficult design problems under increasingly complex circumstances. For them and for society at large, we must strive to understand anew the education of future designers. In doing so, I continue to reflect upon how I and other design educators can facilitate a studio environment in which students can find and grow within themselves the desire and discipline for study and self-education beyond just the acquiring of skills and knowledge they no doubt need if they are going to become designers. The design critique, so central to design pedagogy (Orr & Shreeve, 2018), and one often taken for granted, is a phenomenon worthy of new considerations and further conversation.

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