Mapping Disjunction in Design Learning:
Toward a Pedagogy of Possibility

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As part of an ethnographic design learning series, we use excerpts from learning discourses to map a path from disjunction in design learning toward a pedagogy of possibility. Illuminating the role of students as one where they often conform to the rules and procedures of 'others' these learner-to-learner, learner-to-teacher and teacher-to-teacher exchanges consider such diverse concepts as design orthodoxies, uncovering disjunction and disrupting hierarchies in design learning. We pose questions around voice, power and empowerment. advancing an idea of higher education vocabulary that includes such terms as self-confidence, hope, journey, energy, engagement, independence, being and becoming. Through this shift we conceptualise multiple design learning voices, building shared understandings of learners and teachers as active collaborators and co-producers. Moving toward a pedagogy of possibility, that is about the not yet known, going beyond a focus on intellect to consider the commitment, openness, wonder and passion that are integral to design learning. We offer a perspective on how pedagogy might be revitalised through an ontological approach to higher education design programmes.

Disjunction   Paradox   Exposure   Deconstruct   Dialogue   Social-Reality   Reconstruct   Hope   Practice   Power   Model   Possibility

Design Orthodoxies and Theory
Rendered Meaningless
Learner to Learner Discourse

Learner 1

What were some of the most problematic things you think we experienced as design students?

Learner 2

Well… I think one of the key things I remember was that there were these huge, huge biases towards a very particular set of aesthetics.

Learner 1

Yes it was prescriptive wasn't it? That was so constraining, especially at a time when we could see so much change happening around us. I felt like I didn't have the room to voice my creative concerns at all.

Learner 2

No… there just wasn't that room for debate.

Learner 1

I think the real problem was those biases were never explicit, they were never explained. It was really about industrial training to get you to design in a specific way rather than exploring any possibilities of what 'might be'.

Learner 2

Yes, whereas I remember the Art Foundation I'd done before was a lot more diagnostic. It was about where you fit as a practitioner and the degree was totally the opposite. It wasn't about where you fitted at all, so if you weren't someone who designed to the set model then you had 'failed'.

Learner 1

And the way that the work was critiqued was tough. There was a lot of mockery and derision wasn't there?

Learner 2

Yes… I think that some of the things people had said to them were inappropriate in an educational environment.

Learner 1

But I think a lot of that was coming from an assumption that treating the students like that would 'prepare them for the industry'.

Learner 2

Yes. But there's a sense in which you've got to have an awareness when you criticise somebody's work in a way that you say, "well do you have any taste?" you know? Or, "oh do you think this is nice? Ohh… What does that say about you?" Do you know what I mean?

Learner 1

Yes! It was that sense that your ideas had no value. You had to conform or in the end you'd lose out on marks.

Learner 2

It was like, "however hard I work, however much I put in, whatever I do, I'm going to be told it's not good enough"… and there's only a couple of people in the class who are going to be doing it "right" in inverted commas.

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Learner 1

That was one of the key issues -having to guess what "right" was. When it shouldn't have been about that at all.

Learner 2

Yes, trying to guess was frustrating… there were lots of things like that, where you would've stayed up working for weeks and weeks… and there wasn't that acknowledgement. I think that that was what was very difficult to deal with, and demoralising.

Learner 1

I think that I coped with it for about a year, and then by the time I got to the third year I was so exhausted, and so demoralised, and dragged down…

Learner 2

…And actually, it was crazy to put people in that situation. That produced a lot of anxiety didn't it? It was like we all became less and less sure of our own direction.

Learner 1

I know. We ended up doing projects we weren't at all passionate about.

Learner 1

The other thing is, you know, what we were trying to say through our work. So even the idea about what you're communicating, and why… Because I was very concerned with certain issues that were clearly present in my work.

Learner 1

I agree. I think there were discussions or discourses that were present in our work that were either unacknowledged or suppressed.

Learner 2

There wasn't really a place to have that discussion. Maybe there was in Contextual Studies, but only if I'd really wanted… I think there was a complete lack of criticality.

Learner 1

And that wasn't helped either by the way the theory side, Contextual Studies, was so separate. It was this one lecture a week, which actually could've been quite useful, but it was just so disconnected from what we were doing in the studio.

Learner 2

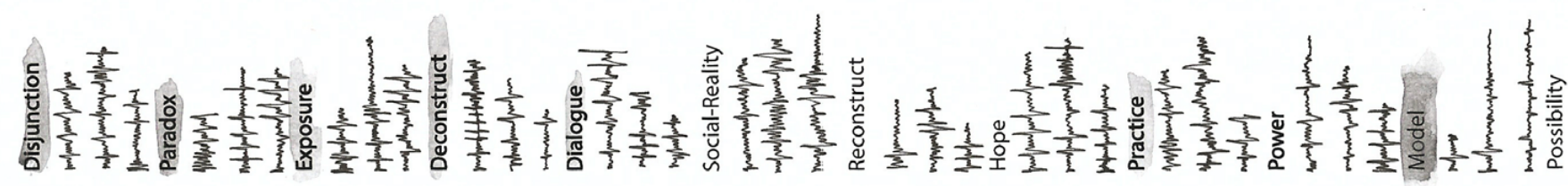Yes, it was so far removed it became almost useless!

Learner 1

Do you think all those experiences on the course affected you in the longer term? I think the impact on our confidence was pretty profound wasn't it?

Learner 2

I'd say it impacted a huge amount. I think I left feeling really low, and like all my love of that subject had been leeched away and been dissipated.

Learner 1

You have to make sure that people feel they can do things when they leave a degree… and I know I really didn't.

Learner 2

It took me years to realise those creative concerns I'd tried to voice on that course were in fact important and valid. Regaining the confidence I'd lost took a long time.

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Uncovering Disjunction and
Revealing a Pedagogy of Possibility
Learner to Teacher Discourse

Teacher   *Learner*

So, you talk about one of the key issues in your learning as having to guess what was "right"   Yes, I just found it frustrating…

Teacher   *Learner*

What do you mean, what particularly did you find frustrating?   Well, I suppose tutor driven practice.

Teacher   *Learner*

But, isn't that a tutor's role, to 'drive' practice and give you direction?   Yeah, but I mean where the design philosophies and values of the tutors take priority over the students', a sort of design orthodoxy, but it's not acknowledged or stated…

Teacher   *Learner*

So, this frustration you describe and the imposition of a design orthodoxy how did it impact your learning? In a sense, playing devil's advocate, why not just go along with it?   Well essentially it felt like conforming to a 'mould' but it's a mould that doesn't fit with your own design philosophies and practices, and in the end all our work looked the same, felt the same; there are so many possibilities but they're massively reduced to just a few by the imposition of a house style.

Teacher   *Learner*

So how was your work assessed? What was the process and how were your marks awarded?   Well, there may have been stuff written down, but I don't remember any of it being used or referred to. I mean the major perception was that it was a bit of an arbitrary mystery…

Learner   *Teacher*

You knew you were going to be judged but you didn't quite know how. You could guess, but you didn't know if that would change for each project. The rhetoric was you could do what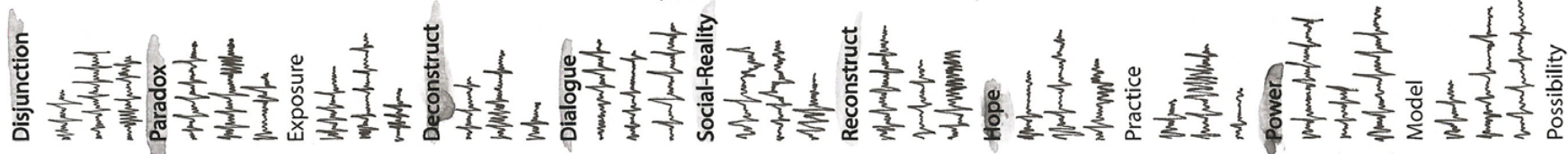ever you liked but the actuality was that you couldn't.   So, in terms of your learning, how did the 'arbitrary mystery' of assessment impact?

Learner   *Teacher*

It created a lot of anxiety and unhappiness, it constrained my practice, feedback was judgemental, but in quite a personal way.   So would you say that your learning experiences were characterised by words like dialogue, wonder, joy, possibility, freedom, critical thinking…

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Learner

No! It would be words like frustrating, stressful, confusing, constraining, unhappiness

Teacher

Do you think your tutors knew how those learning experiences made you feel?

Learner

Well I don't see how they could have, because they would have done something about it. Surely?

Teacher

Maybe they didn't recognise it as important to your learning?

Learner

Mmmmm…. I think there is also an element that they did know, but because they had been treated the same way, they thought "that's how I was treated, and it's a tough industry… so deal with it!" I think that attitude is still quite common.

Teacher

But these things, these feelings, had a big impact on your learning, surely that could be addressed in some way?

Learner

I don't know, but I think a lot of it was about power and we had no way to challenge that behaviour.

Teacher

So, if you read bell hooks, she might say what you are describing is a sort of 'mini-kingdom', where the tutor has all the power and authority…

Learner

Exactly! And we felt that to challenge that was impossible, because our marks would be affected.

Teacher

So, this design orthodoxy you describe seems to be characterised by pedagogy that doesn't offer much opportunity for dialogue, authentic critical thinking or new possibilities for design?

Teacher

So what might be done differently, if that's what learning often looks like what kind of pedagogy would you say could disrupt design orthodoxies?

Learner

Well, that's what's really interesting. I was just angry, but I hadn't understood that it was about the pedagogy…

Learner

Well, I suppose… pedagogy that supports freedom to question, freedom to think, where different design philosophies and possibilities are rewarded, provided the methods and approaches you take are justified.

Learner

That's so important to our development as designers.

Teacher

So would a pedagogy of possibility, where competing and conflicting discourses of design can be valued and where tutors have to identify the aporias (disjunctions) within their own philosophies of teaching and daily life… Does that offer hope?

Learner

Yes, a pedagogy of possibility sounds right… the nature of creativity is always changing, personal, lived, socially situated… It just seems so logical that teaching and assessment would support creative freedom, rather than suppress it, why wouldn't the pedagogical approach allow this to happen? That would be so different.

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Disrupting Hierarchies

Teacher to Teacher Discourse

Teacher 1

That's the interesting paradox, if as learners we recognise that the nature of creativity is always changing, personal, lived, socially situated… but as teachers we don't develop pedagogy to support that creative freedom, if you simply teach as you were taught, how do you disrupt those learning hierarchies?
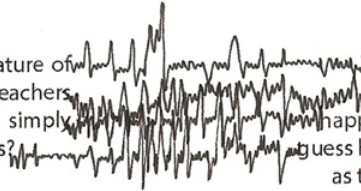
Teacher 2

That's the concern I experienced as a learner and now as a teacher. That frustration and knowing what can be done to stop those same things happening, I mean imposing constraints on thinking, the sense of having to guess how to please the tutor, because when you're going in to the institution as the new teacher you feel pressure to conform, it's like an apprenticeship model, so disrupting those hierarchies is really difficult

Teacher 1

But don't you need a way to evaluate the effectiveness of your pedagogy whatever your chosen pedagogy is, and how do you do that?

Teacher 2

Yes, but the argument would be that students get a chance to evaluate…

Teacher 3

But it's difficult for students to evaluate pedagogy, they can identify the issues such as stress, confusion, being criticised harshly, but they might not be able to identify the root cause. Then, equally, the tutors may lack the pedagogical expertise to recognise how pedagogy contributes or causes the issues.
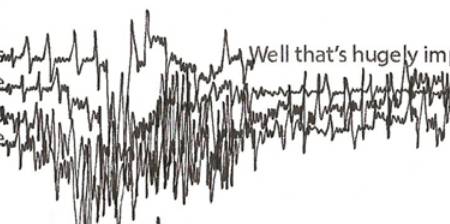
Teacher 2

That's true. Most of the lecturers we had in H.E., their only experiences of 'teaching' was having been taught themselves, and they ended up perpetuating certain models because, perhaps, they didn't recognise the impact or understand another way…

Teacher 3

So how do we recognise the impact of what we're doing if we just do what was done to us? If tutors have all the power over what is taught and make all the judgements through assessment, how do we reconcile that with moving toward a pedagogy of possibility, recognising design practice that is about the not yet known?

Teacher 2

Well that's hugely important, if you practice pedagogy in that way, you must at least understand the impact of what you do, surely…

Teacher 1

So, is that what's missing, that connect!

Teacher 3

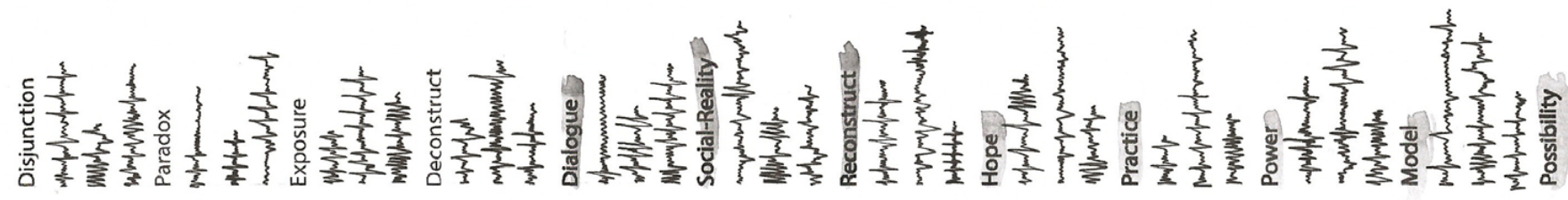Yes, you inherit pedagogy, and a certainty about what learning looks like…

Teacher 3

… Which is ironic, if we acknowledge Baudrillard's notion that complete understanding is impossible, why do we approach teaching as if we are the ones that know…

Teacher 2

So, how do we change things?

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Teacher 1

Well, for me it has to be learning **about** learning. We might be expert in our disciplines but that doesn't qualify us as teachers, we have to be supported in developing that expertise. Then we can start to question the traditional teacher-centred format, students receiving knowledge being passed on by the expert, the institution, without the opportunity to construct understandings that reflect their social reality or ontological perspectives. That might allow us to prevent the imposition of design orthodoxies.

Teacher 3

Yes, I want to be able to make pedagogical decisions on a sound philosophical basis. I like the idea that we can change what we do by understanding pedagogical theory as liberatory… I mean looking to theory to liberate our pedagogical practice, just like hooks says, 'I came to theory because I was hurting…'

Teacher 1

So should we, and I mean teachers and learners, look to theory to question and understand, learning, teaching and assessment practice? I know being exposed to critical pedagogy, radical pedagogy, a range of learning theories, philosophies and paradigms helped me think about a shift from objectivism to pluralism and relativism in my pedagogy.

Teacher 3

Yes, for me the concept of a pedagogy of possibility relies on dialogue, on shared understandings, on being transparent, so that students aren't guessing what tutors want, so that assessment particularly isn't an arbitrary mystery… so that learners aren't passive recipients but co-constructors of design knowledge.

Teacher 2

Maybe that sort of transparency, that openness, is a way to deal with learners feeling that sense of disjunction, feeling that feedback is vague, and also maybe, as a way to mitigate those harsh and critical comments.

Teacher 2

If there is a shared understanding of learning and assessment that's developed through authentic dialogue, then I'm empowered to learn independently and give myself feedback, and any tutor feedback isn't unexpected or 'shocking'…

Teacher 3

So, it's about identifying pedagogy that empowers and supports, rather than controls, learners in becoming the designers they want to be.

Teacher 1

…and looking to theory to support pedagogical decisions and evaluations. Either my philosophical position recognises that competing and conflicting discourses of design can be valued, that it's crucial that learners and teachers understand how design, if you think of it as a field of action, is mediated by power and knowledge, and how that knowledge can be co-constructed… Either you recognise that or you articulate an alternative position.

Teacher 3

I'm much more comfortable with that sort of approach, where we model pedagogy that accommodates multiple design learning voices, where we understand learners and teachers as active collaborators and co-producers.

Teacher 1

Imagine that… a shared commitment to revitalising design learning through a sort of ontological approach. To have an understanding of pedagogy that supports a commitment to openness and collaboration, where excitement and passion are integral characteristics of design learning encounters… Why wouldn't you want to reconstruct and model that kind of pedagogy?

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