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Ventures in Dichotomy: Rigor AND Tolerance in the Beginning Studio

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A lucky guess based on shaky arguments and absurd ad hoc assumptions gives a formula that turns out to be right, though at first no one can see why on earth it should be. - Werner Heisenberg

Creative processes may have their own as yet unknown lawfulness which may be often obscured, and even distorted, by our stringent requirements...-Gemma Corradi Fiumara

As a beginning design teacher for over twenty years, I have learned that educating beginning designers entails reaching a delicate and difficult equilibrium between two contradictory positions: while maintaining the rigor of high aspirations that expect all students to exhibit sophistication of concerns and execution in their designs, one must also remain aware that each student’s process is unique and fragile. This condition summons one to tolerance (not to be confused with indulgence) and much patience. This pedagogical approach, one that we practice at our school, is provokingly summarized in a phrase by one of my accidental mentors, "We are intolerant but patient.”

The effort to achieve this critical balance may easily become ineffectual if one attempts to maintain a homogenous and arbitrary progress throughout the studio. The usual consequence is that the most competent students in the early stages dictate the pace of the project for everyone else. The artificiality and restrictiveness of this condition tends to hinder the sustained engagement (so indispensable for the creative act) by the rest of the students in the studio.

I submit these textual vignettes as an attempt to examine the crucial role that time and pacing play in the early stages of skill acquisition and its subsequent development. It is well-known to all of us who teach beginners that the processes that initiate and expand the mental maneuvers responsible for innovative/creative thinking are not swift. They often seem chaotic and subject to agonizing missteps. Any progress in this domain is rarely a matter of quantum leaps, but most often the result of a few tentative steps and a myriad of frustrating falls. To paraphrase what Kierkegaard said about life, the design process moves forward but its coherence and meaning can only be perceived backwards.

This quest may be attempted by the weak with as much hope as the strong. -J. R. R. Tolkien

In addition, I suggest that the effectiveness of our teaching should not only be measured by the excellence of the works executed by those three or four strong designers in our studios (every beginning studio has them) but, even more so, by the ability to arouse and sustain the creative impulses in our weak ones; so that they too can eventually aspire and execute works of equal value.

It has been our experience that the exercise and full development of the "creative agility of mind striving toward innovative connections" for all our students-the top guns as well as the ones almost drowning-takes time, plenty of time. In this most critical matter, to exaggerate is preferable than to neglect.

To instruct someone...is not a matter of getting him to commit results to mind.

Rather, it is to teach him to participate in the process that makes possible the establishment of knowledge... [It is] to get a student to think [architecturally] for himself, to consider matters as a designer does, to take part in the process of knowledge-getting. Knowing is a process not a product. - Jerome Bruner

At our school, a decade-long effort to craft the pedagogical intentions and the operational framework of the beginning design studios has been focused upon the site of learning; the student. Towards this end, we have been continually informed and stimulated by Jerome Bruner, a pioneer in the field of education; one of his major contributions has been the investigation of the dual theme of how children-the ultimate beginners-learn, and how they can be helped to learn.

We have found Bruner's insights-in particular those that address how young children’s instinctive will-to-learn can best be directed and amplified-to be pertinent and easily transferable in the designing of a pedagogy that is aimed exclusively at our very own beginners. In his landmark book “Towards a Theory of Instruction” he defines instruction as the assisting and facilitating of the processes whereby human beings go from a state of utter helplessness to one of control. The process through which this takes place he describes as “a staircase with rather sharp risers” and the dynamic as being a matter of spurts and rests: “The spurs ahead in growth seem to be touched off when certain capacities begin to develop. And some capacities must be matured and nurtured before others can be called into being [emphasis mine].”

This observation-coupled with the awareness that in most beginning design studios students differ greatly in terms of rate of
growth and level of competence makes a strong case for reassessing the critical role that time and pacing play in facilitating the proper integration of the long sequence of acts that delineate our educational intentions.

Architecture [design] takes time for incubation, cultivation, experimentation (and blind alleys), playing, coordinating, celebrating, risking, cooperating, meandering. These words are not soft: intensity and diligence are paramount. But they are inviting the subconscious to play. And the intuitive. Wondering and musing are such words when it comes to time. They are real process words. Not about schedules but about ripeness. Bearing fruit. [Design] is an organic act, not a mechanical one. Treat it as one. "William Tate"

Our school, cognizant of the decisive role time plays in the beginning design experience, has structured its Foundation Program as a five-semester sequence. It is an orchestrated set of pivotal experiences which begin in the first year and are concluded at the end of the first half of the third year. This strategy originates from the premise that learning depends on the internalization of experiences. Therefore, our main objective has been to provide our students with a studio environment which is most conducive for this complex and delicate internalization process to occur in its totality. Most importantly, project formulations are designed deliberately and intentionally to foster the gradual progressive development of each of our students.

This objective has led us to formulate projects that are semester-long. These are subdivided into three or four subprojects. Conclusions of each become the generators for the next one. This way, inquiries about essential design issues are dealt with gradually and progressively within carefully chosen parameters. This serves the purpose of limiting and focusing each project's content in order to assure that mastering of basic skills take place prior to introducing more complex ones.

The major condition for activating exploration...in a task is the presence of some optimal level of uncertainty. Curiosity, it has been persuasively argued, is a response to uncertainty and ambiguity. -Jerome Bruner

Like Bruner, we consider curiosity the 'energy' that drives genuine search, exploration and discovery. Therefore, we consider its arousal paramount. We have found that this is best achieved in an environment which is heuristic in nature, that is, studios where the primary impetus is exploration and discovery. Project formulations are conceived as heuristic tasks: in other words, well-crafted, enigmatic and ambiguous questions. The heuristic process essentially operates as a cyclic and nonlinear network wherein students seek to synthesize whole yet incomplete formulations during all of the phases of a project. It is characteristic of this approach that throughout the entire process, product and content are entwined, interacting continuously. This way of designing works on the following premise: one must try to design a 'thing' in order to know how to design that 'thing' or even to know what that 'thing' might possibly be. This heuristic approach is echoed by Paul Feyerabend: "Creation of a thing, and creation plus full understanding of a correct idea of the thing, are very often parts of one and the same indivisible process and cannot be separated without bringing the process to a stop...[This is a] process [that is] guided by a vague urge, by a passion." 11

The maintenance of exploration, once it has been activated requires that the benefits from exploring alternatives exceed the risks incurred. That is to say, the consequences of error, of exploring wrong alternatives, should be rendered less grave...Jerome Bruner 12

Our aim is to foster conditions under which the student is growing in confidence and feels free to explore and risk, fail and discover. Fundamental in assisting this objective is to ensure-as Bruner promotes-that the benefits of exploration are always to exceed the risks involved; that they are to be valued above any other objective or criteria. This teaching model displaces the teaching-style which coerces students into a fearful, dependent, and submissive 'tell me what you want me to do'-style of learning and replaces it with a summons for all students to discover a personal way of working, using their own history and individual ways of apprehending and imagining the world. The task in this context for us the faculty is to initiate and cultivate the dialogue between the student and that which has aroused her curiosity and provoked insight.

This educational strategy requires that we accept and participate in the unique process of each student in the studio. It implies a sensitive openness to the way in which each project unfolds. Our task is to reach through the temporary discord and naivete and help identify what merits further development. In this context, we have found that team teaching and periodic group reviews are the best venue to foster a more dialogical and constructive exchange of ideas from all the participants. This approach amplifies the scope of the project on a daily basis due to the diversity and intensity of the questioning and the ensuing argumentation by students and faculty.

The faculty's effectiveness in participating in this process is dependent upon a stance that is both critical and intentional while remaining patient and open to all the particular and diverse interpretations unfolding (or not) throughout the studio.

With Socrates, we know somehow that a dialogue can lead people to discover things of great depth and wisdom. What a pity we know so little of learning by dialogue...Jerome Bruner 13

It is our opinion that students of design must learn at the onset of their design education to engage big ideas and formulate intelligent and ethical positions of their own concerning matters of significance. Our project formulations are simple yet germane. Their primary intention is just to provide the stimulus to initiate the first stage of the dialogue. Additional information and time are carefully assessed and supplied. This is very important since undue complexity and too much information often overwhelm and overload the student's capacity to apprehend and order and play in the situation being explored. On the other hand, overly reduced content may fail to provoke curiosity and significance.
Most importantly, we are always aware that an increase of programmatic content that is appropriate for some students may, at that particular time, do damage to the development of others who are still grappling with a previous phase.

The reward of deeper understanding is a more robust lure to effort than we have yet realized. -Jerome Bruner

At the onset of any investigation rough approximations or gestural constructs are developed from major themes or issues which have been discovered and engaged by the student. Even in its beginning stages these constructs are considered whole things. Their value in their embryonic stages is to enable each student to identify, however vaguely, the primary factors at the heart of the task. Based on the agenda the construct sets up, the ensuing explorations by the student expands and amplifies the programmatic intentions as well as the clarity, complexity and rigor of the executions. This cycle is repeated and elaborated throughout the life of the project, each time benefiting from a more informed base. A sense of progress is viewed in terms of iterative understandings of the intentions being sought and developed.

The conclusion of a project is never rushed arbitrarily but allowed to mature; long range due dates have been abolished (as have been grades, except for finals). Instead, students are required to bring new and updated work each time the class meets. This approach ensures that a work discipline is acquired by the student, one which is consistent and which addresses issues and questions in a timely manner.

The quantum world teaches that there are no pre-fixed, definitely describable destinations. There are, instead, potentials that will form into real ideas, depending on who the discoverer is and what she is interested in discovering. Only by venturing into the unknown do we enable ideas to take shape, and those shapes are different for each voyager. -Margaret Wheatley

The trajectory that eventually yields the conclusion of a project is rarely like a pine tree pointing in a single direction. Even at its best, it is more like a live oak with a dozen of branches going in all directions. Or, like my friend and colleague Bill Tate says, it is like taking a walk with a four year old: it is a venture that may have a destination but the path is one that 'zigs' and 'zags' and meanders on the way there. One can only invite frustration if one tries to keep the child from getting side-tracked and to make him walk straight ahead only. This is exactly what we once did in our beginning studios. We limited the investigation in order to achieve ends other than initiating and sustaining the creative impulses of our students.

Creative processes are more like contained chaos, or a chaos that contains order. The design instinct is a primal, creative force which by design moves and grows and accretes complexity and clarity by repeatedly falling apart. We used to deny our students the thrill of the full and wild and furious ride of a germinal idea at work. By our own design, we preempted the search and thereby concluded projects prematurely, settling for solutions that did not deserve to be called conclusions.

It is our conviction now that a single project that is allowed to exhaust and transform its creative force into the serendipitous events of the search is worth immensely more than three or four truncated ones executed in the same length of time. There is no substitute for the genuine pleasure felt by a student who, once he has been lured and energized by the uncertainty of a task, is allowed to sustain his attention over a long, loosely connected sequence. This is what every beginning design student must experience. This alone deserves our unreserved generosity; at our school, it holds primacy over any other objective.

You are so young, so much before all beginning, and I would like to beg you...to have patience with everything unresolved...and try to love the questions themselves...[design] your way into the answer. -Rainer Maria Rilke

It is my hope that I have been persuasive in my premise that rigor and tolerance need not be mutually exclusive in our studios. In fact, together they are the parenthesis made by our own hands—the left one and the right one—that hospitably and generously cradle that fragile, but potentially world-transforming creative force that each of our students has.

The space that is cleared and framed by the dichotomy is like a maternal matrix that harbors our beginner's initial fumbling: 'a configuration half-perceived, a relation faintly grasped, or a concept newly emergent.' This embryonic thing 'she' nurtures and challenges, invites and stimulates, orients and dares until it undergoes the full range of the push-and-pull of the evolutionary havoc that is required for yielding that which is worthy of being considered designed.

What, after all, is a clock? Without your grownup it is nothing. It is the grownup who winds it...-Gunter Grass

Notes

5. Fiumara, p. 10.
7. Bruner, p. 27.
8. Bruner, p. 27.
12. Bruner, p. 43-44.
15 Wheatley, p. x.
16 Tate, p. 62.
17 Rainer Maria Rilke, Letters to a Young Poet (New York: Random House, 1984), p. 34.
18 Fiumara, p. 12.