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Introduction: Plato's Chapter

Ideas that underlie postmodern thought are rarely used in conversations about architectural education the way that philosophers and literary critics have used it since the early 1970s: as a call to abandon that portion of modern vocabulary that sustains Plato's story that Truth is something that already exists, that our own human capacities are not enough to get us a glimpse of Truth, and therefore, that some method that is detached from our own inadequate capacities is needed if we are ever to extract the Real Truth from our mortal inclinations toward deceiving ourselves by believing in mere opinion, felt emotion, bad theory, or last night's dream. My favorite philosophers and literary critics call for abandonment of the old notion that the whole point of beginning an investigation, pondering a question, or having a conversation, in the first place, is to know, in the end, which of the investigators, ponderers, or conversants were right and which were wrong. This postmodern take on what inquiry or conversation is all about, challenges us to wean ourselves off of our old habit of wanting to know who is right and who is wrong.

In his philosophical writings John Dewey spends a lot of time pointing out to readers that the Western habit to want to know who is right and who is wrong is in a conversation comes from a set of Greek ideas that are no longer useful in our current times. In his writings about the relationship between teacher and student, Dewey understands that teachers who think that they know more than their students are often not seen as harm in a conversation about knowledge, but those who think that they know less than their students are often lead to practices that end up harming, rather than helping, students. In conversation that I have had with beginning design studio teachers, I have been fascinated to find that the harm that students describe that they have felt during interactions with their teachers, is often not seen as harm at all by their teachers.

In what follows I will share with you conversations that I have had with two architects, both of whom taught beginning design studios at the University of California, Berkeley. These two teachers' approaches to teaching the beginning studio are meant to bring up the contrast between their respective traditional and postmodern sets of assumptions about what knowledge is, who has it and who doesn’t, and what needs to be done with it in the context of an architectural education. Their assumptions about knowledge will be related to their traditional and postmodern sets of studio practices, with special attention paid to how enactment of a traditional set of practices lead to harming, rather than helping, students.

In terms of the approach to educational practices in the beginning design studio it is useful to trace the definition of knowledge back to its Greek origins where knowledge was always understood to be of two kinds: the higher kind that the god's possessed and the lower kind that humans held. The old Greek story of a higher and lower knowledge split has had a long-lasting impact on how we teach, and why we tend to follow Donald Shon's assumption that our beginning design students would want to do what we tell them because they would want to know what we, their teachers, already knew. The split between those in the know, and those who would surely want to know what those in the know knew, dates back to a very early chapter in the history of Western culture. A chapter that Plato had a big hand in authoring. Like most Greeks of his time, Plato held the assumption that the world was split into higher and lower levels. In ancient Athens, the gods' residence on the mountain top clouds looking down at humanity below was testament to the fact of their higher authority, their superior knowledge, their immortality, and their privileged view of the Truth. And although Plato believed that humans could never rise to the heavenly level of the gods, he believed that by following the principles of Truth and Goodness that the gods had grasped, humans could at least rise above a level that kept them mired in the mortal mud of having an impermanent body, of succumbing to desire, of feeling emotion, of acting on impulse, of being seduced by rhetoric, and of journeying forward blindly.

Throughout the history of Western pedagogy, educators have been especially susceptible to buying into a teaching vocabulary that stemmed from a set of Platonic credos that asserted that knowledge equated to the truth that only the gods could see, and that the ultimate human task was to develop unbiased objective methodologies that would enable them search for and ultimately discover those universal principles of goodness that lead to the living of a good and honorable life. Building beginning design studio teaching practices upon these ancient foundations has been made possible as generation after generation of architectural educators has passed along a Platonic set of educational principles and practices that continually rendered student's voices invisible. Joe and Manny are two beginning architectural design studio teacher at UC Berkeley that I have had many conversations with. I want to describe some of what they revealed to me about their respective teaching practices, with the intention of raising the
question, "what sets of assumptions lead to studio teaching practices that students, themselves find harmful, and which new set of assumptions might be used to replace the old set of harmful practices with new ones?"

**Manny: Construction of an Objective Dialogue**

Meet Manny, a UC Berkeley beginning design studio teachers, whose teaching approach, I suspect, mirrors that of thousands of beginning design studio teachers throughout the world who have, for centuries, followed the Platonic notion that knowledge is objective. "Much of the teaching I attempt to do," Manny told me in one of our recorded conversations, "starts with the proposition that we are going to construct a dialogue that is as objective as we can make it. That we are going to work very hard to get outside of I want, I like." For Manny, the process in which the teacher and student engaged in the "construction of an objective dialogue" depended on an objective methodology in which the subjective point of view (in the form of the word "I") was censored from both the student's and the teacher's vocabulary.

Several of the fourteen students in Manny's studio section described Manny's insistence that they talk about their work without using the phrase "I want" or "I like" as "Manny's rule." Manny's rationale for the prohibition of the phrases "I want" and "I like" within his students' vocabularies, interlocked with his belief that his students' "capacity to think and to reason, and to argue and persuade were signs of the intelligence of educated beings." He believed that "clear thinking was manifest in clear speaking and the inability to speak clearly most often represented an inability to think clearly."

Manny associated clear thinking with mental abilities like reasoning, verbal articulation, and argumentation. He told me he believed that there was "much too much subjectivity" in the studios that other design teachers taught. He questioned whether learning could take place outside of learning aimed at arriving at objective, rather than subjective, conclusions to design problems. For a student to speak about design work in the first person "I" was a sign of "self-indulgent" behavior "driven by ego and identity," not by a search for what had historically been defined as "good architecture."

By Manny's standards of reasoning and his ability to think and speak clearly, Sam was his best student, "a joy" as Manny characterized him at one point in our conversations. He spoke about Sam, telling me, "I think Sam inevitably gets the framework of what I say. Sam thinks very clearly. You can reason well with Sam. And he always understands the line of thought that I use in critiquing his work." Manny believed that learning was based on a process in which students needed to allow time for the valuable information that the teacher had transmitted to them to be processed through their reasoning and thinking faculties. When the students were in a reactive mode, when they spontaneously and unthinkingly responded to what the teacher was trying to convey to them, when they relied on the "ego" or their "identity" rather than their intellectual capacity to reason, the result was "counterproductive to learning."

Manny considered four students out of the fourteen in his studio section as problematic. Three of the four problematic students were women. Kristin, one of the three problematic women in his section, suffered from the inability to suspend her disbelief in the things that Manny proposed as essential in learning to design. Manny characterized Kristin as problematic because of her resistance to complying with the basic tenets that lay at the heart of his pedagogical approach to the learning of design. One of Manny's basic learning tenets that Kristin resisted was the "implicit belief" in architecture as a discipline.

"She doesn't believe," Manny told me, "and she doesn't believe just because she doesn't want to believe. There is a kind of student that you get at Berkeley. They come in and for some reason they decide to study architecture but with the already formulated belief that the study of architecture is elitist. And Kristin is kind of along that line, somehow. She doesn't have any implicit belief in the fact that it's a discipline that you have to study and learn. I don't know what to say to a person like that to convince them otherwise."

During a hostel-design project, Kristin was exploring the use of large round staircases to accent the corners of her building. When I talked to her about Manny's response to her design she told me that he wondered why she had chosen a round shape, rather than a rectangular shape, for her staircases. She said that Manny wanted her to "state the intention behind her round staircases" and that she was "not very skillful" at stating things "the way Manny wanted." Kristin perceived her lack of skill as a matter of not understanding Manny's language for talking about design; that Manny's language sounded as if he was talking to his colleagues, not to students who were unfamiliar with the vocabulary that architects spoke. Hours after she talked to Manny about her round stairs, Kristin changed them from round to square.

Manny told me he felt frustrated by students like Kristin, who "ultimately went along with a design because their teacher was telling them they should. Not because they necessarily had an implicit belief that what their teacher was professing was useful." The "profound level" of frustration that Manny felt about Kristin's lack of implicit belief in the usefulness of the objective methodology that he professed was evoked by her resistance to designing based on a set of objective rather than subjective criteria. He perceived her defense of her round stairs as an opinion based on personal preference, rather than a clearly articulated proposition based on a well-reasoned objective argument.

Manny's belief that his students needed to "get beyond" the belief that "good architecture" was based on personal opinion (or that everyone's opinion was equivalent in status) marked his use of a traditional educational vocabulary that started with the premise that knowledge existed at a higher level, as compared to opinion, personal preference, or subjective feeling. Manny's "construction of an objective dialogue" was one variation of a traditional vocabulary in which personal opinions were not candidates for entry into a higher level of
knowledge and "human intelligence." Confirmation that the student had reached a higher level of knowledge required that students clearly articulated, through words, that they had the capacity to think, to reason, to dispassionately argue for their "propositions."

For speakers of the traditional educational vocabulary like Manny, opinion could never have the status of knowledge acquired through an objective methodology. He purposely developed "Manny's Rule," which censored the use of the "I want" and "I like" language from his students' vocabularies, because he believed that the construction of an "objective dialogue" was a viable pedagogical method for weaning students from their previous self-indulgent habits of confusing subjective opinion with objective knowledge. Manny's thesis that a higher level of knowledge was revealed through students' capacity for clear verbal articulation of their thoughts interlocked with his thesis that certain words indicated a higher level of objective reasoning while other words indicated a lower level of "ego" and "self-indulgence." The lower-level words (or thoughts, or opinions), for Manny, because they smacked of subjectivity, had no place in a dialogue that sought evaluation of problems through reason and objectivity.

The traditional educational vocabulary that supported the thesis that "right and good" existed beyond what the student personally believed was right or good, interlocked with the thesis that there was an intrinsic difference between teacher and student. Within the traditional vocabulary for talking about teaching and learning, an official external entity of some sort was required to legitimize what counted or did not count as knowledge because that vocabulary was driven by the idea that personal interest and experience were qualities of a lesser level of knowing that could never be counted as official knowledge. Within the model of teaching and learning that Manny enacted, the teacher controlled the vocabulary, the modes of thinking and the self-expressions that were allowed entry into the "objective dialogue."

In Manny's narrative of teaching and learning design, the good student was one that made the reversal from talking about the work in the first person voice of the "I" to talking about the work in objective language based on historical precedent and an "implicit belief" in the "ennobled qualities of architecture." The problematic students, most of whom were women, were those who resisted talking about their work as if their experience of the work was based on anything outside of their experience of their work. The architect's language, for Manny, was by necessity a language supported by the force of reason.

The architect's language, for Kristin, was one that was foreign to her ears. Kristin told me that in one of her conversations with Manny she told him she did not understand a lot of what he was saying. The way Kristin put it to Manny was that since she "wasn't his colleague" that "he had to simplify" what he was telling her. Manny did not think it a problem that his students misunderstood him because they were unfamiliar with the language he used in conversation with them. He told me that he purposely "made a point of constructing a dialogue" that his students would not understand because he hoped that would force them into asking questions about the language he used. The problem as Manny described it was that students rarely asked that kind of question. Manny believed that problematic students like Kristin failed to speak the architect's language because they lacked the intellect and "poetic capacity" required to "construct an objective dialogue," or they blindly refused to adopt an "implicit belief" in the architect's "noble" mission and in "the better aspects of architecture."

The vocabulary that Manny used to define the relationship between teacher and students signaled a certain pedagogical blindness his students' ways of seeing and describing the world as they saw it through their set of eyes, heard it through their pair of ears, and spoke it through their particular voices. Absent from Manny's "objective dialogue" with Kristin was any talk about what in her past experience led to her interest in circular forms, or what she was trying to express by the use of a circular rather than a rectangular geometry, or whether her modes of thinking were based on an interest in primarily emphasizing the use of a visual intelligence mode as opposed to using (at least in the case of the particular problem that confronted her) a logical, or a verbal mode of intelligence.2

Manny's singular option for constructing the objective dialogue between teacher and student raised the question, "Who is to say what counts and does not count as a legitimate language, a legitimate vocabulary, a legitimate metaphor for describing knowledge of the world to one's self or to others?" What Manny heard in Kristin's voice was that she lacked capacity in the areas of reason, idea, and objectivity. But perhaps Kristin's voice echoed a conception of teaching and learning that William James voiced over a century ago: that particular people thought and communicated in particular ways; that to assume that there was one standard for intelligence was to overlook the various intelligences through which various people expressed who they were in the world; that to assume that talking about one's work as if it was created outside of one's wants or one's needs was to overlook the intimacy between the thing created and its creator (or in certain cases the building designed and its designer); that to assume that the discrepancies between the student's language and the teacher's indicated a gap in the student's knowledge was to close one's eyes to the student's understanding of the world, to close one's ears to the metaphors in that student's vocabulary, and to close one's mind to the possibility that something could be learned from one's students.

Joe: Owning and Authoring Their Designs

Unlike Manny, Joe's ears were open to what he called his students' "original vocabularies." Joe told me that he believed that his students' "ownership and authorship" of their creations, could become the basis for "figuring out" where their designs were headed. Based on that assumption Joe developed a listening and recording practice that enabled him to capture and feed back to his students their own ideas that, in his judgment,
might fruitfully move their designs forward. As students talked about their designs, Joe wrote down certain phrases they verbalized that he believed were potentially useful in setting a direction for future exploration. At one of Joe's afternoon studios I watched him at a desk-crit with a student who was working on the design of an art museum in an urban setting. In the early part of the forty-five-minute desk crit, Joe wrote a series of phrases that Roberto used to describe the approach that he (Roberto) had taken in searching for an "overall form" for the building.

As Roberto spoke about his design search he used the phrase "there is no building" to describe those parts of his building façade that were similar to the voids in a modern sculpture. Roberto's "there is no building" phrase was one of several phrases that Joe took written notes on as Roberto verbalized his design ideas. At that time Joe could not have predicted that the "there is no building" phrase would be the one, among several phrases, that would be useful in furthering Roberto's design explorations. But as the conversation progressed, and especially after Joe and Roberto agreed that puncturing the huge (static) exterior wall was a way of regaining the dynamic tension between "volumes and planes" that was expressed in Roberto's early models, Joe realized that the "there is no building" phrase that Roberto had invented connected to Roberto's interest in experimenting with the use of voids in the building façade as a way expressing transparency. Voids in the building, in other words, could become architectural instances where "there was no building."

His listening and synthesizing abilities enabled Joe to connect Roberto's interest in "sculptural voids" and "transparency" with Roberto's "there is no building" phrase. The next step was to feed that phrase back to Roberto, who began to appreciate how the set of words he (Roberto) had spoken were expressive of the quality of transparency that he wanted his building to embody. This enabled Roberto to move forward, on his own, toward crystallizing that transparent quality in "built" form. Because Joe went back to an idea that Roberto had authored and owned, Roberto could continue to understand that "his ordinary spoken language" was a way of explaining to himself, and to others, what he was trying to express through the "unordinary architectural language" of building form and structure.

For Joe, within the conversations he had with his students, there was no "right" or "wrong" language through which they described their felt intuitions. By speaking about his students' designs within the language that his students had created, Joe made it possible for students to think of him as a teacher who did not control what counted or did not count as a legitimate way to describe their work. Their descriptions, as Joe understood and talked to his students about them, always referred back to the private realm of their feelings, and to their set of life experiences. This implied that there was no right or wrong, but rather, there was description-making within a process of personal emergence.

Within that dialogue that Joe had with Roberto, Joe aimed at using Roberto's set of ideas and metaphors to find out where Roberto was going. Enacting his role as teacher in terms of his students' language was what enabled Joe to freely participate in the formation of his students' designs without them feeling that he was infringing on their status as the "owners and authors" of their designs. Joe did not impose his "teacher's standards" for what made a good or bad design. Joe asserted over and over to his students that the language that he was playing with in his conversations with them was their language. In turn, students began to acknowledge that they could develop their own set of standards by which to judge in which direction their designs should move next. In the end, Roberto heard and used what Joe told him about the imbalance between the volumes and planes in the larger model because Joe's description fit into the "balanced tension" standard that he (Roberto) had constructed earlier.

Joe's set of teaching practices pointed to the commitment that students could make their own knowledge. Within the process of using their familiar spoken vocabulary to explore the making of a new and unfamiliar vocabulary of architectural forms, his students invented descriptions about their earlier intuitions. This validated, for his students, the usefulness of their familiar spoken language within the process of learning a new and unfamiliar architect's language of building forms.

Rather than posing the student-teacher interaction with his students in terms where the student was measured against himself as their teacher, Joe posed his relationship with his students based on the terms that they brought into the interaction. Those terms included their set of experiences, language, ideas, and feelings. Joe's method of "knocking at the door until they opened" and his interest in playing with his students' vocabulary by redescribing what they said rather than judging if what they had said was right or wrong, signified an abandonment of the idea that teacher's knowledge (or teacher's vocabulary) was inherently truer, or better, or more useful to his students' knowledge.

Joe did not pretend that his descriptions of his students' works were better or truer than his own. Rather, he understood that his experiences, from his vantage point, resulted in his talent for concurrently speaking both the ordinary language (that his students spoke) and his own version of the architect's language of form. By playing with the vocabulary that his students brought into the shared design dialogue that he and they mutually constructed, Joe modeled for his students how to speak about someone else's work (in this case about his students' work) in more ways than just his own. Instead of comparing his students' descriptions of their work in terms of a universal set of timeless architectural standards for what made "good" architecture, Joe engaged in a process of comparing his students' processes with his own process of constructing vocabularies that retrospectively provided descriptions of purpose or knowledge. The comparison of his own descriptions with his students' descriptions came in terms of the process of creating vocabularies, not in terms of which vocabulary was better and which was worse.
As opposed to the traditional premise that the teacher-student learning relationship was based on the student learning the teacher's language, Joe's interaction with his students (which he called "co-designing") derived from his understanding that the architect's design talents were based on his or her capacity for concurrently speaking both an ordinary language that enabled the invention of personal metaphors and an unordinary language of building forms that enabled the creation of architectural designs. As opposed to the traditional conception that students were expected to adopt their teacher's language so that they could eventually replace their own lower level ordinary language with their teacher's higher level expert and extraordinary language, Joe's "co-designing" premise assumed that teacher and student were partners in a mutual learning process of giving and taking. By playfully transforming his students' ordinary language usage of words into an architectural language of building forms, Joe gave his students a set of architectural vocabulary options. This allowed his students to continually "own and author" their design ideas by choosing those pieces of Joe's architectural interpretations of their metaphors that fit into their personally defined directions, or by rejecting those pieces that missed the mark.

In listening for the emerging metaphors within his students' descriptions of their designs, Joe reflected an abandonment of the traditional conception that the teacher's true knowledge and expert language existed at a higher level separate from the student's lower level of opinion and ordinary language. Within Joe's "co-designing" set of teaching practices the teacher was free to interpret his students' metaphors in many different architectural ways, and the student was free to choose which pieces of their teacher's interpretation added strength to the foundation they had built. The price paid for the enjoyment of these pedagogical freedoms came by way of the nontraditional expectation that the teacher was expected to listen for the student's language, just as much as the student was expected to listen for the teacher's language.

The traditional theory of knowledge implicated in Manny's narrative suggested that since knowledge existed outside of experience, the discovery of real knowledge could occur only through detachment from the self, which was made possible by way of the mind's capacity for cold disinterest, logic, and reason. Opinion, emotion, intuition, interest, and bias, within the traditional definition of knowledge, were aspects of experience that were always suspect. These were bodily qualities that had to be constantly surveilled because they could lead to sabotaging the good work of the mind. Manny's interest in being the official in charge of controlling his students' outcroppings of undesirable, biased, first person "I" vocabularies, pointed to the set of premises that underlay the traditional knowledge theory.

Voices in the Face of Silence

In contrast to Manny, Joe recognized that his students' first person "I" voices were indicators of their inner lives, their past experiences, and their sets of interests that would ultimately be expressed in their designs. All the vocabularies of all of his students counted. It was unnecessary for him to prohibit any of his students' ideas or ways of talking about their designs because Joe understood that his students' subjective voices, and their interests, intuitions, and biases, were the driving forces that kept their design investigations in focus. In contrast to Manny's emphasis on his students separating themselves from their selves, Joe emphasized that his students connect with their selves; connect with their intuitions, with their social concerns, with their interests in certain geometries, with anything personal that could become the basis for the central idea or the metaphoric proposition they needed to move their designs forward, toward a coherent consummation.

As opposed to suspecting that his students' bodily modes of intelligence were saboteurs of the mind's capacities for rationality, Joe validated the necessary connection between body and mind within a design process where keeping the balance between intuition and rationality was of prime importance. As opposed to thinking that his students' knowledge needed to be objectified through detachment from personal history, biases, or interest, Joe understood that knowledge was self-made within a process in which self-made vocabularies became the points of contact between his students' personal experiences and their new experiences of learning to speak an architectural language. As opposed to posing himself as a teacher who knew what was best for his students, Joe listened for what his students thought was best for themselves as they described their own ways of thinking about, and their own sets of interests that drove, their work.

Joe's set of practices and his set of assumptions, as opposed to Manny are meant as a starting point in answering the question, "What sets of assumptions lead to studio teaching practices that students, themselves find harmful, and which sets of assumptions might be used to replace the old set of harmful practices with new ones?" The question is not an easy one to answer. But if we are to develop new ways of teaching we need to recognize where our teaching comes from, where our teaching style locates us on the continuum that spans from Manny's Platonic traditional style to Joe's nontraditional postmodern style of teaching. For the beginning design studio teacher an understanding where one's pedagogy comes from is the first step in recognizing that often so-called "best teaching practices" are based on sets of assumption that they have been blindly accepted, or were believed to be natural, because they fit so well with the story of knowledge and truth that has been handed down to teachers ever since Plato.

Realizing that old teaching practices are supported by ancient vocabularies of knowledge, that these old ways of speaking have engendered and sustained harmful sets of practices, and that those habits and vocabularies can be replaced with new ones, are steps that can be taken in the direction of leaving the past behind and moving toward a future in which student voices are heard and honored.

NOTES

1. See John Dewey, Philosophy and Education in their Historic Relations. J.J. Chamblis, ed. (Boulder: Westview

In an insightful essay entitled, "Border Pedagogy in the Age of Postmodernism," Henry A. Giroux raises the same kinds of questions about the usefulness of narratives that support teaching practices that marginalize student voices based on the traditional cultural idea that the only legitimate form of knowledge is objective knowledge. As an alternative to traditional pedagogy based on modernism's reliance on metaphysical notions of the subject, Giroux calls for a "border pedagogy [that] both confirms and critically engages the knowledge and experience through which students author their own voices and construct social identities." See Henry A. Giroux, "Border Pedagogy in the Age of Postmodernism," Journal of Education [Boston University] 170 (1988): 162, 175.