

Innovating pedagogies: is localization a threshold concept for creative design education?

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Preamble

I want to draw on three layers of perception here. I want to tease out a view of paradigm change from the problems that face disciplinarity today. Secondly I want to look at the way design is conceived of and how its agency in community and business is secured in a changing economic and digital landscape. Thirdly I want to suggest implications of all this within the remit of the challenging of curricula.

Educationists must aspire to the power of ideas in culture, even when faced with the overwhelming venality of our material ways. There are current matters of concern (Latour), that should lead us to question the stability of some of our core ideas. Most importantly, the premise of my argument is a crisis in perceptions of growth, economy and ecology, and how this is reflected in our higher education epistemologies.

An Arts and Humanities Research Council review of future research themes (2009) reported last year that, “In the context of the collapse of trust, the abdication of responsibility and loss of civility that characterizes contemporary public life, research (...) could contribute to a paradigm shift towards a future-facing ethical, moral, cultural and social landscape...It will help raise awareness of issues such as responsibility, (...) sustaining the environment, and quality of life.”

Tina Barnes-Powell suggests we “have to understand the ways in which knowledge is produced.” Are we in what Bridge calls the ‘neutral zone’, which she characterizes as “a time of maximum uncertainty and time for creative possibility between the ending of the way things have been, and the beginning of the way they will be.”? (Barnes-Powell, 2010)

Shan Wareing posits a post-colonial critique of disciplinary stasis or compartmentalization, pointing to its negative impacts on interdisciplinary thinking (Wareing, 2010). This paper teases out some different thoughts for design and the way we teach it or embed it in academic activity. And what I’ve found is that I can only describe what is happening in terms of a broader paradigm shift or re-conceptualization.

This paper emerges from the author’s attempts to embed sustainability in the study of design, particularly graphic design (Tridgell, 2007 on) which have suggested a more comprehensive provocation is called for – a provocation that implicates broader institutional processes. Design is embedded in the cultural milieu of our lives - but, as currently conceived, practiced and educated for, doesn’t have of itself the agency or impact to enact change – broader political agency and institutional actions are called for. Sustainability can’t be component of a current creative design education. To put it another way - sustainable design, as conceived, may attempt to sustain design, but it doesn’t design sustainability.

Numerous attempts to express the relevance of ecological understandings in design education and process, from ‘First things first’ to ‘Adbusters’ and even ‘Hopenhagen’ seem to have changed little. It is the very failure of such initiatives to gain purchase that we must now address; my argument is that the frameworks within which we conceive of the issue of sustainability are inadequate for the job, and that we must address it at both disciplinary/curricular and institutional level.

Learning: concepts, curricula and communities

Brooks and Ryan reported in 2007 that “ ‘sustainability’ is a ‘threshold concept’ orientated to the ‘ideal’, a concept whose very richness and importance lies in its thwarting stable definitions.” As a “threshold concept” I want to challenge whether and how, if sustainability is a concept that ‘thwarts stable definitions’, it can give us openings to

greater or further understanding. They seem to suggest that a threshold concept has the power to transcend the actual bounds of subject or discipline, and in some sense be revelatory of 'the ideal'.

This presupposes a use of 'threshold concept' beyond the discipline. Perhaps broader narratives than subject discourses are at work, implying that the current and stabilized institutional forms – the disciplines - may not be sufficient to the task.

Recently published HEFCE concerns, such as “**Sustainable development in higher education**” (HEFCE, 2009) don't address this broader institutional paradigm, as they embody conventional views and approaches to de-carbonising HE and focus on buildings and services, without aiming to tackle the way carbon appropriation is embedded in curricular activity. The curriculum is explicitly left out, ignoring the broader 4Cs (Campus, Community, Curriculum=Culture) model proposed from the work of the Centre for Sustainable Futures. This suggests it's HE that is in what Bridges calls the 'neutral zone', being able to see neither where we have come from nor where we are headed. (Barnes-Powell, op cit.)

Creativity and culture

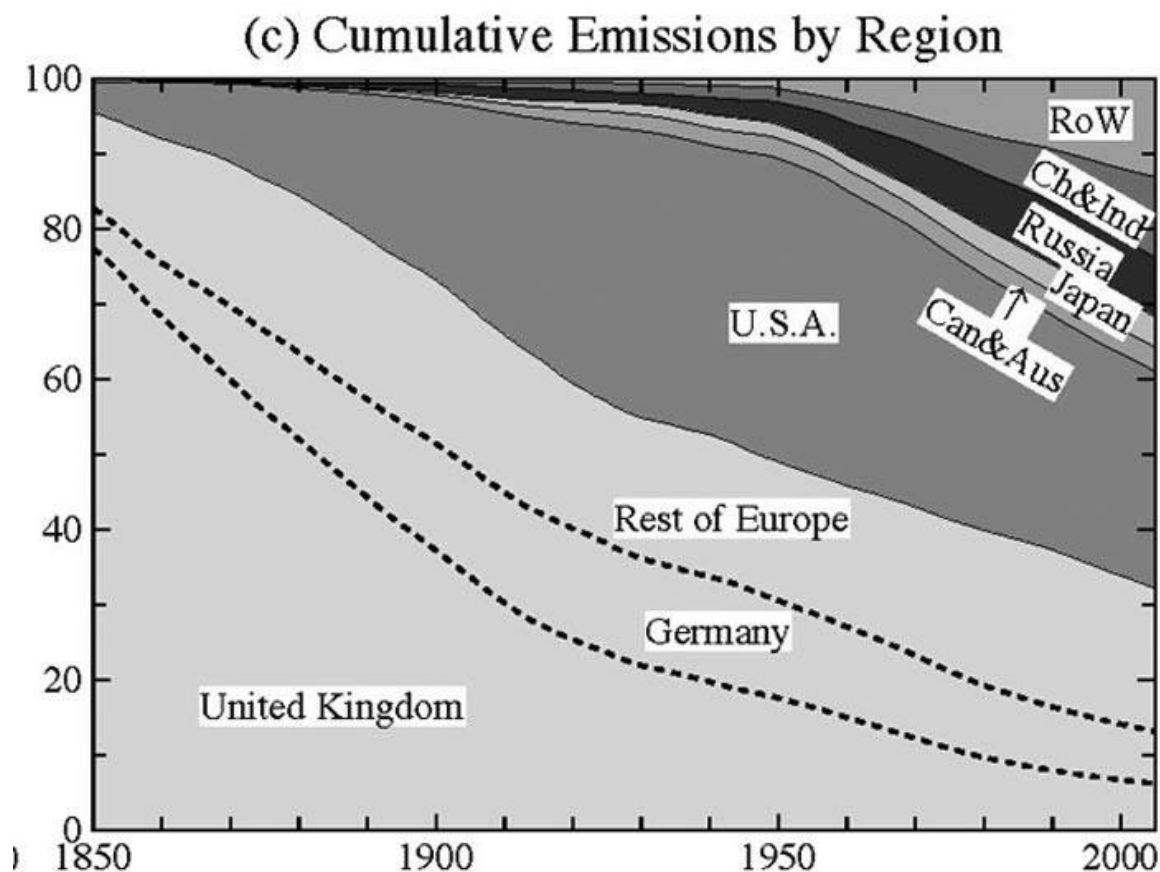
Two problematic features of design study and practice are implicated. The first is contained in definitions or assumptions about 'invention' or 'creativity' that suggest open or free processes of engagement with culture and economy – as though they were actually mapped onto what Latour calls 'matters of concern' (Latour, 2006).

Jeanes offers a devastating critique of contemporary creativity. For her, the mantra of creativity hides a dull circular subversion of truly creative or novel approaches to culture and thought; this Deleuzian perspective offers us the insight that “the problem with our current way of thinking is that it is a process of the **realization** of (known) ideas” – and that, for her, real creativities can only come “from thinking, being creative, in new ways and **not** in ways prescribed and recognized by our current understanding of creativity.” “Thus working within the creative narrative limits us to merely replicate, - ... our ability to create the 'new' is limited by what we already know” (Jeanes, 2006, 128-9).

The limitations of this first constraint on the creativity of design can be seen in the way we offer up change or try to manage cultural transition. And perhaps the most obvious way that we can see through the veil is to think how 'sustainable design' has become an *option* in educational thinking. Even to allow such a category immediately confronts us with the obvious and catastrophic corollary of 'unsustainable design'.

A second implication arises from the discourses established by design in its vocational and ultimately cyclic expression within the cultural processes of consumer capitalism. Thrift suggests its symbolic integration and experiential nexus (Thrift, 2005) is determined in the business-as-usual thrust to any innovation, invention or creativity. This produces immediate concerns about the emphases on life-styling and contemporaneous fashion, particularly when these are divorced so far from the feedbacks of resource constraint in what Stern calls 'the greatest market failure of all time' (Stern, 2008). This creative design works in a world where markets grow and adapt forever and resources never run out.

Today's focus is an academic world in which design wishes to participate at the highest level. The project of creative design education is therefore seen to be to produce knowledges, practices and creativities of international or even universal application; an aspirational epistemology that echoes the Enlightenment values that underpin the processes of science and capitalist economy and resound through the rest of the modern curriculum. These relevancies are those of today's flawed markets. There's a broader perspective that needs to be introduced here. If carbon emissions are the key to understanding the threat posed to the global economy as suggested by Stern (2007), then I have to share with you this possible threshold concept graphic for the understanding of sustainability and design in this context.



GRAPHIC PLACED HERE

For me this graph (Hansen, 2007) writes large the impact of the cultural shift and progress of western ideas across the globe over the last fifty years. It underpins ideas of cultural success, or creative design, as the successful exploitation of carbon appropriation and use, not in some scientific or engineering conception, but as the very culture of our times.

So for innovating pedagogies in our current HE, it seems that the biggest challenge we face is one of making the nature of the project clear.

Paradigm shift or threshold concept?

In exploring the ideas of paradigm shift and threshold concept we can introduce some thinking about new concepts, new boundaries, new frameworks and how these can be assimilated into how we work.

We have to wonder how change will happen – and perhaps some revisiting of Kuhn’s views on paradigm can help us. (Pajares, 2009). It’s worth outlining three stages in paradigm shift or contention. Since all thinking and research can only happen in paradigmatic fashion, all new paradigms are in contention with those already established. It is not enough for a paradigm to prove its effectiveness in nature, it must also prove its status against prevailing paradigms. As this dissolves existing paradigms, there is crisis as a fundamental rebuild of perceptions takes place. This reconstruction changes some of the field's foundational theoretical generalizations, changing methods and applications.

How are such changes in paradigm understood or provoked in our L&T? It is here we can see the relevance and position of threshold concepts. Can they enable us to provoke/promote paradigm shift?

Peter Davies (Davies, 2005 in Land and Meyer, 2005) describes threshold concepts as though they are part of the process of disciplinary indoctrination – they are the way one becomes a member or adopts the ways of seeing of one's subject area or discipline. Their five core characteristics – transformative, irreversible, integrative, boundary-confirming and troublesome (because tacit) – give a clear account of the way he wants to suggest that disciplinary-thinking and practices can be established and disciplinary status can be confirmed.

There's a challenge here if what we are seeking is a threshold concept in sustainability – a concept that builds a better understanding of the reality of a subject area. Crucially sustainability confronts the reality of a subject area that isn't operating in a broader context. For sustainability to have an impact in the Academy – to be absorbed into the mainstream of curricular understanding and adopted in a widespread fashion across the disciplines we face two burdens – firstly sustainability has not been seen or used as a threshold concept to secure core or fundamental understandings within subject areas. Secondly the whole paradigm of our understandings has relied on marginalising it and seeing it in optional fashion, such as Being Green.

So we must take sustainability away from the abstraction of the discipline and relocate it in the actual institution and its broader local processes. And from my interpretation of the cumulative emissions graphic – rather than trying to globalise the understanding, we should localise its implications throughout all facets of the Academy. This is not new, Kuhn's interpretation of the crises of paradigmatic thinking allows that competing paradigms must evolve, indeed they must coexist – there is no thought, no education, no change even without any paradigm at all. In Kuhn's mind, Bridge's "neutral zone" is no zone for us because there is no thinking without a zone. The neutral zone appears simply to mark the arrival of a powerful new paradigm and the strength of its threat.

If we want to use the threshold concept it can be used to reveal the new insight of this broader paradigmatic frame, and that we need now to work on the tacit nature of troublesome knowledges –we need rather to work with the tensions between paradigms.

Localisation

Localization might make this paradigmatic shift clearer. This idea carries much power to reenergize our thinking, broaden our insights, push forward our bounded thinking, - across much of the Academy, but most especially for the design of the world to become.

Twenty years ago, Neville Brody saw it thus...

"This can not be left to the wiles of "experts" or "specialists." As long as design is defined as a profession – an insulated commercial priesthood – the public will be seen as little more than fodder for the market.

The requirements of community, the preservation of human and material resources, the liberating powers of education – not indoctrination – should stand at the center of the design process, guide its development. (Brody, 1989)

Today we see these changes happening in many guises – in an economic history in the explanation of the graphic earlier, in so-called new media theory, network theory, and through a great many areas of the curriculum across HE.

For those who have not had their 'peak-oil' moment we must try here to develop this different threshold concept!!

Increasing resource pressures will constrain the current paradigm; the new paradigm suggests this will entail greater differentiation of design activities within a knowledge system carried by the network – and the instance of design will be the demand made of the network by the process of a localised design need. (Tridgell, Hopkins, 2008)

The relevance of any generic epistemological understandings within design (or any subject) can only really be expressed in the conditions at hand – the real, the local, the contemporary. And as the crisis deepens resource constraints will push this remorselessly home to the local. This process is already under way and there are several manifestations of understandings that can bring this home to us.

Digital effects on culture as a localising actant

The implications of the networked knowledge economy (NIE) and its shared and proportionally more nonmarket understandings and cultural exchange have been explored by Benkler in his “Wealth of Networks” (2006). Speaking of the paradigm shift from his argument, he says,

“Now, ubiquitously available cheap processors have dramatically reduced the ... costs ... (of) cultural expression and communication, and have rendered feasible a radical reorganization of our information and cultural production system, away from ... commercial, concentrated business models and toward ... nonproprietary appropriation strategies, in particular nonmarket strategies whose efficacy was dampened throughout the industrial period by the high capital costs of effective communication.”

The impacts of the NIE on the realities and design requirements of changing local conditions are counterintuitive. Education itself is the escape from the local - travel and universalizing knowledge are the gifts of successful carbon appropriation to the brainy in a real world. (Thrift, 2006, 300)

Challenging current cultural property regimes through ways that von Hippel has called the democratization of innovation (von Hippel, 2005) upsets the established ways that higher education delivers to its economy and pursues its governance.

Democratization of design process, community and culture as a localising actant

Localised networked design economies question assumptions about twentieth century innovation and economy. They offer the possibility of redefining the knowledge economy as one that embeds its local economy in networked knowledge, rather than understanding knowledge economies as those that service and manage productive, but distant, ones, echoing the discussion of colonial discourses earlier.

As Thackara has suggested in the Design Observer – we are emergent economies now (Thackara, 2008). Local knowledges and broader networks are the key. The focus for design becomes particular, local, actual. For an excellent recent case study one can see the work of Rose, M et al (2007). Among their contributions to the knowledgebase of design we find “the potential for significant design advantages in drawing on existing socially-situated communities of practice and knowledge and design skills where these can be redirected toward new product and service pathways,” and how in this exploration of the local “it is important to identify and understand how successful designs and design-based commercial enterprises can often be created by those who are not professional designers.” The search for sustainability will seek to utilize networks of design in new ways, as the pressure to localise, to contain costs, to bind in knowledge from the networked knowledge economy into its transactions. These (I assume increasingly digital) ecologies will make design local - binding the expressions of the network, its designs, to their localised impacts.

This does not make established design happy, but must move the orientation for a truly creative design education within the new paradigm. It is not that this is such a jump into the dark. Already there’s a building consensus within the new paradigm. Digital Britain (DCMS, 2009) shows how the Academy will be rooted in the community in new ways, with far higher information flows and local material needs. The vision is of a digital culture in community and a locality of digital culture, echoing my basic premise. But the fears are plenty, the risks high. The tension caused is palpable, until you can grasp the reality of the crisis and the un-sustainability of the current paradigm.

Hopkins is seen as survivalist in his representations of this paradigm shift. His Transition movement is a call to local communities to organize for what he has characterized as ‘the powerdown’, the increase in resilience required to

overcome the effects of peak oil. “That’s not to say we should all close off from each other, rather we should find more equitable and useful ways of relating in place of the unequal exchanges of ‘stuff’, which perpetuate rather than supercede the legacy of colonialism. “ (Hopkins, 2008).

For me there are now basically only two places **here** and **there**. The local, with all its challenges and needs, and the global – now busily networked as the sum of all our localisations.

As Stephen Sterling has pointed out in his third level of institutional response to this challenge
“..(in) this transformative response, a ‘living’ inquiry-based curriculum is developed. The focus is on becoming permeable, experiential learning communities and organizations. The learning is the change.” (Sterling, 2004)

For this reason **localisation** could be pursued throughout the Academy, not just in the study of design. In this sense localization is a threshold concept for a creative design education – one that because of paradigm shift we can’t yet see or use very well in any discipline. And we have to use its capacity to disrupt established vehicles for unsustainable living as enshrined in the current higher education process.

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