

Being and Becoming in the Design Studio: Practicing a Practice, Practicing for Practice, and Practicing a Shared Life

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Abstract

Postsecondary design education is largely taught through the pedagogical method known as the design studio in which students and teachers engage in activities that simulate a professional design practice. Its aim is for students to learn with and from one another to experience being a designer while engaging in the design process. In the process of this doing, students practice the design while also practicing for a professional design practice. Such learning is most enriching when students (and educators) are prepared to engage in meaningful conversation with peers, their work, and the discipline itself. In such an ideal, students are also — perhaps unknowingly — practicing a shared life. Based on Gadamer's three different I-Thou encounters to understanding, I explore the possibilities and limitations of the 21st Century design studio as a site for practicing a practice, practicing for a profession, and perhaps even for practicing a shared life.

Keywords

Hans-Georg Gadamer, shared life, practice, teaching, community, design education

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This past semester, the very last day of classes also happened to be the very last class for my fourth-year communication design students. With graduation only weeks away, there was little more I could “teach” them. The prior class I told them that the last class would have three student presentations, but after that, they were free to use the studio time in any way they wanted. Collectively, they decided that they wanted to spend one last class as a group. With some organizing during the week, some students brought crafting supplies enough to start a store; others brought baked goods and snacks, including freshly baked still warm jam rolls at 8:30am! After the presentations were over, with Wes Anderson’s *French Dispatch* playing quietly in the background, the students made name tags and beaded bracelets together; they helped one another with final feedback for their assignments; they ate and chatted. Someone rounded up the class for a group photo. And when I packed up to leave for the day, a few were still there, not wanting this time together to end.

This kind of camaraderie is not unheard of for graduates of the visual communication design program in which I teach. Many cohorts remain close years after they leave, celebrating highs and supporting one another through difficult times. Often, they graciously return to their old classrooms to share their experiences with students. A few even end up marrying one another. But they don’t start this way, and I don’t think it happens by coincidence. Today, I will suggest that through practicing design and practicing for the design profession, students simultaneously, and perhaps unknowingly, also practice a “Shared Life” (Risser, 2002).

Educational philosopher Nicholas Burbules (2019) states that practices are “socially structured activities that operate according to norms about their proper conduct” (p.126). Another definition of practice, this time by Alisdair MacIntyre (1981), states that it is:

... any coherent and complex form of socially established cooperative human activity through which goods internal to practices are realized in the course of trying to achieve those standards of excellence which are appropriate to, and partially definitive of, that form of activity, with the result that human powers to achieve excellence, and human conceptions of the ends and goods involved, are systematically extended. (p. 187)

In speaking of norms, proper conduct, internal goods, and standards of excellence, both philosophers point to practices as ethical sources unto themselves. Gadamer takes this a step further and with a much larger view. In his 1983 address *Citizens of Two Worlds* (Gadamer, 1983/1992) he defines it as “the whole original situatedness of humans in their natural and social environment” and a “primary belongingness of all who live together” (p. 217). Elsewhere he summarizes: “Practice is conducting oneself and acting in solidarity. Solidarity, however, is the decisive condition and basis of all social reason” (1981, p. 87). *Being* human and *doing* human, then, could be the ultimate practice for us humans.

According to these definitions, the practice of visual communication design is also a practice, and a hermeneutic practice at that. After all, designers are something of a mediator or translator, or as Moules (2022) puts it, “a broker of understanding” (p. 376). We are always situated between the design client and the design user who have different but intersecting needs, goals, and desires. Furthermore, no two design problems are the same. For instance, a poster for a play is not just a poster, but a poster for *this* play, for *this* theatre group, with *this* history, in *this*

location and time, for *this* specific audience. Our interpretations of the situation at every step of the design process — one that involves problem-solving, research, ideation, iteration, discernment, and creation — are what ultimately give shape to the final poster. It is a product of the conversations that the designer has with the people, texts, images, their process, and with the self. The outcome and success of a design solution rest on the designer's understanding of the “concrete situation” (Gadamer, 1960/2013, p. 20). From an educational standpoint, it is crucial that we create opportunities for students to practice and nurture the practical wisdom to “develop and guide one's own capacity to form an opinion” (Gadamer, 1999/2001, p. 531).

Such a practice is rarely something that comes naturally. Initially, students tend to be drawn to design simply because they enjoy creative making (such as drawing and painting) or are interested in artefacts of design (such as logos and posters). I was no different. They do not yet know that the practice is not about personal creative expression but rather about personal creativity in service of *Mitteilung* (communication). Early on, many have difficulty understanding this, and it is a value that students only come to recognize and practice (Burbules, 2019) over the course of their education.

For example, one exercise in my introductory typography class asks students to find and document examples of typographic application in the world (e.g., signage, posters, menus, etc.) and discuss who the communication is intended for and what meanings might be communicated through the shapes, colour, medium, and so on. The exercise introduces students to subject terminology, but more importantly, it is an opportunity to get them to look with intent and curiosity and consider the relationship between form and meaning. In this way, they are invited to experience the world as a designer would and begin practicing being-in-the-world in a designerly way.

A year later, with more knowledge, skills, and experience, it is often in an assignment about accessible and inclusive design that the value of design as service to others crystallizes for many students. Here, I ask the students to design a series of packages for three pasta varieties of a single brand, with all required text and images provided. In addition, they are randomly assigned to one of three audience types with specific needs: Visual Impairment; English Language Learner; or Restricted Diet. The task is to design the packages with all the required information so that they support the aims of the specific needs group and of the brand, while balancing aesthetics and function for a more general audience. By researching and considering the varied experiences of shoppers, balancing the needs of different audiences, and deliberating on how to apply their design knowledge and skills, students develop solutions for communicating complex and layered information. Moreover, I have observed that many begin to realize the difficulty and responsibility in understanding the phenomena we often take for granted and begin to internalize the “for the Other” aspect of the practice.

In ways like these, my colleagues and I strive to provide a design education filled with opportunities to practice the practice for the design profession. In the “doing of the thing itself” (Figal, 2002, p. 109) students not only learn important foundational skills and knowledge — *techné* — but also begin to cultivate the much-needed *phronesis* that will allow them to use these in ways that are appropriate to the particulars of each unique situation. (Gadamer, 1960/2013, p. 20).

Design as a daily professional practice is also always collaborative and always in conversation with a human Other. At minimum in the case of a freelancer, there is the designer and the client. More often, there are colleagues, subject matter experts, suppliers such as photographers, illustrators and developers, and for larger projects, there can also be audience representatives. Therefore, a design education that supports communication —this *Mitteilung*— must also create opportunities to practice what Gadamer refers to as *Miteinander*, “being-with-one-another” (Gadamer, p. 536, 1999/2001).

In the design studio that the students and I inhabit, conversation occurs with the design tradition, the work, the self, and perhaps most importantly, with one another. Studios are small, with no more than 25 students per class. This is important, since, unlike in large lecture courses with hundreds of students, a design teacher can know each student by name and over time can come to recognize an individual student’s strengths, where they need to improve, and how we can support them. Students also have many opportunities to get to know one another because most of the studio time is set aside for work, collaboration, and discussion.

A hallmark practice of the design studio pedagogy is the design critique, or “crit”. The crit is an event in which students present their work, either in progress or completed, for discussion by their peers and instructors. The aim is to help improve the work by asking questions and sharing different perspectives and interpretations about it. Although crits can be conducted in larger groups, my preference is to work with small groups. This is because few students feel comfortable speaking up in front of the entire class, especially early on in their studies. This is probably not just something particular to young adults, but to anyone who is new to a practice and unfamiliar with the norms of the community.

Much like a hermeneutic conversation is about the topic, a crit is about the work in question. The student whose work is being critiqued learns to communicate the reasons behind their design decisions and listen to other perspectives and interpretations of their work that may challenge their own. In turn, the students critiquing the work learn to look and listen carefully and communicate their own perspectives and interpretations about it. Each student both gives and receives feedback in this way, helping them to learn to listen to what the others have to say, distance themselves from the work, and reflect on how their work functions. At first, this too requires initiation. Students may not want to make others uncomfortable; they may not want to present themselves as being too judgmental; or they may think that they might say the “wrong” thing. For example, students often start by stating a preference, as in, “I like the colour scheme you chose.” Although it sounds supportive, such a comment is not about the work at all, but about the self. So students are guided to focus on the work, state how and why they think a design choice functions (or does not) in the given situation. We may guide them to say something like “I think that the colour scheme you chose communicates friendliness and hospitality.” Although it may feel awkward initially, as they learn from mistakes over repeated crits, it becomes more natural and constructive.

When all participants come to the design crit in good faith with a desire to learn and be there for the learning of themselves and others, students can practice something close to a hermeneutic conversation. To hear the other, there must be humility. One must be open to listening and be open to the possibility that they may need to reconsider their current understanding and design

choices. However, there need not be agreement. Students are encouraged to critically consider these new possibilities — test them out as part of their design process — but ultimately each design decision, and the responsibility to “strengthen one’s own resources (*Kräfte*)” (Gadamer, 1999/2001, p. 535) will be their own. When each participant sees their own personal responsibility to respond to the other as a true other (Risser, 2002), an opportunity to see things anew opens, allowing for growth both as individuals and as a community.

I must admit though, that all this is an ideal. There are many obstacles to such conversations in the design studio, and limits to what design educators can and perhaps ought to do. Afterall, the design studio and higher education are themselves in-the-world, and the world today is one that seems designed to impede genuine hermeneutic conversation. What I think all these obstacles have in common is that their source lies in the inability to see the other as a true Other, one that can “teach us something new [...] about our world and ourselves” (Vilhauer, 2010, p. 83).

In *Truth and Method*, Gadamer (1960/2013) speaks of the first of two ways in which we deny the Other their claim as the “kind of experience of the Thou that tries to discover typical behaviour in one’s fellowmen and can make predictions about others on the basis of experience” (p. 366). In other words, we see the Other as a predictable object. We thingify the Other. Which of us teachers at one time have not made assumptions about students based on their outward behaviour? A student who comes to class habitually late or does not speak up in discussions may be labeled as unengaged or uncommitted to their studies; or a previously struggling student who all of the sudden comes with thoughtful work might be suspected of cheating (“there’s no way they could have come up with that!”). In not trying to truly hear the student’s claim, in not seeing them as an individual — without a sense of curiosity about what they have to say — we as educators forgo an opportunity to understand and to connect with them, further losing an opportunity to support them in their learning and flourishing.

It is not just teachers who rob the other of “their claim to legitimacy” (Gadamer, 1992, p. 173). Students too can treat their teachers and peers like objects to know and predict. For example, design is often culturally presented as a youthful profession; older teachers are sometimes dismissed as out of step with the times. In failing to hear these experienced practitioners, future designers risk losing a connection to their own history, especially at a time when foundational skills and knowledge are being eroded by both ideological motivations and the increasing and uncritical use of technology. Furthermore, practice itself can also be objectified. Although there are many curious students, they have been socialized and educated in a culture that sees knowledge as something to be acquired — a grade, a degree, a means to an end. This focus on future outcomes and results makes me wonder whether young people today get to practice being-in-the-world (Heidegger 1927/2010) at all, or if they are required to perform being-for-a-world demanded by others.

We are only human, so we will not be able to rid ourselves completely of this tendency to thingify the Other. However, today’s polarizing media portrayals pitting left vs. right, young vs. old, men vs. women, rich vs. poor condition all of us to delude ourselves further that we can know and predict the Other. Without ignoring its positive effects, we cannot deny that today’s technology not only aids to spread and legitimize objectifying (and often false) claims, but in making it easier for us to work, study, and play away from others, it further reduces the

opportunities for all of us to be truly together in the world. We are perhaps, and unfortunately, too well-practiced in this objectification and alienation from a very young age.

Even if we can acknowledge the Other as being more than a predictable thing, if our understanding is only one that is “a form of self-relatedness” (Gadamer, 2013, p. 367), this too cannot be called true understanding. What masquerades as understanding here is only a projection of the self. Gadamer (1960/2013, p. 368) specifically mentions the teacher-student relationship as one prone to this type of dehumanizing. As an example, in my own student days, there was an inflexible deadline policy in which any assignment handed in even five minutes late received a failing grade. Some teachers also locked the door to the studio barring latecomers. They claimed that this was helping students learn the importance of time management and overall professionalism. Putting aside for now major issues to do with assessment practice, this “I’m doing this for your own good” type of claim fails to see the humanity in the individual student. Whether the teacher realizes or not, it is more a form of control and dominance that only further thwarts genuine conversation.

Another way that this second type of I-Thou relationship often appears in design and design education (and education in general) is in work created in the name of “doing good.” Activities that aim to address a social cause or charity all too often become a way to maintain the status quo, leaving only designers, students, and teachers “feeling good.” As an example, in 2024 a Canadian university publicized a logo competition for a campus indigenous initiative. The competition encouraged applicants, especially those of indigenous descent, to submit a completed logo design that communicates the values of the initiative and reflects the ties to the local indigenous community. Only the winner would receive remuneration. Anyone else who submitted a proposal would be doing design work for free. These types of initiatives are often conducted in the spirit of community involvement and the name of social justice. Yet, requesting free work from members of that same indigenous community only works to perpetuate the historically uneven relationship which the initiative purports to oppose and overcome, never mind undermine the value of design as a professional practice. Unfortunately, this type of patronizing “doing good” through design is all too common both in the professional realm and in classroom activities. Perhaps they continue because it is easier than the time-intensive, difficult, and uncomfortable work involved in truly hearing the Other¹.

When both the objectifying and patronizing types of relation between the I and Other are so normalized in society, it can be difficult for not just students but all of us to see that such is not a way to share a life. Yet, despite these limitations and obstacles to our ability to engage in a genuine conversation, in trying to truly hear the claim of the Other, and in inviting students to practice such hearing, all of us stand to benefit. For my part, I believe the stakes are too high *not* to keep trying. So, within the confines of the design studio, with the students, and at times together with generous alumni, I practice visual communication design, the thing that has ultimately brought us together, and try to do so in a way that may allow us to also practice a shared life.

In the end, from the outside, this may not seem like much. What we do together in the design studio is not going to change the world, nor is it meant to. At least, it is not the way I see it. But what I have experienced in my years of teaching and learning alongside the students is that a life

of practice in the design studio has the potential to cultivate human flourishing and a sense of solidarity, even when agreement cannot be reached. For many students in the fourth-year class, this takes the form of confidence in their ability to ask questions of themselves and others as they take on new challenges and new practices. For some, it might mean they now have the courage to try something they never thought they could: moving to another country, singing for someone, even trying stand-up comedy — all these are real recent examples. It can also be as quiet as feeling just a little more understood, a little less alone. For almost all, it will lead to loving and supportive relationships that will last a lifetime. Because in practicing design alongside one another and practicing for the design profession, they have also knowingly or unknowingly begun practicing a shared life — one that continues to cultivate trust, humility, confidence, and enduring friendship.

Notes

¹ Through Design Canada, the national design association to which I belong, a letter was sent to the university to offer them support in the creation of an alternative solution. However, as far as I am aware, there was no response.

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