

Transforming Mindsets: *Intrapersonal Skills and the Becoming of a Designer*

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ABSTRACT

Design—whether making interfaces, objects, systems, or services—is as much about understanding behaviour, culture, value systems and relationships as it is about material intelligence. Today’s design practice calls for a generation of designers able to more deeply understand the human experience and as we recognize this paradigm we also recognize the need to better understand ourselves, in order to better understand others. The studio curriculum presented here, Transforming Mindsets, focuses on supporting the development of intrapersonal (individual, interior) skills of designers.

A research study was implemented in conjunction with the Transforming Mindsets studio in order to investigate the effectiveness of this experimental curriculum. The study used real-time self-reporting tools, one-to-one interviews and a six-month follow-up interview with students after completion of the studio for data collection. The study disclosed that the focus on inward skills had a deeply transformative effect on students and led to studio project outcomes that exceeded previous work. Yet post-studio interviews also revealed the challenge of integrating intrapersonal skills and practices into future contexts.

KEY WORDS

Design education, curriculum, self-awareness, resilience, mindset, embodied learning

I. CALL FOR AN INTEGRATIVE EDUCATION MODEL

As design participates in an expanded field of practice, there is a need to reconsider and expand foundational elements of design education models. Design today—whether making interfaces, objects, systems, services or experiences—is as much about understanding intangible factors such as behaviour, culture, value systems and relationships as it is about material intelligence. Whereas once we could think of design education as about making things, we are now asked how to teach making tangible, making sense, making possible, making right and making happen (Grocott and Sosa, 2017).

This expanded notion of “making” requires a more integrative education model. We are called to prepare students to be designers who are as able to navigate unfamiliar cultural contexts or collaborate effectively with multidisciplinary groups as to be fluent in visual communication. This indicates the need for expanded approaches to both how we design and how we teach design.



Fig. 1 Archipelago of Possibilities

The figure above is an image of a final student project, Archipelago of Possibilities, from the studio course. We can see some of the very traditional outputs of design practice playing an integral part of this project—the canvas map etched by laser cutting, the illustrated and softly coloured playing cards, the sewn pocket to package the product and the printed ‘travel guide’ booklet. But what is not visible in this image are some of the non-tangible aspects of this student project that made it so impactful and a successful project outcome. This includes the students’ explorations to understand teachers’ mindsets, researching challenges around implementing behaviour change, facilitation of workshops with teachers and school administrators and the completion of the project in deeply a collaborative group environment.

The field of design, both in industry and academia, is able to develop tools that facilitate human-centered, co-creative methodologies for our work. Design education has introduced curriculum opportunities for intercultural fieldwork and experiential projects with real-time clients. Select studio-based degrees ask students to engage in experiential work outside of the classroom, doing their own primary research in different communities and designing to meet the needs of actual clients. In the pursuit of understanding the nuances of culture, identity and value systems, we teach tools such as systems diagramming, empathy mapping and value exchange visualizations. These studio exercises enable students to use their unique skillsets in ways beyond traditional practice and advance the field towards more prominent roles in sustainability and leadership.

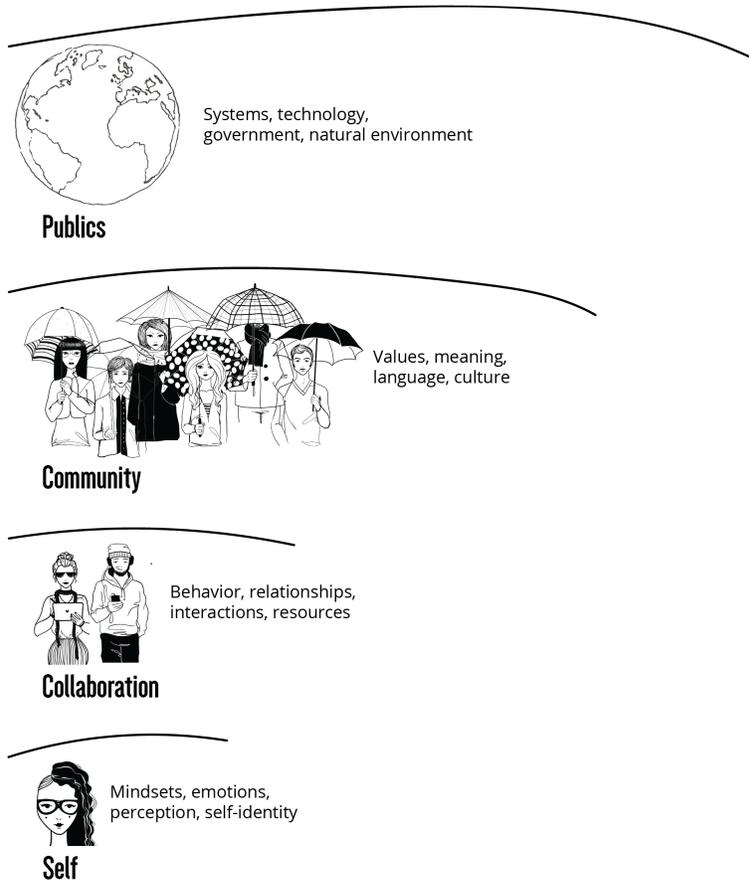
The practice of design calls for a generation of designers able to more deeply understand the human experience. Along with the tools and related skills to use them, at a deeper level we need to begin to recognize and call out the dispositions necessary for designers to succeed at

this work. Behind this research was the recognition that in the face of a rapidly expanding practices of design, and a multiplicity of education models experimenting with the future of design education, and the desire to create a more integrative approach to design education.

As we recognize this paradigm shift we also recognize the need to better understand ourselves in order to better understand others. As practitioners, we recognize our abilities to be adaptive, agile and self-aware. These are valuable, interdisciplinary attributes that are especially present in what designers bring to the table (Michlewski, 2015).

This curriculum looks at how we can more directly address developing the disposition of the designer and how to make these dispositions that lead to success more explicit throughout the curriculum. It has evolved from a somewhat simple idea that introducing self-reflection would promote self-awareness and over time has become a research-informed, learning-sciences-supported-approach teaching students to interrogate their own long-held beliefs and behaviours as part of their design practice. The latest iteration of this experiment, what will be referred to in this paper, was taught in the Transforming Mindsets Studio of the Transdisciplinary Design MFA program at Parsons School of Design in New York.

We are interested in understanding how designers can bring their skills to have greater impact, both in our discipline and beyond, and to be part of the larger conversations seeking sustainable-driven solutions to our most intractable problems. To make impactful contributions we need to think of our ability to design at multiple relational levels.



*Fig. 2 Levels of relationship at which we seek for design to make an impact.
Illustration credit: Anastasia Venediktova*

At the foundation of understanding human relationships, whether on a global scale, community scale or interpersonal scale, is the relationship with self. Deeper understanding at this core level contributes a strong building block to understanding as the levels expand.

As we highlighted in the levels of relationship, the work asks students to directly address the individual, interior realm when it comes to their design practice. We are proposing design education needs to embrace a greater focus on individual, interior, experiential learning, which cultivates intrapersonal skillsets. What we mean by intrapersonal are skills that focus on interior perspectives and self-insight. Distinct from interpersonal skills, which are the basis of social interactions, these personal skills include the capacity to be empathic with oneself and the internal drive to be curious; a willingness to be challenged and an agility to overcome obstacles; knowing when to take ownership and when to be humble. These mindsets are as much about personal resilience as they are self-awareness.

We believe that if design seeks to be a key player in bringing systemic change and implementing of sustainable initiatives, we must accentuate designers' abilities to be consistently agile, comfortable with uncertainty and effective collaborators. Being able to design

with high levels of self-awareness, perception and social-emotional intelligence is likely a key difference between the future of good design and great design.

III. TRANSFORMING MINDSETS STUDIO

The Transforming Mindsets studio was framed as an exploration of the role of design in behaviour change. This pedagogy is based on how designs for the public often lead to proposals (such as a public health campaign or a community-composting initiative) that require not simply a “solution” but ways to support an individual to shift behaviours, mindsets, or belief systems. The parallel process of having students work toward personal behaviour or mindset changes while designing projects to shift others’ mindsets was cornerstone to the curriculum. This was not only an important intrapersonal interrogative tool, but proved to be a powerful empathy exercise by identifying one’s own setbacks and/or mindset blocks and going through the process of working through them that translated into the depth of understanding of their audiences. It underscores the value of working on ourselves to be better able to work with others and working with others to better understand ourselves. This is foundational to the framing of the pedagogical approach.

The studio projects and partners were carefully chosen to deepen a student’s theoretical and practical understanding of this reciprocity concept. Within their studio, the students were examining their own mindsets towards learning and how learning environments support or hinder an educational experience. With project partners, students were looking to identify factors that held students and teachers back from reaching their potentials in the classroom.

Past: Surfacing Limiting Beliefs

One of the exercises that the students’ kept returning to was an activity adapted from the leadership Case Clinic method in Otto Scharmer and Adam Yukelson’s U.Lab course (2015). The Learning Mindset Case Clinic worked with the premise that one must let go of old ways of thinking to let come new ways of being (Scharmer 2009).

For the first weeks of the semester the students came together in small groups to work through the mindset or belief that constrains one of their peer’s full participation or dedication to learning. Within their client projects they were also working to identify self-limiting beliefs around learning with their partners. In addition to allowing students to experience what they were being asked to facilitate for others, the activity required them to develop intrapersonal awareness. Essential to successful human-centered strategies is a high-level of intercultural competencies and the ability to be compassionate and empathetic with people different from oneself. Building stronger intrapersonal awareness and the capacity to critically interrogate our own socio-cultural backgrounds and personal biases is extraordinarily helpful in cultivating these abilities.

It became evident that the stories shared and solutions proposed were of less significance than the vulnerable experience of publicly acknowledging one’s own fixed mindsets and challenges. Students were invited to step into this vulnerability and share a normally hidden struggle because of the implicit motivation that the Clinic would suggest strategies and offer support in

order to change future actions. Consistent with research about generating interpersonal closeness, the moment of vulnerability that each student took on increased his or her likelihood to seek out similar opportunities to be open in the future (Aron, 1997).

Follow-up data collection with students suggests that an additional transformative outcome was the deep sense of social belonging that came from explicitly being vulnerable together and purposeful in how to deepen each other's learning experience. The Clinic created an experiential, informed platform for intangible concepts like listening, empathy and vulnerability that are so often referred to in the field of design.

The work became centered on how the class was growing collectively and not simply proving individual worth through end projects. "The environment...was like magic, amazing, transformative." (All student quotes are transcribed directly from student interviews conducted as part of the research study.) Students described that the stress, tension and judgment that comes when there is a competitive pressure to "perform" stifles creativity in the studio and stands in the way of being able to effectively collaborate with others, "We are able to truly be ourselves with our group and spend our energy focused on how we can work together and support one another on our project."

Present: Tuning Behaviour Patterns

A significant structural change for the course was dedicating the first ninety minutes of the weekly six-hour studio to "serious play." By serious play we mean facilitated, play-based activities designed to develop and enhance skills, such as collaboration, creativity, reflection and self-awareness. We called this aspect of the class The Performance Gym. Play was infused into the course with the premise that the way one does anything reflects the way one does everything (Brown 2009). Through non-competitive play students could gain insight into how their instinctive behaviour and thought patterns come up in project work.

Stuart Brown, a clinical psychologist and leading researcher into the role of play in human development, affirms that, "the ability to play is critical not only to being happy, but also to sustaining social relationships and being a creative, innovative person" (Brown 2009). Using reflective, embodied, play-based activities proved to be extremely effective at helping students break out of established ways of thinking and freely explore new ways of being with their colleagues and designing throughout the semester.

The embodied activities demonstrated how students instinctively react in new and collaborative situations. The play created recurring experiences of being placed under pressure, given ambiguous instructions or operating in a world of uncertainty, which disclosed for individuals his or her automatic responses under these conditions. Facilitated group reflections after every activity were key to recognizing the value in all of this work. The debriefs often ran as long as the exercise and encouraged reflection on actions like jumping in to "save" someone else or acting too soon or too late. It created a space that encouraged students to let go of anxieties and stress that can stop one from reaching their potential as designers; reporting, "The Gym

has helped me understand my relationship with other people, how I see myself, what I take from others and in turn what do I really give back to them.”

Future: Proposing Preferred Outcomes

The “Give Yourself an A” exercise asked students to write an argument for how they would earn an A for the studio (Zander 2006). Students postdated the letter for the end of the semester, encouraging them to think about how they would define success. In foreshadowing what success looked like for each individual, the exercise highlighted students’ intrinsic motivations to succeed and brought attention to students’ ability to shape their educational experiences.

The activity was framed around how to create a learning contract between the student and the professor. It quickly revealed to students their initial inclinations to speculate what the professor was looking for as success, rather than critically reflect upon what they themselves defined as success. To support the students in transforming their learning mindsets they were asked to focus their attention on how they might enact a different mindset of their own towards “success” and challenged to envision what evidence of a “different mindset” might look like at the end of semester.

The exercise encouraged students to take ownership of their learning experience and put the emphasis on their ability to engage with their learning according to their own performance metrics. One student described how this framing led her to ask, “What does success look like for me, and not simply what do I need to do to please my professor?”.

IV. BRINGING IT FORWARD

Explicitly dedicating studio project time to working on these non-cognitive competencies greatly enhanced students’ ability to empathize with the public, collaborate with peers and design never-before-seen solutions, according to students’ self-evaluative reports. Despite the studio time dedicated to these self-developmental learning outcomes, partner projects were not compromised and students overwhelmingly reported that the projects were some of their best work.

If we understand that one measure of a student’s potential capacity for future learning is his or her ability to be proactive and self-aware then the Case Clinic, Performance Gym and Prospective Writing provide some approaches for how to teach the introspective skills necessary to take stock of one’s strengths and take initiative around one’s weaknesses. Together the exercises shaped a class focused on enhancing collaboration skills, collective growth and lifelong learning. Students cited the impact that the learning environment had on building self-confidence, relieving stress and improving communication skills and group dynamics as directly leading to enhanced community partnerships and more mature project outcomes.

In six-month follow up interviews transferring these skills into future academic and professional projects had mixed results. Students reported struggling with translating the empathy, reflection and collaboration skills into more conventional project-driven environments of the design studio.

Some students lamented their inability to advance a collective-growth mindset or to be as secure and open with peers who had not had the shared experience of the Transforming Mindsets studio.

We hope further iterations will disclose how to improve the transferability of the learning outcomes. An addition that could make the most significant difference would be to require students to teach their peers how to pursue a more self-aware design practice. Students reported that the studio lacked the opportunity to lead play exercises, develop an embodied curriculum, or design a case clinic of their own.

As we moved forward from this studio integrate what was learned in this work to our roles as both researchers and teachers, three key ingredients surface as foundational elements of each of the exercises. First, each activity began with self-interrogation. The students (and instructor) were required to personally identify the mindsets and behaviours that were holding them back, and thus identify the design opportunities for their own interventions. Second, the environment encouraged, and exercises required, a willingness to make yourself vulnerable and take risks. Without the students and instructors being willing to step outside of their expected roles and actions in the classroom, the curriculum would have not been successful. And third, each activity depended the community of peers to process the work and support one another.

This three-part sequence is infinitely adaptable into work in the classroom, design studios and research. The unintentional scaffolding serves as a frame to help direct and encourage future projects and promotes the value of facilitating an environment and collaboration that embraces these ideas.

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