

MAKING IS THINKING

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The following paper was an assignment written in December 2009 for Dr Erik Stolterman's design theory course at Indiana University.

As a mentor for the incoming Human-Computer Interaction Design (HCID) class of 2011, I engage the students in many philosophical discussions. It is the highlight, I feel, of having a mentor relationship with students, because it allows me to reflect upon myself, my actions, my thoughts, and my understanding of the courses here at Indiana University. For instance, in October 2009, I had a conversation with one of my students, where in being completely honest with him, I surprised myself.

The student was asking for advice about electives. He was unsure what he wanted to take, because he wanted to “get the most” out of his experience in the HCID program, but at the same time, was unsure if he needed to expand his artistry background since he was coming from a technical background.

That said, he asked me what elective I took during my second semester, and whether it was something related to HCID. I told him no, the course I took had almost nothing to do with HCID explicitly. I had taken a fiction writing course. After all, “I am a writer, an artist, a designer, an engineer. In that order.”

It boggled his mind that I, being what he considered one of the top performers in my class, did not put “designer” at the beginning of the list of adjectives describing who I am. I replied,

“It works because writing is all about how to express your ideas. If you have an awesome idea, but can't express it, it doesn't matter.

“That goes directly back to HCID. My profession isn't who I am. It benefits from who I am. It doesn't define me.”

This is my position in terms of design theory, and being a designer. I am a writer, an artist, a designer, and an engineer. My “ability to know” is based on my “ability to construct meaning” from my “experiences” (Smith 2005). I am, in other words, utilizing my previous life experiences to inform my design thinking, as suggested by Krippendorff. Acknowledging that I am a tactile person, that I must be creative with my hands, and that I must have creative outlets in general or I will likely go insane, is imperative to understanding me as a designer.

You see, I believe “thinking and feeling are contained within the process of making” (Sennet 7). The semester I took this design theory course, I was also taking ceramics. This elective, much like fiction, has little to do with HCID explicitly. However, there are implicit similarities that have altered—and improved—my design thinking.

THE CRAFTSMANSHIP OF CERAMICS AND HCID

Ceramics was one of two artistic realms that I had not truly ventured into; photography is the other, and I will be taking a course next semester to fill that hole. As such, by entering the course, I was admitting that I was a novice, but that I hoped to develop a connoisseur's eye toward ceramic design and craftsmanship. At the beginning of the semester, something as simple as making a slab could take me 45 minutes because I was unused to the clay material, which seemed to have a mind of its own. The clay could be too wet, and not hold its form, or too dry, and fall to pieces. The clay could have bubbles in it which, if not found, could result in the sculpture exploding in the kiln.

The only way to learn all of the different pitfalls of the ceramic craft is either to experience them, or watch someone else go through it and learn from their mistakes. By the end of the semester, I could make a slab in ten minutes, without air bubbles, but only because I put so many hours into failing at slab-making at the beginning of the semester.

In this way, I learned that my discipline with drawing, painting, and playing violin could once again be applied to a new forum, ceramics. It is like the architect Renzo Piano said, “You think and you do at the same time. You draw and you make. Drawing... is revisited. You do it, you redo it, and you redo it again” (Sennet 40).

Why do I have this discipline instilled within me? I could have lost my patience when I first trained myself to draw when I was eleven. I could have assumed I would never reach my sister's potential when it came to painting when she was fifteen and I was seventeen. I could have convinced my mother to let me quit violin when I was fourteen, the way I wanted.

I did not give up any of these times because I am, I have realized while taking this course, a craftsman. I believe in craftsmanship, meaning that I believe in the “enduring, basic human impulse, the desire to do a job well for its own sake” (Sennet 9). I believe in collecting experiences in which I am a connoisseur, in which I have gained the “art of appreciation” (Smith 2005). I want to have the “ability to see, not merely to look” (Smith 2005).

What does this mean for HCID, and my theory of design? Everything. It means that when I learn how temperamental clay can be, I can apply such knowledge to designing an interface. I will never know what sort of “mood” the clay will be in when I make it to the ceramics studio, the same way I will never truly know what sort of “mood” my users will be when they interact with my interface and/or software and/or product designs.

This is what I mean by believing that I am a craftsman, and indeed that all designers ought to be craftsman. By gathering my experiences to look for patterns of behavior from seemingly unrelated events (i.e. using clay as a metaphor for people/users), I am using a “solution” from one field to “uncover new territory” in HCID (Sennet 11). Through my artistry, I have come to realize that “problem solving and problem finding are intimately related” (Sennet 11). By knowing how the clay works, I am able to recognize when a problem is forming, and therefore determine the possible solutions.

WHAT IS THE MORAL OF THE STORY?

As designers, it is imperative that we recognize the material properties of our craft.

In ceramics, it is to know the material properties of the clay. It means to recognize that by throwing the clay one way, I am aligning the clay particles to slide against one another so it becomes a slab. Or that by pinching the clay, I will eventually create a bowl. Or that if I add enough water to the clay, I will have a clay solution so thin I can paint it in layers, thus achieving a smooth, delicate surface.

In HCID, it is to know the material properties of the people using our design. Who are they? What is their responsibility? What is their main concern when interacting with my design? Do they realize it as such? Will they have varying moods while interacting with my design? Must they have the use of both their hands? Must they have use of all of their senses?

In this way, I am the writer, the author attempting to tease out the concerns of my characters. What are their motivations, and how can I help them? What can I do to get in their way, and is it necessary? Everything to me is a narrative, from working with the clay, to practicing the violin, to walking through a storyboard for a proposed interaction.

This is because I am a craftsman, and thus represent that “special human condition of being engaged” (Sennet 20). I am fully engaged, and so should other designers be. We all ought to learn from the miniscule events in our lives as much as the traumatic ones. We ought to “do good work,” which means we need to be “curious about, to investigate, and to learn from ambiguity” (Sennet 48).

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