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Creative Debate as a Tool to Empower and Create Disruptive Thinking within Learning Contexts in a University Design Environment

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Abstract

With this text we focus on the ability Creative Debate has to empower and create disruptive thinking, within the context of University design studies. This research understands creative debate as any debate where participants create the layout, reach agreements, manage its own development and assess the results, all lead autonomously and creatively. One of the items that define the debate as creative is the participants' design of the "discussions", that is to say, the design of the activities that bring the topics to be discussed into play on a more experienced way. And this means to previously work on developing a script and a phase of pre-production for those activities that will help to boost, generate, create arguments within the debate. And this work is starting to being developed by design professionals who focus their own work on the design of intangibles (services, systems, situations, cooperation), instead of producing material goods. As a case study we will use a debate undertaken by students from 3rd year at Grau de disseny d'Eina (Eina's Bachelor Degree in Design), Art and Design College, on April 2015.

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1. Creative Debate. Negotiation processes and collective construction knowledge

This paper is part of a wider research on advantages on learning dialectical exchanges, in particular using the layout we have called “creative debate”. The development of the idea of creative debate, its sizes, functions and layouts are one of the topics of the research of the Research Team “Processos de disseny. Pràctiques avançades en art i disseny” (Design Procedures. Advanced implementations in art and design) from Grau de disseny d’Eina (Eina’s Bachelor Degree in Design), College affiliated to the Universitat Autònoma of Barcelona.

With this paper we focus on the ability of the Creative Debate to empower and create disruptive thinking, within the context of University design studies. Likewise, we suggest it to any other College scope.

This research understands creative debate as any debate where participants create the layout, reach agreements, manage its own development and assess the results, all lead autonomously and creatively. One of the items that define the debate as creative is the participants’ design of the “discussions”, that is to say, the design of activities that bring the topics to be discussed into play on a more experienced way. And this means to previously work on developing a script and a phase of pre-production for those activities that will help to boost, generate, create arguments within the debate. And this work is starting to being developed by design professionals who focus their own work on the design of intangibles (services, systems, situations, cooperation), instead of producing material goods.

Engaging in discussions is part of the design tools used in creative debates to promote the birth of “emerging categories”, in the words of Íngrid Sverdlick, by building new relationships between the debate parties. Fostering the emergence of emerging categories or concepts, through substantiated dialogue, is one of the aims of any debate who would like to be considered as a research activity.

Accordingly, the emergence of new concepts or contents fits in the paradigm of dialogue explained by Guba and Lyncon (1989) where assessing is also considered from a constructivist, holistic and intrapersonal point of view. In the *Visió constructivista de la quarta generació (Constructivist perspective of the fourth generation)*, lead by the above-mentioned authors, an assessment aiming at the research of quality, merit or virtue is rejected and the idea that assessment is the result of the participants’ development and the negotiation of groups is being defended.

Arising from that the knowledge the students have gained comes from the interaction they maintain in a collaborative working system that allows them to exchange opinions and ideas that will enrich and broaden their points of view.

However, the engagement that we are seeking to boost targets the scope of communication and dialogue in order to incite a joint development of knowledge (Flecha, 1997). We are not trying to seek for absolute truths; we are looking for subjective understandings full of meaning (Bolívar, 1995). Doing so, one can overcome a mere exchange of arguments (bidirectional and linear) and promote generating negotiation processes which in fact build knowledge. Thinking similarly, Coll and Solé (1990) defend teaching under a constructivist conception and define it as “(...) a continuous process of negotiation of meanings, of establishing mental contexts that are being shared, result and system, simultaneously, of the process of negotiating”.

2. Discussions. Cooperative learning for empowerment.

Using discussions also helps to overcome the tendency of group discussions to position themselves on two opposite sides that do not give space to raise other alternative points of view. This is an issue for group discussions because they tend to be structured on dichotomies, the problems tend to be explained using opposite thesis, so at the end there is a distortion on the approach itself. In fact, duplicating the group between “ones” and “others” ends up on stereotyped and conventional approaches that do not allow for the subject matter to move forward an innovative point of view.

Certainly, the construction of concepts by association of belonging to something based on dichotomous differentiations is also created within social environments: we/others, friends/enemies, truth/false, fair/unfair, etc. Although these differentiations are useful to focus topics, we must not lose sight of that they also restrict the freedom to undertake argumentative and conceptual relationships (Serrano, 2015).

Creativity needs to find new subjective commands beyond those socially instituted and, for this purpose, uses a variety of methodologies such as lateral thinking (De Bono, 2006), flow state (Csikszentmihalyi, 1996) and

biassociation (Koestler, 1975). The three of them have in common the fact of associating environments that are usually distant environments and are part of the tools of creation of design thinking. It is in this sense that creativity can be understood as the generation of connections between elements or contexts that initially did not happen to have a direct relationship nor a bipolarized opposition.

Creative debate follows this tendency that it is a non-polarized tendency, encouraging the use of hybridizations, connections, combinations etc, and questioning the logics of division, differentiation and distinction by opposites. This means that one can give an opinion from emancipation (empowerment), as said by Marina Garcés, instead of “(...) acting as a ventriloquist, or, at best, inviting people to participate in a karaoke with a closed repertoire”.

During shared and participative activities we must avoid the figure of the ventriloquist, such as the layout of the debate to be discussed. Garcés speaks specifically about “(...) avoiding the fact that from collaborative or shared design may raise new ways of privatization that make mutuality a simple sum of “I”. The graphic design of Facebook’s wall post would be, from its frontality and focusing on the individuals, the best feature of continued existence of obstacles to co-implication. If re-learning that “we” means not to leave room neither for the omnipotent fiction of self-sufficiency nor to self-awarded and expropriating freedom of the individual-owner, both obstacles will have found in the virtual environments of “social networking” a breeding ground”.

This perspective of mutuality, the co-implication, the common place and the community design permeates the new ways of sharing one’s word. The lineal exchange of arguments does not give rise to innovative thinking that has an impact on reality. Indeed, as explained by Castells (1996), it is a matter of creating a culture of “community and connectivity” in order to share points of view and act with greater strength in the process of innovation.

In this proposal for defining creative debate, the participants used tools for generating ideas from the design subject itself and *DesignThinking* in order to encourage interactivity and disruptive thinking. Lets then consider that this type of debate belongs to participative and co-operative learning (Daniel Cassany, 2009). On one hand, because the “users” are the ones who participate in the construction of the sizes and functions of the debate; and on the other hand, because the individuals and the teams co-operate in order to make some progress together under a shared responsibility.

This functionalist point of view of communication, based on the pedagogy of transmission, breaks the possibility that the participant may become only a sender and makes him become part of the act of building knowledge. In the words of Alvin Toffler (1981), the opportunity to stage both roles at the same time defines the participant as a prosumer. The concept of prosumer is usually used in participative design but when applied to learning it breaks with the unidirectionality of traditional teaching and supports “the de-monopolization of specialist knowledge” (Aubert, 2008).

3. The case study. Debate on Transition Design at Eina

During the research on existing and/or possible layouts of creative debate in university environments, we have chosen a case study on which we have analyzed the processes, methodologies and behaviours. It corresponds to the debate of *Transition Design and city* undertaken by students from 3rd year at Grau de disseny d’Eina (Eina’s Bachelor Degree in Design), Art and Design College, affiliated to the Universitat Autònoma of Barcelona, on 23rd April 2015. The debate was raised to students that had enrolled for the subject *Últimes tendències* (Last tendencies) as part of the research activities of *Transition Design* of the Research Team (teachers) on EINA’s Design Processes. This means that the students were aware that the exercise set in the classroom crossed the limits of the subject being studied and of the bachelor degree to be part of a “real” research of the Research Teams of the University.

The teacher who suggested this exercise accurately determined the tasks prior to the debate. However, she left open all its possibilities. On a first phase, students had to write a *paper* on a topic related to the design tendency so called *TransitionDesign*. Due to the required layout, this part of the work was the hardest and the most targeted due to the rigorous lack of flexibility that is required by such conventional layout.

Later students were asked to team up according to their affinities on the topics they would prefer to discuss and to discern the aspects of the works that would arouse their interest the most by debating on a small group. Finally, they decided to merge small groups to form bigger ones and at the end there were 4 groups that suggested 4 working lines for the debate.

The next phase of the work was the design of the layout that each group had considered the adequate one for the topic they were suggesting. The initiative came from the students who, feeling empowered because they perfectly knew the contents and they had chosen the topics of the debate, considered that the classical layout was not a good way of doing it to make the most of the capacity to produce knowledge from the dialogue. They designed what was called “discussions”, that is to say, a type of exercises or dynamics from which the dialogue between attendees would be established.

In this regard, and without them knowing it, they position themselves under a point of view that is born from social constructivism. That is to say, the theory of knowledge that Lev Semionovich Vygotsky (2006), at the beginning of the XX century, based on highlight the learning generated from social contact, in the dialogue, in taking language to shared argumentation, in the dialectic or in the debate.

They decided there would be 4 thematic lines and their corresponding “discussions” were as follow:

1. Topic: Is it necessary the role of a designer in Transition Design? If it is, what is most important: to design living practices or products?

Discussion: A moderator throws a ball to somebody and asks him/her the above-mentioned question. This person throws the ball to someone else and asks the same question to that person or throws the ball back to the moderator, who then starts again the same proceeding. On the wall there is a big board hanging where four graphic design students translate the conversation using schemes, diagrams and drawings. When the debate is consolidated, two other moderators appear, the ball is withdrawn and the graphic elements that have been registered start to be part of the debate. All of it is recorded on a video-documentary.

2. Topic: Crowdfunding as a key element for transition.

Discussion: A crowdfunding controversial and unethical case is set out using a short video. The attendees’ chairs are set up in a circle. There is like a spider web made with a ball of wool between the attendees; at each speech a piece of wool is tied to the attendee who has spoken. Written notes on the conversation are taken, as well as pictures of the visual appearance/aspect.

3. Topic: Barcelona, city under a transition? Recovery of public space; sustainability policies; cooperative initiatives within neighbourhoods; collective architectures.

Discussion: Chairs are divided into two groups and are placed face to face. Only 4 questions are asked during the debate and the assistants must physically place themselves in one of the groups or in the other group, and/or change places during the dialectics. The debate leaders gain presence, some of them energizing the space and the movements, some of them discussing the concepts, some of them writing down the main ideas on boards, some of them identifying the ideas of the participants by using coloured stickers and creating chaos.

4. Topic: How design has an influence on organising the decision-making of a group, whether it is a social or a business one? Hierarchical organizations vs collaborative organizations.

Discussion: Two weeks before the debate is due they invite an expert on collaborative business organizations and they do an exercise with him to draw up ideas. For the debate they prepare two emergency situations and they raise them to the public who is divided in two groups. They organize one of the groups with roles that are characteristic of a vertical structure and the other group with a horizontal structure. The groups dramatize the situation whilst the leaders of the debate dynamize, solve queries on roles and record the debate in writing. When all it’s finished, they share the results.

Finally, and as a conclusion, one must highlight that design processes have been conventionally applied to something that is tangible but as it has flipped from materials to knowledge in the change of society we are presently experiencing, the strategies and methods that belong to design are being applied to intangible processes. This means we are changing the main goal of design on understanding “how are things” to “how could these things be”.

This is a change of positioning that replaces the producer-executive character of traditional design by a projector-reflexive one. The *design thinking* focuses on the processes beyond products or final results (Nigel Cross, 2011). This places design thinking in environments where it wasn’t previously found, especially to address and solve problems in areas where applying guidelines is not sufficient and innovative proposals are required. The design becomes especially useful for situations with complex issues that require a vision from different perspectives and different reference frameworks, and it brings multidisciplinary and creative proposals. One of these situations could be learning activities, such as creative debate or other research areas, knowledge and innovation (Tom Kelley, 2001).

One of the tools that puts into practice the idea of *design thinking* is, precisely, moving the focus of interest from the assignment to the creative freedom that innovation can promote. As said by González “In the area of innovation we constantly work with “diffuse milestones” and “hypothesis” (González, 2014). Therefore, the speculation and the groundbreaking proposal of outlines will be a path to reach for solutions to complex issues, where managing uncertainty will be an essential part of the process.

Indeed, with the displayed case study, we researchers raise doubts about the adequacy (for research projects) of the results obtained from structured debates based on strict criteria of credibility and predictability. The discussions in the case we have studied cause a disruptive effect that is made clear for both criteria because the participants cannot anticipate the answers as they are unaware of the context in which they will have to build their arguments.

Meanwhile, the students who had participated have given us a very positive feedback with regards to their learning, in both contents and research methodology. For example, when it came to the in-depth of the previous research because they were passed on the responsibility of the questions to be asked and so the responsibility for holding an entire good debate. Students also especially appreciate their own effort to be able to enlist participants through invented group dynamics and they value the ideas born from the boost of the discussions. Finally, they stress that using creativity promotes the identification of the student with the subject studied. Thus, interpreting the action and the creative experience as tool of emancipation for their learning process and for the generation of disruptive thinking."

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