

Journeys of creativity in pedagogy: “butterflies leaving the cage”

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Introduction

This article explores the possibilities and tools of creativity in pedagogy, the multiple journeys it can undertake and the infinite destinations it can lead to.

It is a fluid talk through my approach as designer and a lecturer, and some relevant experiences I had as Associate Lecturer in the BA Course of Interior Design and as National Saturday Club Tutor of Art and Design in the School of Art, Architecture and Design of London Metropolitan University - and how my parallel participation as student on London Met’s Postgraduate Certificate course on Learning and Teaching in Higher Education (PGCert LTHE) informed them. Therefore, it is a double narrative perspective.

This is a personal piece of writing, full of all my fascination for the pedagogic experience with students, which to me possess an intrinsically poetic nature. I hope the readers will find here interesting examples of this “poetry in action”, the transformative power of education and its potential impact on the wider society. I discuss different aspects of creative pedagogy including use of metaphor, imagination, dialogue, testing ideas, material interaction, self-exploration and embrace of students’ cultural capital, mostly with reference to Design education.

The ship of higher education

I begin with my meta-reflection on the Facilitating Student Learning (FSL) Module of the PGCert LTHE course. During the FSL Module, we were asked, in small groups, to create a physical object that would represent our idea of higher education (HE). My colleagues and I represented HE as a ship, as a metaphor of a safe place – for both students and staff – even during the scary waters of a storm.



Representation of HE as a safe place - Image credit © Chiara Cola

This was Autumn 2019, we didn't know back then which storm was looming over us – and the world – and therefore, as well as retaining its conceptual significance, this now seems even a bit prophetic. What was it that allowed us to navigate the troubled times ahead? Could it be the very collaboration and creativity that made our ship?

Creative pedagogy: accessing the “endless space” of imagination

The core message in my meta-reflection was about creativity and education as powerful tools for liberation, as connected to identity empowerment, self-confidence, personalization and reflection, which are crucial points in London Met's (2020) Education for Social Justice Framework.

To visually represent this journey to freedom, in my reflective paper for the FSL Module, I used my own digital images, representing butterflies, as I thought they were the perfect metaphor for it. Since I was a kid, I always found it extremely saddening to look at butterflies (or birds) locked in a cage and to witness their nervous wing movements, in the frustrated attempt to leave their imprisonment.



“Butterflies' cages” - Image credit © Chiara Cola

How can we, as learners, achieve this escape to freedom, and how can we achieve it with students?

I personally have always loved the idea of challenging creative tasks that allow the object to emerge as something barely visible, almost hidden, through a surface. In my design work, I made different series of images inspired by the invisible side of existence. It is about this fascinating idea of pushing between visible and invisible, to overcome a limit.

This idea connects with the vision of Paulo Freire, the influential Brazilian educator who was the foremost advocate of critical pedagogy. Using his words, it is important to understand that our condition can be changed and challenged; this notion is the starting point for social justice overall:

“Accordingly, the point of departure must always be with men and women in the “here and now”, which constitutes the situation within which they are submerged, from which they emerge, and in which they intervene. Only by starting from this situation - which determines their perception of it - can they begin to move. To do this authentically they must perceive their state not as fated and unalterable, but merely as limiting - and therefore challenging.”
(Freire, 1970: 85)

Which are the obstacles in this process? How can we allow the “obstacle” to seeing and learning become a vital push and a central part of the development of an idea open to analysis and reflection?

A clue is found in the poem “The Infinite”, by Italian poet Giacomo Leopardi (1835, translated 1950), which begins like this:

*“Always to me beloved was this lonely hillside
And the hedgerow creeping over and always hiding
The distances, the horizon's furthest reaches.
But as I sit and gaze, there is an endless
Space still beyond, there is a more than mortal
Silence spread out to the last depth of peace,
Which in my thought I shape until my heart
Scarcely can hide a fear.”*

The poet used to go and sit in his favourite spot of the Recanati village, and the fence in front of his eyes was at the same time limiting a full vision but also acting as a majestic tool for the imagination, making him access the “endless space still beyond”.

How can we work together with students to access this “endless space”, without being scared of it? The obstacle often arises in unclear and non-honest communication; therefore, dialogue seems key.

Dialogue

By building meaningful relationships, with dialogue at the core, we will achieve a clear communication. Dialogue, being within humans, is by definition imperfect and, in its different layers of significance, “errors” can happen, as acknowledged by Argyris and Schon:

“Good dialogue is not a matter of smoothness of operation or elimination of error. On the contrary, its goodness is inherent in the ways in which error is continually interpreted and corrected, incompatibility and incongruity are continually engaged, and conflict is continually confronted and resolved”. (Argyris & Schon, 1978: 146).

Creative pedagogy, then, needs to consider error as a possible, precious resource of alternative realities and solutions and make it an important element of the design process.

Testing ideas, testing ourselves

When, during the FSL Module, our Tutor Tom Burns mentioned a similarity between problem-based learning and the practical approach in medical fields, I felt something that highly resonated with me, probably because since I was a kid I have been always fascinated by both creative thinking-making and medicine, noticing more their similarities than their differences.

Testing – both in medicine and design – is necessary to push boundaries and find new solutions, sometimes even different from the ones we were searching for. When we carry out testing in a design education setting, what are we actually testing?

We are testing an idea, but we are also testing ourselves and so are the students – the determination, the fear of failure but also the fear of success, the vision, the reaction at the outcome, the post outcome reflection.

Testing appears as a key element to carry out powerful self-exploration and to develop resilience. Testing is a vital aspect for change and, to properly express its full potential, it needs to be *expansive*. As leading expert, Yrjö Engström, defines it:

“Expansive learning is initiated when some individuals involved in a collective activity take the action of transforming an activity system through reconceptualization of the object and the motive of activity embracing a radically wider horizon of possibilities than in the previous mode of activity” (Tuomi-Gröhn & Engström (2003: 30-31) cited by Igira & Gregory, 2009)

Interaction through testing material

A crucial role in the whole testing experience is definitely played by the material and the interaction with it. During our FSL Module, as a student of the course, I lived an exciting learning experience as we were introduced to a “text mapping” activity where we had to analyse the content and structure of a select text from the module reading list, using a paper scroll (see Abegglen et al. (2019) on using scrolls to facilitate academic reading). In its collaged, very long body, the textscroll had a completely different materiality from a normal book or a digital one, and it required a different approach in proximity, listening and reading through all senses. We were encouraged by our tutors to interact with it, and that was a key aspect of the experience, both as an individual and as a group – which reminded a little bit an anatomic dissection.

Just to echo the medical science again, by quoting Helen B. Taussig (1898-1986), pioneering paediatric cardiologist, and her famous exhortation: “*Learn to listen with your fingers*”, developing the sensibility in the interaction is key, as it opens new, unexpected horizons.

I also observed the power of learning through interacting with material during my experience as Associate Lecturer in Interiors, I worked a lot in Studio in hands-on experimentation. An illuminating example is the project by an Interior Design Year 1 student, produced before the pandemic, in response to the brief “If walls could talk”, which was proposed by the Course Leader, Janette Harris. This student (GM) was inspired by the story of the Bell Foundry in Whitechapel but also very interested in this idea of “things behind things”, as suggested in the peculiar layers of materiality and colours which she incorporated in the design itself, reconstructed through the combination of the right materials: wood and clear acrylic.

By testing together various possibilities, the idea turned a static object into one expanding in dynamism, apparently defying gravity. As well as the object’s body, she considered its shadows too in this conceptual layering; the “anti-gravity stool” also had to perform acoustically: we can definitely say that, throughout the process, she learnt “to listen with fingers”.



“Things behind things”, chair design by GM, inspired by the Bell Foundry, as part of the project “If walls could talk”, based at the former Royal London Hospital. BA Interior Design Studio, Autumn 2019. Image credit © GM.

Self-exploration, material and social justice

Another example of learning through material interaction, from of my sessions as Tutor of Art & Design for the National Saturday Club, was the task about reinterpreting a cult piece of clothing - the t-shirt - through layering, cutting, hand-stitching fabrics which were all second-hand. I also took in some old mesh Ikea curtains that were regenerated into a whole, dramatic wedding outfit for a costume performance.

In the current times, there can't be social justice without consideration for the environment. Regenerating materials, giving them a new life, maybe differently shaped from the previous one, can have a positive impact on the wider society but it is also extremely empowering for the maker and the material itself, which is treated with respect and offered another opportunity.

The task was a powerful experience of self-exploration and material reinterpretation for the students. The piece shown here, "Fragile", was particularly relevant as the three students managed to create a very delicate ensemble of fabrics, all about contrast: a wonderful top with dramatic mesh sleeves and a corset adding to it the "fragile" tape.



"Fragile": recycled stretch lycra, mesh, silk and fragile tape. Image credit © Angela Blazanovic.

The girl who modelled it in the photograph was at first afraid of posing in front of our Student Ambassador and photographer, but she then did it very boldly and felt empowered afterwards. The materials combination seemed like it had a powerful impact on the maker.

Often designers have a favourite material or colour. When designing and teaching, I feel much more interested in their combination and especially when combining opposites: light/heavy, smooth/coarse, mat/shiny, cold/warm. It is a reciprocal relationship of transformation, a mutual understanding of differences and the resulting respect that originates from it.

Embracing students' cultural capital

Experience always seems crucial: how can we incorporate and better enhance the value of personal experience and what it could add into a design artifact?

As Henry Giroux (2010, n.p.), another leading exponent of critical pedagogy, explains:

“For Freire, pedagogy had to be meaningful in order to be critical and transformative. This meant that personal experience became a valuable resource that gave students the opportunity to relate their own narratives, social relations and histories to what was being taught. It also signified a resource to help students locate themselves in the concrete conditions of their daily lives, while furthering their understanding of the limits often imposed by such conditions. Under such circumstances, experience became a starting point, an object of inquiry that could be affirmed, critically interrogated and used as resource to engage broader modes of knowledge and understanding.”

Each student’s cultural capital and personal narrative can become a central part of both learning process and design developments as well as an invaluable element of critical analysis – as shown in the above examples of the chair design and the fabric creation.

Conclusion: creative immensity

In this piece, I have wanted to underline the importance of dialogue and collaboration in challenging limits, how every creative experience is different and potentially infinite, and how, as a result, we can all be empowered by education facilitated by creative pedagogy.

I have aimed at showing the journey of creativity, the importance of testing in a design education setting, as well as the impact of the materials chosen, their combination and reinterpretation through regeneration, as an urgent issue for the whole society seeking social and environmental justice.

The final part of the same poem I started with (“Infinite”, by Giacomo Leopardi) seems then like the perfect ending to this paper which commenced with the metaphor of a ship, and which has highlighted the theme of expanding the imagination:

*“And into this
Immensity my thought sinks ever drowning,
And it is sweet to shipwreck in such a sea.”*

This reflects exactly that precious moment when learners together can safely enjoy exploring in a creative shipwreck and feel confident to fly away, free like butterflies.



“Butterfly’s dawn” - Image credit © Chiara Cola

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Biographical note

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