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Off-centre – a call for humble lessons for design
How can metadesign perspectives support education in design for sustainability?

Abstract

This paper uses the notion of ‘off-centredness’ to highlight and critique a North Western conceit, hegemony and anthropocentric worldview, and an interwoven dominant construction of sustainability as ‘other’. It argues that while this generally is detrimental to social and natural systems, it also has repercussions on the specific context of education for design for sustainability. The paper proposes that pedagogy in this remit can be enriched by the positioning of ourselves - as educators and students - as humble co-learners. It offers a tentative pedagogical framework - ‘from me to we’ and from ‘product to paradigm’. This has the purpose of supporting co-learners to, from a deep understanding of, and connection with self and place, and engagement with design as physical object, form understandings of and meaningful relationships with the world as a whole. This should help enable co-learners to find agency as civilians and designers to contribute to futures of sustainability. The research has twinned applications. It informs the curricula of two new degree programmes in design at Linnaeus University, Sweden. It will result in a web-based learning resource open for general use.

Keywords:
metadesign, shared learning, co-learners, paradigm shift, extended epistemologies, eco-literacy, futures of sustainability

Introduction

This paper presents insights from the early stages of a research project, which ultimately seeks to mobilise an ontological (how we understand the world), teleological (how we define purpose) and epistemological (how we understand knowledge) leap, resulting in new approaches to pedagogy in design education. The purpose of these approaches is to support students and educators as co-learners to, from a deep understanding of, and connection with self and place, form understandings of meaningful relationships with the world as a whole, in order to find agency as designers to contribute to futures of sustainability.

The research supports the preparation of the launch of two new degree programmes focusing on design for positive change at the School of Design, Linnaeus University, Sweden, in 2015. The full study will result in a web-based learning resource open for general use.

A self-reflexive note on humility is called for, as I am not oblivious to the irony of simultaneously proposing humble lessons, and a framework that purports to integrate everyone and everything. Suffice it to say that I position myself as one of the co-learners
embarking on a shared learning journey? It is also important to make explicit where the thoughts of the paper come from, as I am deeply immersed in a context I seek to critique and change. I am a Swedish UK resident, over the years working in Estonia, the US, France, Norway, Indonesia, China and Turkey. I am a white, middle-aged woman – with the many privileges, and some challenges, that this entails. I am a fashion designer, turned educator and activist. A lengthy PhD project gave me the chance to reattune my existing interests and skills, as well as harness the new insights and capabilities I collected underway, towards a practice that I call the design of shared learning experiences. (Tham 2008)

The paper draws on insights from my fourteen years of experience of teaching design for sustainability at graduate and post graduate levels, and a range of helpful conversations during these years with other educators, students, researcher peers, and a general public. The paper further incorporates early findings from a series of interviews that are being conducted with educators and students from Denmark, England, Holland, Indonesia, New Zealand, South Africa and the USA on the use of vernacular practices and local knowledge in learning for sustainability.

This paper seeks to offer an impression of an idea for a systemic and holistic approach to design education in the context of sustainability, and to offer insights from the early stages of a research project. This means that issues of concern, educational approaches, and conclusions have been sketched out rather than drawn in detail.

What is ‘off-centre’?

‘Off-centre’ in the title of this paper refers to a series of provocations to a Western hegemony, and a dominant anthropocentric (and ego-centric) worldview, brought by the sustainability imperative. (Its urgency evidenced by e.g. Rockström et al. 2009; IPCC 2013.)

- The North West is ‘off-centre’ in light of emerging (or at last recognised) centres for economic growth, academic excellence and creativity.
- It is ‘off-centre’ in terms of the lived experience of unsustainability – or a failure in relating local/personal concerns to global challenges.
- ‘Off-centre’ evokes an urgent shift from prioritising the wellbeing of humans living in the North West today, to that of humans living in other places and in the future, and other species. (See e.g. Hawken et al. 1999; Sardar 1999)
- ‘Off-centre’ refers to the poor fit of the dominant academic institution in terms of organisation, epistemology, pedagogy and its very purpose, to embrace sustainability.
- Finally, and positively, ‘off-centre’ refers to what in systems theory is termed ‘bounded instability’, an auspicious space for learning and innovation potentially enabled when systems veer off-balance (see e.g. Stacey 1992).

Through my experience (in Sweden and the UK) of implementing sustainability across academic curricula, teaching design for sustainability at graduate/post graduate levels and to professionals, and acting external examiner to an MA in design with the specific focus of sustainability, the theme ‘off-centre’ has manifested itself in many ways. Educators express a lack of confidence in teaching about and for conditions they lack lived experience of. Students
(and educators) express feeling overwhelmed by the magnitude and complexity of unsustainability, struggling to see their own role and to find agency. Overarching guiding principles of academic institutions and programme/course specific quality/assessment criteria fail to acknowledge and promote core tenets of a paradigm of sustainability, such as an extended epistemology (Heron and Reason 2001), diversity, collaboration, and empathy (see e.g. Macy and Johnstone 2012).

I attribute the off-centredness (in both its general and education specific manifestations) to a Western trajectory of increasing separation from both direct engagement with and appreciation of natural systems. (See e.g. Merchant 1982) The intricately twinned (enabling and spurring the process) trajectory being, of course, that of economic growth taking the place as a core societal logic and dominant narrative (see e.g. Offer 2006), resulting in individual and societal (incorporating both personal and professional vantage points) obsession with novelty and fast speed, external routes to happiness and success, and homogenisation. This has come at the cost of natural and social well-being, and diverse modes and definitions of thriving (see e.g. Thorpe 2007).

In total, this constructs sustainability as other to the dominant ways of thinking and doing, and sustainability as external to dominant understandings of self. Thus sustainability in action becomes at best an attempt at retrofitting, and in thought a gesture of altruism. (See also Tham forthcoming) As North Western educators and students, we are locked into this logic and its many practical manifestations due to a paradigmatic blindness that is perhaps both a real result of our immersion and seemingly convenient.

**What can a deep encounter with sustainability entail for students and educators?**

In the context of education for design for sustainability, venturing outside of this fish-tank proposes some significant challenges, including:

- The excited student accepted on the degree programme, eager to *make new stuff now*. Will she or he be happy to be told to become what amounts to a “cathedral thinker” (Brand 1999) - engaging anonymously in collaborative pursuits, the tangible results and returns of which will not be realised within her or his lifetime?
- The seasoned educator. Will he or she be happy to confront that a lifetime of personal and professional practices (and a more general subscription to and being part of maintaining oppressive societal structures) may have contributed to unsustainability? Will she or he be happy to leave the comfort zone of well-established teaching practices? Will she or he be happy to confront and admit a lack of knowledge, (and furthermore that the students may know more), and dive into the unknown?

I have personal experience of these situations, as applied to me and as observed, and the general answer is a resounding NO. This NO is understandable as it the response to the proposition of what amounts to letting go of the fundamental scaffolding that is the understanding of our identity, our purpose, our world. Using a Swedish saying, ‘this is not done in a coffee break’.
Yet, students are agile and resilient. Again, as I have experienced, equipped with the right tools, their acceptance of new parameters is fast, and they can reattune expectations, curiosity and creativity towards contributions for futures of sustainability. For educators, there is of course more to digest, unlearn, and generally more at stake - a greater risk involved. The safe and empathic shared learning space is therefore central to their eventual reattunement. Yet, at the heart of both students’ and educators’ crossing of the profound threshold from being part of design as usual (or almost as usual) to design for sustainability, which also constitutes at paradigm shift for each individual, is the experience of agency. My research shows that even a small increase in the experience of agency, which may concern seemingly mundane and negligible improvement – such as washing your clothes at lower temperatures today, or choosing local produce, again, today, opens up more significant doors to sustainability. Being able to take this first, even minute step, a) increases an individual’s experience of the importance of sustainability and how interesting it is; b) increases his or her curiosity to learn more; c) enables her or him a better engagement with the complex interdependencies that constitute sustainability, and her or his negative and potentially positive role in these; and c) increases her or his experience of agency to make more contributions to sustainability, from personal and professional vantage points. (Tham 2008).

How can pedagogy in design education provide humble lessons for design?

This paper argues that, in conjunction, the provocations of off-centredness call for new humble lessons for design. It proposes that adopting the position of off-centre humble co-learners offers important opportunities for educators and students in the North West to contribute to global sustainability, and promote a healthy and polycentric design paradigm. It suggests that as a close and synergistic companion to formally stated external goals and principles of sustainability, educators and students should be supported in unlocking an internal compass, where a deep, embodied sense of rightness and appropriateness provides guidance for all decision making, whether tacit or formal.

Helpful companions to this pursuit are two perspectives on what constitutes valid learning in what amounts to a context of sustainability. The notion of an extended epistemology sums up the insights that only when (otherwise prioritised) theoretical knowing forms a congruent whole with knowing gained through experience, practice and presentation, can knowledge be robust. (Heron and Reason 2001) The poignancy of such knowing for sustainability is emphasised in the realm of ecological literacy which advocates that formal understandings of principles of natural systems should be accompanied by or stem from tactile and experiential encounters with nature. (Goleman et al. 2012) St Pierre (2014) points out an unrealised potential, as educational initiatives for eco-literacy have hitherto primarily or even exclusively been directed at children. Another helpful companion is the notion of metadesign, which can be described as design of design itself, of seeds for change, and emergent, collaborative design. (See e.g. Giaccardi 2005; Wood 2007) For the purposes of this paper, two contributions of a substantive metadesign research project 1 are of particular relevance. They concern how metadesign perspectives and practices can support understandings, with resulting wide and agile agency:

1. of how a reflexive individual, centred in her or his values, interests and capabilities, can become part of meaningful, reflexive, co-creative and synergistic teams within
and across disciplines, and a profound experience of ultimately participating in collaborations of shared purpose that span the world.

2. of how design at the level of a product, with its embodied materiality, form and detail, is nested within and intricately interdependent with higher orders of design, that constitute systems and paradigms.

(See e.g. Tham and Jones 2008; Wood, Nieuwenhuijze, Jones, et al. 2008; Jones and Lundebuye 2012)

A tentative framework – ‘from me to we’ and from ‘product to paradigm’

The insights presented above have resulted in a tentative comprehensive framework for learning for design for sustainability: ‘from me to we’ and from ‘product to paradigm’. This seeks to support an agile learning dance between personal values, experiences, vernacular practices, and global conditions and metanarratives, and between design of ‘the thing’ to design of systems, processes of change and paradigms.

The framework informs the new degree programmes at the Department of Design, Linnaeus University, where it has been translated into two interdependent progression paths (or green threads), ‘from me to we to world’ and ‘from product to system to paradigm’ spanning three years. At each step of increasing complexity, students will be exploring, mapping and giving design form to tacit and explicit interests and motivations, values, practices, histories and dependencies.

Obviously the larger ‘maps’ are not withheld through the process, but instead the progression steps indicate a chronological sequence of focus in learning. The educator travels these green threads together with the students. In fact, essential to the pedagogical framework is that educators and students establish themselves as co-learners with our students in a mutual and transparent contract. As educators we offer the safe space (in the guise of a learning place and time, transparent curricula and assessment criteria, learning frameworks, facilitation, rules of engagements – agreed upon with the students, confidence in the shared learning process). Students offer their attendance, participation, curiosity and willingness to share their knowledge and experiences.

Equally obviously, the framework proposed is partial. It will not be degree programmes without the vast expertise and experience that exists in the Department of Design. It will also take on different identities with each student and educator constellation that makes the shared learning journey. As a whole, the framework should be helpful for students and educators to form coherent and embodied narratives and to find their own voice and agency - as local and world citizens and designers, as individuals and as peers - and to be courageous and resilient when flying in the dark.

Conclusion

The term ‘off-centre’ is a provocation, designed to challenge both privilege and accepted dominant worldviews, where the construction of sustainability as other is deemed especially problematic. The result of the pedagogical approaches tentatively offered here, should be a polycentric worldview, where each student and educator, is centred though a deep experience and understanding of their particular here and now. This should enable a deep
sense of connectedness with other realms of the world, and confidence, curiosity and creativity to stretch into new design remits and dimensions of our world, finding agency to contribute to futures of sustainability.

My research continues, eliciting more insights through case studies, interviews with students and educators around the world. Ahead of the launch of the new programmes at Linnaeus University, in the academic year of 2014/2015, the members of the teaching team will, in the form of a competence development programme, travel the green progression threads together, learning, exploring, contributing expertise and experience, shaping the programmes in their details. A range of approaches will also be piloted with existing students.

I recommend that further research in this remit:
- Explores what it means to be an educator and academic institution today, particularly in the context of sustainability.
- Explores how accessible educational resources can be created that draw on and synergise diverse ways of knowing for sustainability.

I gratefully welcome examples and stories of pedagogical approaches that take as point of departure a deep engagement with local place, and the insights this has yielded.

Notes
1. Benchmarking Synergy Levels within Metadesign (Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) and Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council (EPSRC) funded project, at Goldsmiths, University of London. (2006-2009) Principal investigator Professor John Wood. www.metadesigners.org

Reference list


