THE PEA PROJECT – DESIGN STIMULUS

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ABSTRACT

Can a simple green legume, an ordinary garden pea, open up the field of design?

Can the humble pea help us to escape from 'defined methods' into another realm?

Can we discover in the palm of our own hands something about ourselves and in turn change the way we see the world around us?

Keywords

Reflective practice, creative thinking, phenomenological awareness, innovative teaching and learning practices, participative design studies.

WHAT IS THE PEA PROJECT?

The authors have successfully conducted the Pea Project with undergraduate industrial design students to stimulate creative thinking and reflective practice [1].

The Pea Project involves the adaptation of a series of successful and innovative teaching and learning practices that have had a significant, sometimes profound, effect on students. What begins with a rather bizarre - some might say eccentric - encounter with a pea develops into a deeply reflective experience.

The Pea Project consists of a number of complementary elements over the course of the conference. In our experience these elements generate participative elaboration and discussion of the themes that emerge.

The Pea Project directs the nascent designer to become self aware, to look at the overlooked and to connect with their surroundings [2].

It is our experience that this encourages designers to think more holistically and to engage in the practice of design at a deeper level. Furthermore it generates a deep sense of belonging to shared spaces and experiences, an essential characteristic for collaborative dynamics to be sustainable.

THE PEA PROJECT PRECEDES DESIGN PRACTICE

Operating from constructivist [3] and phenomenological [4] perspectives, the Pea Project combines the banal and the everyday, with outcomes that are fundamental to the practice of design.

These outcomes relate to the development in the student of unforced awareness and a capacity for deeply reflective thought [1, 5, 6].

This workshop includes the creation, assembly and exhibition of photographic data captured during the conference; phenomenological encounters with, and responses to, this photographic *data*; and *responses to the responses*, emulating the layering and meta awareness of reflective entries in a journal.

Figure 1 - Hand and Pea, 2001
Industrial Design, RMIT University

The Pea Project subtly and persistently demands that we venture beyond what we already know and understand, opening up and creating space for deep learning. This kind of thinking builds on the work of a broad range of educational theorists [7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13].

It is anticipated that our conference workshop will generate participative elaboration and discussion of the pedagogical themes.

THE PEA PROJECT – SUMMARY DESCRIPTION

Conference participants will be asked to take part in a reflective learning exercise. Each person will be approached during conference breaks and similar situations and asked to hold a pea while we take a digital photograph.

The Pea Project will *operate* over each of the three days of the conference, requiring one formal session on the second day;

o **day one** photographs and data collection;
o **day two** 60-90 minute experiential workshop;
o **day three** display of images and postcard responses.

We propose to experientially share with participants our innovative methods for stimulating phenomenological awareness, initiating and deepening reflective practices [5, 6, 14). We regard awareness and reflectiveness as foundational traits in developing and preparing designers for design practice.

At another level, we consider the process and outcomes of the Pea Project to be contemporary art – a work where the project participants become co-creators. France Morin [15] suggests "that artists have the capacity to make a lasting positive impact on peoples lives by helping them to see for themselves the dignity, beauty, and sacredness of the activities of their everyday life: the creative spirit, a powerful agent of transformation, that lies within everyone." The Pea Project aims to evoke this *creative spirit* in each and every participant.

Figure 2 - Hand and Pea, 2001
Industrial Design, RMIT University

In keeping with Bachelard's [4] view that "the communicability of an unusual image is a fact of great ontological significance", the image of the participant's own hand holding a pea becomes the focus of attention.

Each participant will receive a postcard of a previously photographed hand (figure 2). On the back of the card will be two questions, *What did you see?* and *What is going on here?*, with space for participants to respond.

As everyone starts from an equally obscure and ambiguous place, outside the "rubber stamps of conventional clichés" [16], responses tend to reflect the unique qualities, interests and experiences of the respondents.

The photographs and the completed cards will be presented and discussed at the subsequent workshop on the second day. The first part of the workshop will be presented in darkness, with a projection of the many hands and peas. Each hand and pea will be the focus of attention for a few seconds. This will be followed by a quicker projection of the images to promote a sense of the hands as a collective and to establish a sense of diversity and difference. Some participants are expected to experience a sense of reverie; others may see their hand as if for the first time or become aware of the shape of their own perception [17].

At the end of the PowerPoint presentation, with the lights back on, participants will be asked to reflect on the process, of which they have been part, and to again respond to the two simple questions *What did you see?* and *What is going on here?*. The combination of the quiet, darkened room and the call for reflection is anticipated to create a deeply thoughtful personal space.

This approach should create the conditions necessary for sharing experiences and personal responses to the combination of the hand, the pea and also the approach adopted. It is these responses that become the focus of discussion in the workshop. In a teaching and learning setting participants experience a range of responses that are as diverse as the hands depicted.

The combination of pea and hand, in particular the personal experience of being engaged in the process, stimulates multiple points of departure with shifts in figure-ground relationships and the emergence of personal projections. The material thus generated and recorded can act as a further stimulus to deeply self-reflective loops of engagement. Personal responses to the pea and hand encounter are expected to persist beyond the boundaries of the conference, opening up "zones of possibility for intellect and imagination." [18]

When the images and responses are displayed as a *collection* it becomes possible to see a diversity of ideas as well as common themes and overlaps in ways of seeing. The responses of others may also set off a further round of reflective engagement.

If the *quality* of images captured is consistent with previous efforts the collection of hands will be aesthetically pleasing - the images, particularly when projected, will be visually arresting and quite mesmerizing. Valerie Cassell [19], curator and director of the visiting Artists Program at the School of the Art Institute Chicago believes "that contemporary art has the potential to play an integral role in society by opening up spaces in which individuals may reexamine their own lives and their relationship to the world." For this reason, space permitting, we propose to

continuously project the images captured in a preset sequence, in an automated PowerPoint presentation in a darkened room at the conference venue.

Those attendees who have not been part of other aspects of the Pea Project will at least have some sense of the initial presentation.

Following the workshop the photographs and completed cards will be displayed for the conference participants to view, read and reflect upon. A second postcard will be available to allow participants to respond to the collection.

These cards will be displayed alongside the original images, creating a dynamic and reflective forum.

The Pea Project is endlessly extensible with many potential points of departure. We are sure others will adapt the idea of using digital images, postcards and simple everyday objects in ways we can barely imagine.

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AUTHORS' BACKGROUNDS

The three authors are members of *project-mu*, an interdisciplinary research team housed at the Interactive Information Institute at RMIT University, Australia.

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Barch Hons - Politecnico di Milano; PhD RMIT (current) Lecturer and coordinator of Design Studies in the Industrial Design department, RMIT University, Australia. Main interests/skills include: Socio-technical issues related to Design (including studies on synaesthesia, semiotics, and usability); user-centred design (in particular applied to the design of Information Technologies); constructivist learning and teaching approaches; design of Product-Service Systems; design of collaborative work environments (including virtual work spaces); Multi-disciplinary research methodologies and dynamics.

Peter Burrows

GradDip BusMan; MBus RMIT; PhD RMIT (current) Over 20 years work experience in management and project management roles for Australia Post. Currently provides consultant and research services to a number of organizations including the Australian Army, Australia Post and Deakin University. Research focus relates to the use of art, images and visual media in management education. Key interests include: the practice of management, the study of everyday practices; organizational culture; anthropology; ethnography; art; visual media; art history/theory; political theory; spreadsheet modeling; teaching and learning; philosophy.

Michael Coburn

BAppSci (Hons) Computer Science; PhD RMIT (current) Experience in building e-commerce solutions using a range of software technologies. In particular building sites with streaming and interactive content. Familiar with AI methodologies including, but not limited to, agent based systems. This can manifest itself as agent-based personalisation for web pages. Experience in conducting requirements analysis and producing software specifications for software projects of varying levels of complexity. Research interests include: self-organising, self-assembling, self-similar entities, including nano-structures both in the physical and abstract domains; Human Factors, and how this discipline can inform industrial and user interface design.