Practical Implications of the Essentially Two-faced Nature of Design Research and Design Practice

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The problem – 'discourse'

- Designers & researchers talking and writing about design:
  - *Conflate and confuse epistemologically different ideas and thoughts*
  - *Expand and elaborate core concepts in ways that make discourse impossible to parse intelligibly*
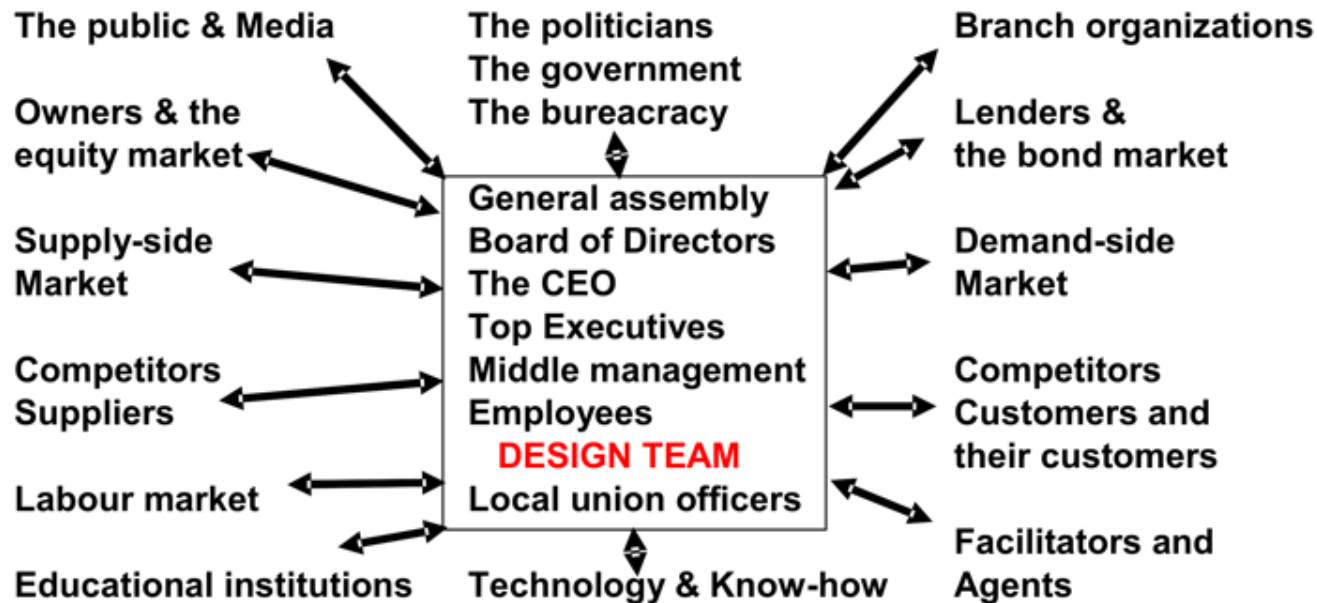 - *Create epistemologically flawed theory*

Scope of problem

This problem:

- Compromises understanding and improvement of design activity
- Weakens use of design
- Reduces quality of designed outcomes
- Impacts adversely on all stakeholders and participants in design
- Increases across design fields when sub-cultural perspectives and values affect meanings of overarching and detailed concepts.

Stakeholders and Constituents

The public & Media

Owners & the equity market

Supply-side Market

Competitors Suppliers

Labour market

Educational institutions

The politicians
The government
The bureacracy

General assembly
Board of Directors
The CEO
Top Executives
Middle management
Employees
DESIGN TEAM
Local union officers

Technology & Know-how

Branch organizations

Lenders &
the bond market

Demand-side Market

Competitors
Customers and
their customers

Facilitators and
Agents

Internal and external actors and communications (adapted from presentation of Tellefsen & Love, Commonground, 2002).

Research findings

- The research indicated that there is a single, simple, and resolvable structural basis for the problem and that it is caused by

- A widespread assumption that there is only one discourse in design

- The research points to two conflated discourses:
  - ☺'Public face' discourse
  - ☺'Technical face' discourse

Designers as 'Change Agents'

Insight came from an exploration of designers as 'change agents'

- Change agents must use words and language that clients and other constituents understand (LCD and M&M language).

- Change agent's language must be simplified and shaped so as to be accessible to all constituents and coherent across the client organisation's sub-cultures. Complex concepts must be simplified for communication.

Change Agents need two languages

Change agents need two languages:

- A sub-culturally and contextually-shaped simplified discourse with simplified concept models for communicating ideas in an accessible form across a wide variety of different constituents.

- A unambiguous technical formally-defined language to draw on 'technical' bodies of knowledge, and for reliable theory making.

'Public face' design discourse

- *Public face* discourse is used for ideas communicated by change agents
- Appropriate forms are defined by possibilities for good communication and manipulation of judgments and emotions. I.e shaped directly by the socio-cultural, value-laden perspectives of the different stakeholders and constituents.
- Complex ideas are revised into simpler more accessible models.
- It goes in the opposite direction to developing unambiguous generalisable and predictive theories.

'Technical face' design discourse

The *technical face* of design discourse:

- Requires tightly and formally defined unambigous representational language:
  - to communicate unambigously with, and understand, researchers and technical experts
  - about useful high-value generalisable technical information, theories and ways of modelling situations that have reliable predictive power.

Problems of using technical discourse in public face situations

Using technical face discourse in public face situations results in

☹ lack of understanding

☹ confused transition into unhelpful and often irrelevant activities such as:

- reification and obsession
- attention-seeking
- status managing
- false or fraudulent analysis
- self-deception
- lying
- redirected argumentation and anger

Problems of using public face discourse in technical situations

Using public face discourse in technical face situations leads to:

- ☹ conceptual inaccuracy
- ☹ over-agreement
- ☹ lack of critique
- ☹ poor analysis
- ☹ flawed theory
- ☹ weak understanding
- ☹ poor reliability of knowledge transfer

Example 1: Designing an Organisational Learning Process (Public Face Discourse)

Designers creating organisational learning designs must:

- communicate with clients and employees their reasoning and proposals for change
- gather information about their brief, the existing situation, its problems and possibilities.

- This is 'public face' discourse using lowest common denominator of understanding across constituencies.

- Public face design discourse is used to focus on individuals' personal experiences of learning to build a shared mental model of 'organisational learning - so designers and can explain, persuade and manipulate individuals to change their mental constructs, feelings, judgments and actions.

- It contrasts with technical face of strategic planning and behaviour in organisation focusing on e.g., behaviours of groups, hegemonic analysis, ontological analysis of information flows between organisations.

Example 2: "Design Learning": public face and technical face discourses

- Design & learning are closely related because the central reason for learning is to facilitate design.

- 'Design learning' is mainly a public face concept used as a placeholder in discussion of teaching methods. It enables communications across constituents and to persuade learners to undertake particular tasks.

- In technical face discourse, 'design learning' does not stand up as a concept well. The physiological realities of human learning processes mean there is little to distinguish 'design learning' from other learning (although there are many reasons to differentiate design *teaching* from other forms of teaching). Humans' bodies have a single physiological system for learning whether about designing, flower arranging or cigars.

Conclusions (1)

The findings of the research:

- A single problem of discourse appears to be central to multiple weaknesses in design theory literature.

- Analysis suggests there is a need, as in other practice-focused disciplines, for two modes of discourse: a 'public face' and a 'technical face'.

- Clarification and resolution of many problems and paradoxes of design research result when this two-faced approach is used to segregate incompatible aspects of design literature

- Avoiding conflating 'public face' and 'technical face' discourses of design is important and central to improving the quality of design research, design practice and design theory making.

Conclusion (2) Asymmetry of public and technical face discourses

- Public face and technical face discourse exist in an asymmetric relationship.
    - For all public face descriptions, concepts and topoi there are equivalent and more fully described technical concepts and theories.
    - The opposite is not found because public face discourse is a sub-set of technical face concepts and theories as it is a simplification to aid communication.