USING WRITING TECHNIQUES IN THE DESIGN STUDIO

Moura Quayle
University of British Columbia
Landscape Architecture Program

INTRODUCTION

As a design educator I am continually searching for ways to open doors to design learning. The dilemma in design education is trying to teach something that students must experience to really learn—if a student has never drawn or thought visually before, where do we start the design-learning process? What, for that matter, is design learning? The purpose of design education should be to provide students with skills to think and enough experiences to help them remember. Thinking skills aid the bridge-building between design theory or knowledge and its practice (Schon, Argyris, 1974). An important question is where and how to start. What is "known" to the student so that he or she has a base for moving into the unknown?

Two strategies are common in design schools for addressing this dilemma. One is to set up experiences that force students to take the step off the cliff into the abyss of the unknown, demanding that they call upon their common sense for "how wide a door should be" or their past experience about "the kind of spatial experience that creates excitement". A problem with this is that "common sense" is also a learned response, and if prior homework or educational experience has not provided such, students will be at a frustrating disadvantage. The other strategy, perhaps more common in undergraduate programs, is to attempt to spell out a linear, step-by-step process which provides guidelines and a certain amount of security to students habituated to rote learning. My approach seems to be somewhere in the middle. I don't believe in either extreme but I continually seek methods that teach students to think for themselves.

In searching for a path through this dilemma, the notion that writing might form a bridge for teaching design cast some light on the problem. Parallels between techniques for idea-generation, creative blocking and unblocking, right and left brain activity, and general problem-solving became evident. After all, writing is a design exercise where the medium is words. Writing and designing both use vocabulary which is codified. When students arrive in a design program, they have been writing for some twelve or more years using this codified language with all the accepted conventions and do's and don't's. The language of design is a new code to learn. It is far from being carefully codified; in fact, designers invent their own codification for meaning (semiotics) and communication. There are some conventions, but often these play a limited part in design process. How can we teach students to both respect the codified language but to also manipulate the code?

My experiences in a process writing course led me to the conclusion that perhaps I could "borrow" the writing techniques and transform them into useful design teaching techniques.

USING AND EVALUATING THE FIVE TECHNIQUES

Since 1987, various attempts have been made to integrate writing process into the studio-based curricula at the University of British Columbia. These include first-year architecture and landscape architecture studios, a third-year community-design studio, and a methods/theories course taught jointly to first-year architecture students and second-year landscape architecture students.

Five specific techniques have been explored and/or tested for application in these situations. They include:
  (1) freewriting/free drawing
  (2) dear critic
  (3) heuristics
  (4) clustering and branching
  (5) word games

1. Freewriting/Free Drawing

Freewriting is a "traditional" way to generate ideas according to Boice in his treatise on psychotherapies for blocked writers (Boice, 1985). Apparently freewriting is older than most tactics for unblocking. As early as 1870 a physicist, Haym, wrote out his thoughts in unclear and incomplete form and used such notes to generate experiments and more formal writing. However, it was in 1973 with Elbow's Writing Without Teachers and in 1981 with Writing with Power where freewriting was fully explained and presented as an extremely useful technique for writers.

> The most effective way I know to improve your writing is to do freewriting exercises regularly. At least three times a week. They are sometimes called "automatic writing", "babbling", or "jabbering" exercises. The idea is simply to write for ten minutes (later on, perhaps fifteen or twenty). Don't stop for anything. Go quickly without rushing. (Elbow, 1981, 3)

He explains that freewriting helps us to simply get on with it and to learn to separate the producing process from the revising process.

It was with this background that we brought freewriting into the design studio directly. While it can be extremely useful for opening up avenues of ideas, most studio experiments used freewriting as a form of informed reflection (Quayle, Paterson, 1989). For instance, when a project is completed, students can freewrite on the type of blocks they encountered and how they busted them, or on the most important concept that they learned during the project. More comprehensive

reflection would involve a critique of both their process and product. Freewriting also assists in emphasizing the importance of values and biases in design, allowing reflection and evaluation.

In the Methods course, freewriting is used to ease into the course. It is accompanied by "free drawing" which uses the same mode as freewriting but in a graphic format. Free drawing is also explained as an idea generation tactic, useful as a warm-up for any design session. A blank page is an awesome sight. Start the pencil or light pen moving—and then the ideas start flowing.

Sixty percent of students in the Methods course ranked freewriting as "most useful" on a scale of five. One student commented: "I really liked the freewriting and analog drawing, these seemed to me to be very powerful ways to hook into myself and my process." Of all the techniques, freewriting/free drawing appears to be the most versatile in achieving specific objectives.

As a technique to learn the freewriting/ free drawing method is very simple, although some discipline is required to sit down and put pen to paper. It is very adaptable to student's needs. For instance, an "asterisk" freewrite can be instituted to help students realize that they can reach plateaus which require energy surges to surpass. In an asterisk freewrite, the writer is required to place an asterisk each time he or she wishes to stop writing. However, the writer must push on to the time limit set at the beginning of the free write. On reflection, writers can see that "hot" ideas often emerge after they push past that point of inertia. This is a particularly good technique for students who have trouble pushing themselves hard enough. Another variation is a "spiral" freewrite in which the writer sets a series of ten-minute freewrites identifying a large topic initially so that he can write subsequently on more specific or more general topics which are generated from the previous freewrite. The spiral freewriter can help expand thinking processes. Free

drawing can operate in a similar fashion.

Free drawing (warm-up drawing, rapid drawing, nonstop drawing) is useful in similar ways as freewriting for designers to: generate ideas, clarify ideas, loosen up thinking processes, blast through blocks and warm-up for a thinking/designing session. Conveniently the results of free drawing are already in a visual form; the process of verbal-visual transformation has already taken place. Free drawing is useful to students when they don't feel like designing. They should draw without thinking about drawing. Free drawing can be a quick outlet for feelings.

2. Dear Critic
Understanding and communicating with our critic is an important link to freeing up our writing and design processes. It is very difficult to freewrite or free draw if our critic cannot be pushed aside until we need it in the more analytical phases of our processes. As a result, addressing the critic is a necessary evil. Just having students talk about their critic is a useful exercise. Even better students benefit from writing a letter to their critic, in a sense they learn to talk back. Our critic is often based on some real person we knew long ago or who is currently part of our lives. The more we know about our critic, the less power it has over us.

One of the suggested activities in the Methods course is to write a letter to your critic, to give it a name and confront its reality. This idea was inspired by a chapter on the Caliban Critic in Klauser's book Writing on Both Sides of the Brain (Klauser, 1986). The following is from a student's writing about his critic.

> Why is my critic so strong so much of the time? Why is it that we shit on ourselves so much? It seems to be safer to criticize oneself because to do otherwise would be arrogant. I don't know if I've ever heard anyone in studio say out loud: I really feel good about

what I just did or I like my idea. We're all so scared that the next person is better. My critical voice seems to keep defenses up which need to be kept more. (Sarah...second year landscape architecture student)

Discussion and specific writing about the critic are both helpful to students. Each student struggles for control over their critic. Acknowledgement of the critic's existence is very useful in establishing control. Approximately one-half of students in the methods course ranked exercises involving the critic as "most useful" (one on a scale of five).

3. Invention Heuristics
Invention heuristics (from the Greek "heuriskein"—to discover) are

> "lists of questions which writers can answer to probe their memories, activate their imaginations and achieve a deeper understanding of their material. They are especially useful when a writer wishes to shed preconceptions and discover fresh perspectives" (Hungerford, 1987, 22).

Heuristics are common in the design disciplines but are more generally defined as the "rules of thumb" which designers apply to make decisions (Rowe, 1987). However, an invention heuristic is very useful for the designer. Heuristics are mainly derived from the classical models of Aristotle who defined different types of arguments (the topoi or topics). We can define our own "topics" to help us broaden our understanding of a problem. For example two invention heuristics derived from the classical topoi "definition" and "comparison" are useful for designers (Lindeman, 1981):
Definition
1. How does the dictionary define sidewalk?
2. What earlier words did sidewalk come from?
3. What do we mean by

sidewalk?

4. What parts can sidewalk be divided into?

5. What other words mean approximately the same as sidewalk?

Comparison

1. What is sidewalk similar to? In what ways?

2. What is sidewalk different from? In what ways?

3. Sidewalk is superior to what?

4. Sidewalk is inferior to what?

As designers, we consciously or unconsciously develop a problem solving heuristic in the form of questions such as: What is the problem? Why is the problem indeed a problem? What goals must be served by whatever action or solution that is taken? Which goals have the highest priority? What procedures might attain the stated goals? What can I predict about the consequences of each possible action? How do the actions compare with each other as potential solutions to the problem? Students can develop their own problem solving heuristic for each design problem or a general one which they can adapt. A first year design handout in the U.B.C. Landscape Architecture Program is called "101 Questions" and is a heuristic for reading the landscape. It becomes a basis for developing more specific heuristics.

Students have been exposed to heuristic techniques in the form of heuristic reasoning (analogies, typologies and formal languages) and also in the form of developing a series of questions. This questioning process was ranked "most useful" by 46% of students in the Methods course. The techniques are especially helpful in planning exercises which require clarity of thought and process. They appear to be more difficult to implement for students as they require more complexity of thought and a discipline to follow-through and actually apply the heuristic. These techniques were found to be more useful in mature students. When students "cotton-on" to forming questions and checklists, the technique can prove very flexible and adaptable to their needs. Heuristics can help establish some criteria to

assist in decision-making as well as forcing some students to broaden their thinking.

4. Clustering and Branching

Clustering is a concept/word coined by Gabriele Lusser Rico in her popular book Writing the Natural Way.

> Clustering is a nonlinear brainstorming process akin to free association. It makes an invisible Design-mind process visible through a nonlinear spilling out of lightning associations that allows patterns to emerge. Through clustering we naturally come up with a multitude of choices from a part of our mind where the experiences of a lifetime mill and mingle. It is the writing tool that accepts wondering, not-knowing, seeming chaos, gradually mapping an interior landscape as ideas begin to emerge. It is an openness to the unknown (Rico, 1983,28).

To create a cluster you begin with a word circled on a page and simply let your mind go. It almost seems like a point-form, more visual, freewrite. Branching is a similar concept for increasing fluency and has its roots in Tony Buzan's mind-mapping exercises (Klauser, 1986). While a linear outline or approach is one-sided and left-brained, branching is multi-faceted and whole-brained. This is cited as an example of another organizational technique, however it in itself is one move distant from a writing process familiar to most students.

Clustering and branching were explored in the studios and Methods course through the LARC (Left And Right Creativity) Program which is a linear set of instructions attempting to lay-out step-by-step creativity (Williams, Stockmyer, 1987). This program involves methods of re-arranging ideas and words in pyramids, groups, chains and circles thus taking clustering and formalizing it. Some students had difficulty applying

the LARC program to their design work because of its linear and rather regimented nature, however others students appreciated such an organized approach. Clustering itself can be a useful technique especially for unfocused students because it serves to organize at least one aspect of their process.

5. Word Games

The previous four techniques have dealt more with the process of writing and less with the elements of writing: words. Word games or transformations are extremely useful in teaching design. The reasons for using transformation techniques are listed in a class handout by Douglas Paterson as follows: (1) making the familiar strange and the strange familiar; (2) learning that the world around us is an important source of information and inspiration for design; (3) expanding the range of design possibilities; (4) regenerating interest in one's design when blocked; and, (5) developing greater intimacy with any particular idea and expanding one's understanding of the nature and potential of the idea.

The students in the methods course undertook both verbal-visual and visual-visual transformations. The visual-visual ones stimulated them both to draw and to write about their feelings: "The horse chestnut seed produces a deep and profound satisfaction. There is some kind of quality in the seed that produces emotion, aside from its physical form." The verbal-visual transformations encouraged lateral thinking and created excitement about the power of words. Students are encouraged to have dictionaries, thesaurus and quotation books at their side during design sessions.

The transformation techniques were highly popular with students. They were successful in stimulating new ideas and ways of thinking. The transformations helped students think about their "problems" in different, strange and sometimes amusing ways. The techniques seemed to be more successful and easier for students to apply in the upper years, although a first-year design exercise using a verbal-visual transformation

aided in "loosening" up design thinking. Forty-six percent of students in the methods course ranked the transformation techniques "most useful" and several wrote written comments to the effect that the techniques should be expanded with more time spent on them. Word games are useful in both small scale design problems as well as other scales. Perhaps surprisingly, they can work extremely well in an environmental planning problem to conceptualize and broaden scope. Word games are especially good techniques to help students expand their ideas.

CONCLUSIONS

The parallels between writing process and design process are strong enough to indicate that the techniques for teaching and encouraging growth of these processes overlap. Freewriting and free drawing are probably the most useful and easiest writing process techniques to transfer to design education. Confronting the critic is essential in allowing students' effective communication to improve. Heuristics are useful for giving structure to the critical voice and then allowing the creative voice to respond to the questions or points raised. Clustering takes the now familiar brainstorming and "group graphic" techniques and isolates words and ideas on which to build broader concepts. Word games have a tradition in any creative activity and

thus can be applied when to the design process.

As an educator, be excited about writing and its processes; it is rewarding for both you and your students. Writing processes should not be separate from design processes. Students should have the opportunity to experience the integration of both processes and thus gain the most from these techniques and enhance their design learning. Finally, I feel that I learn a great deal about my students and my role as teacher from their writing.

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