

Design as Interpretation: Embedding Threshold Concepts in First Year Design Education

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In *Interpretation in Architecture: Design as a Way of Thinking*, Adrian Snodgrass and Richard Coyne argue against positivist models of design activity, asserting that design is hermeneutical, that interpretation is the core of architectural production and hence architectural understanding. Interpretation is seen as the act of positioning, of situating ideas within a set of relationships, of holding a point of view. For first year design students, understanding design as an interpretative process often presents a fundamental challenge to established ways of thinking.

The paper explores first year design education in the Interior Architecture program at the University of New South Wales by conceiving the interpretive nature of the design process in terms of Meyer and Land's definition of threshold concepts. While in recent years the notion of threshold concepts has been explored in disciplines such as the biological and physical sciences, accountancy, mathematics and engineering, there has been limited application in the discipline of design education with the exception of the work of Jane Osmond and Andrew Turner in the field of product and automotive design. This research proposed the notion of spatial awareness as a threshold concept in first year teaching but concluded there was little evidence in the resulting student assessment data to suggest that it possessed the transformative characteristics of a threshold concept. Rather than a discrete concept, it was concluded that the 'confidence to challenge' or a way of thinking within the discipline, provided a stronger correlation with the idea of a threshold concept.

The paper builds on this work, arguing that for a discipline such as design education, the idea of threshold concepts holds more value when considered in the light of 'ways of thinking and practicing', rather than discrete conceptual ideas. Conceiving the interpretive nature of the design process as a threshold concept, it is proposed, offers a way of approaching both student learning and curriculum development that focuses on processes of thinking and practicing. The paper explores the ways in which the interpretive nature of the design process can be characterised as a threshold concept and hence how processes of interpretation can be embedded in curricula and modeled for students through structured and unstructured activities in the design studio, foregrounding the preconceptions and prejudices that predicate design activity and focusing on the development of a long term critical and reflective practices in graduate design students.

Conditioned by processes of linear, rational thinking and rote learning, first year students often struggle with the idea that design problems are constructed by the individual through processes of interpretation, that each individual brings their own experience and ways of seeing the world to a given design scenario. As a threshold concept, the development of interpretive thinking skills in design it is argued, is by its nature a transformative, irreversible, integrative, bounded and troublesome mode of thinking and practicing.

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