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Narrative Patterns and Exformative Design in Cooperative Learning

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Confronting legacies of oppression in education

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Following up on the Brazilian educationist Paolo Freire's call to liberate pedagogy from oppression (Freire,1970), the present article proposes a new approach to the design and delivery of learning, no longer as an imposed curriculum of knowledge gathering and skills development, but as a systemic experience, lived in relationship with learning-nurturing communities. The "new normal of education" emerging from this exercise comprises strands of inspiration that reflect the broad interests and global lifestyle of the author—with elements from design theory and praxis, Japanese monasticism, Buddhist learning theory, cultural narratology, the post-romantic vision of Rabindranath Tagore, and much more. The educational design model appearing from the combination of these very different and culturally diverse elements is a hybrid, free-flowing framework ideally suited for systemic, organic, cooperative, and collaborative learning environments—challenging the systemic dualisms inherent in traditional teacher/student settings and other forms of societal and/or authoritative educational oppressions, of which Paolo Freire's infamous "banking model" is only one.

The inherent oppressive character of education

Rethinking education is nothing new. In fact, the history of education reads like a history of reform movements. In Politeia, Plato positions education as the cause or ground for the change of society, culture, and individuals—which implies that rethinking education directly influences how society, culture, and individuals are made to change (Oelkers, 2001).

Modern educational reform movements have been focusing either on redesigning educational institutions or on reviewing the perceived role of education within the changing context of society as a whole or of society and its specific educational needs. While most of the attempts to rethink education have failed (Oelkers, 2001), ostensibly not having found entry points to tie into the public discourse and challenge a heavily institutionalised status quo, the work of Brazilian educationist Paolo Freire has fared much better. Building on the Platonic insight of there being an intimate connection between education and how society, culture, and individuals are made to change, Freire re-identifies education as a singularly oppressive institution—and the concept of "oppression" as the main obstacle for humanity to develop the skills to cope with changes that are not driven by theories of management. In the world of today, where boundary crossing and free augmented thinking are seen as the only way for society to prepare for an unpreparable future, challenged by complexity and uncertainties often triggered by agencies outside the reach of control of human leadership (Ottino & Mau, 2022), the work of Paolo Freire has regained a fair dose of unexpected relevance.

A roadbook of change

Preparing ourselves for *the nexus* is urgent business. The world faces enormous challenges of unprecedented complexity (Ottino & Mau, 2022). We need innovation and thinking, and creativity across the curricular boundaries of old, beyond silo thinking, beyond the oppression that withholds us from the freedom to engage with challenges that were unknown to our predecessors. We need "real" freedom of thought and "real" freedom of development. We need boundless vigour, unrestrained by the power favouring a status quo. We must do more than sound the alarms. A re-assessment of Freire's concept of oppression, in modern, post-Freirean terms, must open the way to proposing a novel framework for cooperative learning and establishing the conditions for a "new normal" in educational design and praxis.

A post–Freirean take on oppression in education

The oppressive nature of classical education can be understood in three ways: through its absence, through ignorance, and through its presence.

Oppression by absence

If education is the activity of preparing the groundwork for the acquisition and development of learning as a faculty of human behaviour—and if human behaviour refers to the activities and relationships that individuals and communities nurture among each other and in accordance with their environment—then, does education provide freedom?

The idea that it does, implies that individuals and communities going without education are somewhat equal to being "unfree," "imprisoned," or "oppressed." To the privileged, who have experienced (formal) education as a default part of the package deal of their upbringing, saying that education equals oppression feels like a bit of a hyperbole. To the less privileged, the idea that the absence of (formal) education is an act of oppression comes across as less of an extravaganza—for they have sensed how it is through the process of liberation that the true scope of having been oppressed reveals itself.

Perhaps more than in Freire's time, the world of today and tomorrow is ready to realise that the absence of education is not just contrary to providing an essential service as a human right but a loss of opportunity to liberate our global society from the unfreedom of not being able to look towards the future with confidence. Initiatives such as Ahmet Öğüt's "transversal pedagogy" and "The Silent University," specifically demanding acknowledgement of asylum seekers and refugees and of their right to educate and be educated (Öğüt, 2017), fall well within the removal of oppression by absence in a post-Freirean scope.

Oppression by ignorance

For the privileged, who are often those seen as "successful products" of the classical educational curriculum, recognising oppression in the very system that they believe has set them free, comes across as counterintuitive. It indeed requires some effort to see how the denial of us being oppressed by education or imprisoned by ignorance is, in fact, the natural outcome of oppression or a symptom of ignorance itself. Knowledge unobtained and skills unacquired function like obstacles and limitations to progress and growth—both at the personal level and seen from the perspective of the community in which we live and work. Further, it is not just ignorance and lack of skills that ails us. Knowledge itself can be an agent of confinement—and good skill can be a real barrier, withholding us from making a jump into the unknown and discovering new opportunities that might lie ahead.

This is well understood in lean manufacturing, where the main obstacle to progress is identified as one's inability to see where a process might be liable for improvement (Rother, 2010). Sometimes it is as if the system, by design, remains unforgiving. On purpose, it seems to refrain from providing the necessary points of entry that would allow the user of the system to put the system into question. Often, the lack of entry points is reinforced by the illusion of perfect knowledge or a self-perception of unsurpassed skill. Echo chambers and black boxes are symptoms of this phenomenon.

Oppression by ignorance is more important and more harmful than generally understood. If an opportunity for improvement remains unidentified, chances for improvement are non-existent. The essence of the matter, then, is that the most

enduringly harmful of all unidentified opportunities for improvement is within the individual ... locked in knowledge and skills and, therefore, in ignorance.

The oppression of education

Worse than the oppression inflicted by absence of education, and the oppression of ignorance (of knowledge, or of the lack thereof), is the oppression that lies hidden in the very act of education (Freire, 1970). In classic approaches to what is traditionally called "instructional design," the boundaries of information, and the choice of transferral and transmission of knowledge and skills, at best, are erected and delineated by a (group of) individuals representing a certain "authority of knowing"—a body deciding on what it is that the other should learn and what not. Thus, through the acts of a hierarchical chain of decision-taking, the "instructional designer" erects the walls that will keep the student locked into any given construct of thought, unable to escape from her artificially created reality.

In worse cases, the deciding body is no longer an "authority of knowing," but an authority driving a political agenda and adjusting textbooks and school curricula according to the needs and whims of a desired political outcome (Brunner, 2013). In these cases, teaching and training and learning and unlearning are acts of violence inflicted by authorities upon innocent victims—often using Skinnerist operant conditioning as a method of choice (Laleman, 2022, May 9).

It was Paulo Freire who nailed this most clearly (Freire, 1970). That all of us are oppressed by education and educators alike—because both these agencies submit us to the kind of learning that impedes our sense of discovery and exploration and makes us impervious to mutation, adaptation, innovation, and growth. Confined forever in an "informative structure" permitted to us by forces outside ourselves.

Balanced systems design & cooperative models

Massive change

Designing massive change (Mau, 2020) in learning and education requires "de-oppressionizing" the binary model first—and replacing it with a systemic approach based on the cooperation of all the stakeholders in a community—everyone. Freire referred to the binary model as "the banking model"—where students are processed as bank accounts, kept by representatives of powers that have stakes in maintaining the status quo. These bank accounts are empty at first and then get filled up with information carefully pre-vetted by the account owners—in anticipation of their cashing in on their interests (Freire, 1970). Even today, the banking model is up and running—with ministries of education designing curricula based on "learning needs," that are identified upfront and are based uniquely on the "knowns" of locus and tempus ad hoc. Power is ever-present in social settings and remains a critical topic for the future of design for social innovation (Amatullo et al. (Eds.), 2022).

Towards being lost in the forest

With the aim of moving on from an oppressive educational model, we need to (re-) establish models allowing for learning as a life process rather than as a series of pre-designed events with a predictable outcome. We need systemic learning design, where individuals and communities can rediscover that they are inherently wired to learn as they breathe—iteratively if must be, continuously if possible—and always incrementally picking up learning takeaways from themselves, from each other, from the system and from the environment.

We must dismiss "instructional design" as a moniker, for it describes a world where students are conditioned to react upon instructions and deliver the exact conditioned response that was coded into the instruction itself.

We must free education from its design model that is based on the known—and prepare for a model that makes room for "being lost in the forest" (Mau, 2020).

Balanced systems design

In balanced systems, there is no room for hierarchy or instruction. Learning happens according to a seemingly random pattern, in sync with all other elements of the environment in which the individual and their community develops and flourishes. We no longer design "instructions." We design a "platform for constant design" (Mau, 2020).

Learner experience design attends to the harmonious development of the "body-mind" (Nhat Hanh, 2021) of the learners and their communities. Education no longer has a goal; it has become an ongoing, never-ending process, enabling the ability of learners to use their imagination, to be free thinkers, to possess and nurture a limitless curiosity and an accumulative alertness of mind.

Instructional design makes room for learner experience design, a field that aims at providing the learner with a latent awareness that we are not above or separate from, but wholly and holistically part of nature (Mau, 2020)—and that, therefore, nature is an ideal environment to earn knowledge, insight, and wisdom (Tagore, 1931).

With this, learner experience design is deeply rooted in the belief that natural processes and human-centricity are approaches to user design superior to design formats dependent on extra-systemic instruction manuals. Like everything in nature, learner experience design should prepare the soil on which learning is likely to just happen. Never should pressure be exerted upon anyone to learn anything (Tagore, 1931). The learner experience designer should trust that nature will be the guiding force to inculcate the spirit of learning in the mind of the learner to pursue the learning path she likes (Laleman, 2022, February 17).

Choice is humankind's most distinguishing feature. When learners are given the choice of what and when to learn, half of their learning path is already trodden. Learning tracks imparted in a natural way automatically pave the conditions for freedom of heart, freedom of intellect, and freedom of will (Tagore, 1931). When learners learn by choice, the learned matter gets shared without additional effort, and learning grows exponentially without the mediation of teachers or trainers.

Much of learning is enabled by self-realisation—and the realisation of the self is one of the natural outcomes of learning (Tagore 1931). In an ideal learning process, learners discover the hitherto hidden potentials of their inner selves. The idea is Tagore's: Birds do not attend flight schools. Birds realise the flying potential they always had. Fish do not attend swimming seminars. Fish realise the swimming potential they always had.

Learning is a process of the "body-mind." It is enabled by all the senses, and it is enhanced by motion, creativity, and crafts. The more the learner is physically engaged, the better they will learn.

Cooperative models

Since learning is like breathing and "balanced systems" are its habitat, the best way to remove oppression from the educational model is through nurturing cooperative models. For this reason, learner experience design means that the designer is occupied with systemic handles, affordances and entry points that open doors to peers finding each other and jointly creating the right conditions to experience learning as a continuous process.

Affordances and exformation

Designing the space for constant design

Learning is itself a process of design. Learners are involved in the process of continuously redesigning the here and the now that surrounds them—and in designing visions of what can become possible if only they are open to the possibilities that keep emerging along the way. Designing the space for constant design (Mau, 2020), therefore, is like a loop—where the learner's design enables new territories, which in turn enables the learner to design new possibilities that give way to new territories, etcetera.

Handles and placeholders

My practice as a learner experience designer has been a journey away from designing learning activities with a mindset on "the best methods" to achieve learning goals—to designing pathways and spaces with handles and placeholders (Laleman, 2020).

Handles are affordances. They are built-in expressions of the possibility of learning. They are the most important feature of a well-designed learning path. Placeholders are features that temporarily hold the space for learners to store ongoing ideas and newly discovered possibilities.

While handles "drive," placeholders "hold."

Holding is important because, in a balanced systems design framework, the learning outcome is never "wrong", and nothing ever needs to be unlearned. Instead—learning is progressive—and progressively incremental. The learning process is a journey from what (in Zen Buddhism) is called samvriti-satya (provisional, conventional truths) to paramārtha-satya (profound truths) — with all truths on the spectre between those two extremes co-existing at the same time (Nhat Hanh, 2021). In other words: a more profound truth is not a substitution for a shallower truth. It is its addition.

Exformative action

It is a designer's truth that "a product that needs being explained is a bad product." In the same sense, when a learning path needs extra information, it lacks the self-evidence that true systemic learning requires. "Intrinsically, knowledge (or information) is merely an entrance to thought," explains the Japanese designer and educationist Kenya Hara, "and to know things is only where the journey of imagination starts (Hara, 2015)." For this reason, supplying mere information with the aim of building knowledge is not exactly what education should be concerned with. The things we need to learn to get ready for the nexus are not to be found in what we already know (Ottino & Mau, 2022).

To get ahead with education unoppressed, we must stop informing and start exforming. The word "exformation" has a short history. It was coined by Tor Nørretranders in 1998, who introduced it as meaning "everything we do not actually say but have in our heads when, or before, we say anything at all." On the other side of the Nørretranders spectre lies "information: the measurable, demonstrable utterance we actually come out with" (Nørretranders, 1998). Almost two decades later, the word "exformation" was highjacked by Kenya Hara, who used it with his students at the Musashino Art University, Tokyo, and made it the name of "a communication method by making things unknown" (Hara, 2015). In 2020, I pushed the semantics of the word even further,

moving it into the realm of education itself, where it replaces the information-driven and instructional *banking model,* with its focus on learning for the status quo, with a learner experience-based design model, directed at self-realisation and the exploration of possibilities as yet hidden in the unknown (Laleman, 2020).

Exformative design, then, is a discipline explicitly driven by the love for exploring the unknowns in the context of boundless systemic interaction—and *exformative action* is immersion into the system and realising an ever-changing, adaptive self at the inside of it.

Working with organic narrative patterns

Designing equity by design

Yet, learning for the future is not limited to embracing and exploring the unknown. It is a cooperative and collaborative project in real life, and not separate from it—and by its being so, it favours people of different strands to come together. This works better as the designer and the facilitator of the process become more invisible (Oida & Marshall, 1997), eventually merging with the very immersive process that the learners are experiencing.

The process of becoming invisible is an absolutely organic one, where diversity and immersion evolve into enhanced equity before disappearing (but not in the "real" sense of the word) in total entropy—a phase where learning has become tacit, collective wisdom (Takeuchi & Nonaka, 1991).

Kishotenketsu

In this manner, the organic, exformative learning process follows the natural pattern of a dynamic, cyclic narrative, the design of which is limited to creating the conditions for the narrative space to emerge—and providing affordances and placeholders for the learners to find their way - while being "lost in the forest" (Mau, 2020)—in the maze of the unknown.

Working with established, human-centric narrative patterns helps the designer of learner experiences stay in sync with the idea of being systemically engrained and

relevant. It is encouraging how, in the last decade-or-so, the sense and purpose of narrative patterns, erstwhile spoken of merely in the context of narratology and creative storytelling (Bal, 1985), has gradually emerged as a tool in design practice, pedagogy, adult learning, product development frameworks such as Scrum and XP (Johnson, 2019), and decision making (Rao, 2011). This evolution is steadily being reinforced by neuroscience (Suzuki et al., 2018).

Kishotenketsu is one of these narrative patterns that uniquely suits the learner experience designer in their quest for creating an educational offering that is both "natural" and has no affordance, let alone tolerance, for oppressive meddling. Kishotenketsu is a favourite in Japanese narratology—where "ki" represents the creation of the conditions, "sho" refers to the iterative explorations providing for incrementally growing insights, "ten" is a phase of profound and connective comprehension, and "ketsu" is connecting the dots and proceeding to a next "ki."

Designing a new normal of education

So what are the responsibilities of the designer when designing for social innovation in education?

- **Design for compassion:** The work of the educational designer is not to design pathways to predefined learning requirements. It is to design affordances (Vervaeke, 2019) (McLuhan, 1964) for interactive engagement with and from and among the learners, and entry points allowing for a renewal of interest in learning to take place. Design for social change (Mau, 2020): design affordances to gently facilitate an altered state of consciousness.
- **Design for constant design** (Mayer, 2013) (Nhat Hanh, 2017) (Mau, 2020): Seemingly effortless action, perceived as "the natural way" (Tagore, 1913), follows mindful optimisation of practice (Vervaeke, 2019). Design placeholders where learners can store a profound understanding of what it means to learn and when learning can happen (Laleman, 2020). Afford for an ever-changing grammar of learning.

- **Design for cooperative exploration of the unknown.** "Let the inmates run the asylum" (Thiagarajan, 2020): Design release as the most subtle of mechanisms for control.
- **Design for self-organisation.** "Instead of being a commanding warden, be a sage by the side" (Thiagarajan, 2020).
- **Disempower oppression by cultivating mutualism:** While there is a technical distinction between being a learner and being the teacher, the design of the process should be such that this differentiation dissolves as interaction creates intersubjectivity. The teacher is the student; the student is the teacher.
- **Invoke wonder and curiosity by enigma:** See point 3.

In brief

We are on the verge of entering the nexus (Ottini & Mau, 2022), where the conventional model of education—singularly a force of oppression by the past, by the institutions of the now, and by the powers that thrive on exploiting the current global ecosystem—are made redundant by emergent complexity, uncertainties, and the realm of the unknown (Laleman, 2020). Carefully dislodging our educational conventions from their inherent factors of oppression (Freire, 1970), we must design an educational environment that prepares future generations for the unpreparable. In the context of a design-for-constant-design model (Mau, 2020), knowledge and information, typically "owned" by oppressive powers, are no longer the crucial drivers of education. Instead, we must design for curiosity and creativity. Exformation is a design approach typically meant to make things unknown—and recreate a place for new, augmented thinking.

In order for exformative learning design to be reliable and in sync with changes in society and the environment, we must apply balanced system design and state-of-the-art design artefacts. Classic pedagogy makes place for a new normal of education—a continuum of cooperative learner experiences, designed with affordances, accessible points of entry, placeholders for incremental learning, continuous feedback loops—and following experiential and explorative narrative patterns (such as kishotenketsu), that mimic the natural learning flow and the curiosity of an inquisitive child.

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