Discipline Specific Ethics

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This paper addresses ethics concerning and unique to designers who practice as members of the 'discipline of design'. More specifically, it is concerned with fostering an understanding of the spectrum of ethical concerns members of the discipline must consider. I address this topic through 'practice' in order to show how these considerations ultimately are dependent on formal exploration and practice. As an example of these considerations in practice I will discuss a studio project I developed while Designer in Residence at North Carolina State University's College of Design. The intention of the project was to enable students to begin their professional careers by making contributions that are considerate of the credibility and trust that the discipline demands of its members. The intention of the project was not to identify a list of items that may be used as ethical bullet points for professional practice, that would be both presumptive and inappropriate (not to mention there is much to be done before that can happen and as soon as it does will find itself immediately outdated), but to introduce ethical considerations through practice. What I am doing in this paper is offering the student project as an illustrative

example of how ethical considerations shape and rely on praxis and serve as both a vehicle for understanding ethics and a model for implementing ethics through form-making.

A Primer to Ethical Models

The category 'design ethics' is not used in this paper and instead is replaced with the more specific category of 'ethics concerning and unique to designers who practice as members of the discipline of design.' This distinction is important because in using it, the discussion is focused on a very particular application of ethics.

Outlet or Arena Specific Ethics

I'll start by parsing those that are contributors, associates, commissioners and/or the result of design's use and application from those that are members of the discipline. For example, an entity that commissions a designer to develop a new graphic identity is not serving as a member of the discipline. Their relationship to design is the result of a particular arena in which design has been applied. Their 'design ethics' are different then a designer's. And although at some point they may, through professional assimilation, be contributing to the discipline as patrons, they are not practitioners or members. To make this conversion requires indoctrination. Until that happens, their ethics concerning design are relative to their interests and use for specific artifacts resulting from the designing endeavor.

This example holds true for associates of design as well. Copywriters, illustrators and customer service representatives are each associates of the discipline in that design engages them when being conducted in a particular type of practice. Their 'design ethics' again are not the same or even considerate of the design discipline but do share the same 'outlet or arena specific considerations', ethical or otherwise. These considerations are issues of business and professionalism and are often inappropriately not distinguished as being different from 'disciplinary ethics'. Decorum and the legalities of operating in a work-for-hire application of design, create shared considerations regardless of the individuals' position, title or role. These 'arena specific' concerns change relative to the mode of design application being conducted. Research, extension and the academy are also each a different arena for the application of the discipline and as such require unique considerations relative to their engagement. Transference and overlap can and does occur but even when that happens there are significant changes required in order to function properly. The next ethical model primarily affects those who are members of the discipline.

Discipline or Practice Specific Ethics

By looking at the breadth of application we touched on above, we can easily identify the two constants in every example, the designer

and the form-making endeavor. 'Discipline Specific Ethics' are a series of considerations exclusive to the concerns of the contributing member of the discipline. They guide and inform the 'designer' as they conduct the formal design inquiry. Representation, knowledge formation, message articulation, aesthetic development, vernacular appropriation and subject discourse are but a few issues faced by the 'designer' during this period. 'Disciplinary Ethics' are what guide the 'designer's' decision-making independent of outlet. Ethics, in this case, act as bouncing boards from which the 'designer' is able to make the necessary observations in order to direct his or her work. These ethical considerations act as the conscience with which the 'designer' is able to assess his or her own understanding, thoroughness of exploration, developed arguments and conclusions relative to the subject or project being engaged and in doing so bring projects to satisfactory conclusions.

Disciplinary ethics are necessary to address and mature because they serve the integrity and trust of the discipline and, as such, do the same for every designer, collaborator and subject. Disciplinary ethics are what allows the 'designer' to come to a point at which they are confident and satisfied that they have conducted inquiries that sufficiently meet the expectations of the discipline and their own personal values. Unfortunately disciplinary ethics are the most underserved and least addressed form of ethics. This is more often because they are situational, shifting and temporal, and rely on seeing the discipline itself as having a value regardless of where it contributes. Ethics may start academically or as words but require praxis in order to develop into relevant, sophisticated and understood considerations. Discipline specific ethics are not about benevolence as is so often assumed, but are about consideration, knowledge, self-direction, perspective and trust. In practice they are what empower the 'designer' to move from generic to specific, knowing that subjects are not identical and to assume otherwise would be inappropriate. When disciplinary ethics are engaged in practice they become the vehicles that ensure everyone that those 'designing' are responsible members of a legitimate discipline.

Pedagogical Interlude

Fundamental to my thinking of the relation between design and ethics, and to my practice as a designer and educator is making a distinction between design as a discipline and the application of that discipline. How we frame our considerations of the discipline and how, or more importantly where, we apply the discipline are two separate areas that each result in separate ethical considerations. To 'unmap' the discipline from where it has been applied in the past provides the ability to clearly separate the responsibilities required when applying design to a particular arena from the ethical considerations necessary during the design process and the making practices of the discipline. Doing so provides the

discipline a foundation to begin envisioning new contexts, offerings and applications, ethical and otherwise.

By separating the arenas of practice from core design abilities we are able to identify the foundation languages of our discipline. At the meta-level every designer could say that they make connections between cognition and the material world. Depending on what discipline of design you identify with, your abilities become more unique and specific. Although I consider myself a media designer, I instruct primarily within graphic design. As such, the core of the graphic design discipline for me is the ability to communicate and craft in a language that creates relationships between textual forms of expression and pictographic forms of expression in order to create meaning. By seeing this as the core value of my discipline and not the ability to create two-page layouts, I provide a foundation that allows me to envision new contexts while addressing the issues of all designers who may go forward and choose from an endless number of possible arenas of application.

Ethical Examples: An Education in Praxis

The above positions are particularly relevant when discussing education if for no other reason than in a classroom of twenty-two students. Each student could potentially be interested in applying the discipline to a different arena. As such, teaching students that the core ethical consideration for the discipline is deciding on the type of paper or ink you will use would be inappropriate. Mainly because, for a person who is doing screen or motion-based design, these are unnecessary considerations of practice (a more discipline specific expression of that issue would be the ethical considerations of substrate usage in design dissemination). In order to address these issues in design education, I have ceased to assign format lead projects to upper level studios. Instead of asking students to rethink the poster format, I ask them to think about designing communication. Through inquiry they identify the most relevant design contribution, the most effective communication vehicle and the formal language that most appropriately serves their intent. This simple switch more often then not results in fresh perspectives on old formats.

This core position allowed me to construct a class project that introduced students to ethics through studio practice. The example is the first of a two-project senior studio I've titled 'Enabling Design'. The studio exposed students, through practice, to the values and responsibilities that come when functioning as a member of the discipline. By engaging them in topics/issues/communities that are under-served I created a space that moves them away from design preconceptions associated with mainstream audiences, topics or format driven studio work. By placing them in an unfamiliar space they were forced to engage in a process of inquiry that did not allow them to do work based on assumption and convention. The opening exercise introduced students to the ethical considerations needed when

engaging non-mainstream subjects or material. These considerations foreground the process and responsibilities of designing while simultaneously providing a framework that speaks to the core abilities of the discipline that also can be applied in any arena.

The exercise started by breaking the class into pairs. Each student took the hometown of the partner they were paired with and used it as the subject with which to present three design compositions. For the first three designs the students were required to research the location in order to identify subjects and formal languages with which to communicate the specifics of the community they were given. This communication could be directed to anyone of their choosing. I purposely left the methodology of inquiry/exploration open in order to see what the students responded with. The three compositions presented for discussion by the class were absurdly similar. Twenty-two students representing twenty different locations used only four major subjects to communicate these locations (all of which were in North Carolina except two, which were in Texas and South Korea). Every student had self-imposed one of the following elements to use as their design's composition and subject focus: architectural landmarks, leading industries, celebrity residents and current events.

The compositions were also surprising in that over half of the students' self-imposed 'formats' were associated with applications of design as the vehicle to structure their composition. For example students made mock newspapers, magazines and advertisements. Most surprising though was the discussion of the work. When students were asked why they made certain aesthetic and image-making decisions, it was apparent these were not based on assumptions and their perceptions of that community or space. If it was the country, it was mountains and woods, if it was the city, it was gray and 'urban' looking. When asked to explain the visual elements and their design decisions, many said that they had relied on the images they had found of other (assumed-to-be-similar) locations and hadn't considered the intentions of the person who made that prior work as an issue to consider. Others relied not on new research but on their preconceived notions of who lived in the place. The reactions of the partners whose hometown they were representing were minimal. Often they were aware of the stereotypes and amused by the depictions but certainly not worried about how it represented the community. This was an interesting unintended result. The assignment equally revealed to students and myself how each of them evaluated or didn't evaluate the ethics their peers used to guide their work.

The next phase of the project brought that aspect of understanding discipline specific ethics to the foreground. The students designed three more compositions based on three new perspectives obtained by interviewing their partner. The partners asked each other three primary questions:

One – what is one thing you miss from your hometown?

Two – what is one place that someone not from your hometown wouldn't know about?

Three – describe an unforgettable experience you had while living in your hometown.

The design issues all of a sudden became a lot more difficult. Students were immediately uncertain about how to locate graphic material to create compositions based on these insights. Having a personal connection to the provider of the material made them 'all' understand the weight of their responsibilities as a designer. They each became aware of the importance of the images and words they were using. Where in the first three designs they all immediately fell back on humanities-based modes of enquiry. This time everyone struggled with how to design around his or her findings from personal interviews. Most students began this second group of compositions by using images and typography that they 'liked' or were exposed to in their own lives. This became a difficult option though when faced with depicting a place that was not photographed and that they had never visited before. Many designers are faced with this everyday and without hesitation run to an assumption or convention (for example to show Paris you use the Eiffel Tower).

However students quickly received feedback from their partners about how graphically 'wrong' their initial communications were. Their 'places' all became personal. They came to understand their places as complex relationships between people and experiences that interact in a built environment filled with subtle details.

The students were beginning to have meaningful discussions that moved beyond conventions of an urban or rural place. These discussions caused students to look at new ways to do design research. Some visited their places. Some collected photos from the interviewer. Self-initiated student-to-student desk critiques became a constant. Ethical student discourse was no long limited to, "but do you like it?" or considerations of assuring 'a balanced page'. It became more about extracting insight, perspective and the analysis of form as a representation of meaning; considerations that had not been commonplace or even part of 'their' own considerations regarding their work. This is important not because it is the designer's responsibility to ask these questions, but because as soon-to-be-practicing members of the discipline, they were experiencing why their discipline and design was relevant. For the first time, they experienced the responsibility that comes with being a designer and with which they are entrusted as responsible members of the discipline.

As the compositions were brought to a conclusion[1] some students chose to negate their partners' feedback rather than to follow it. This however was a good result. Instigating or opposing instead of

placating or complying was as fruitful a result as any other. However it was only fruitful because it wasn't the result of an uninformed assumption surrounding an issue. It was the result of an informed responsible discourse. In the end, all the work was based on the understanding that how designers represent and envision a place is not to be taken lightly. And most importantly that a 'place' is not just an object, but is the result of people, ideas and experiences and that designers have an ethical responsibility to find ways to uncover those details and use them to share with others. It is these 'discipline specific ethics' that will guide them in making decisions about their work as they move forward into their outlet for design. As they explore these outlets it is these same 'disciplinary ethics' that will allow them to assess how comfortable or uncomfortable they are with the work they contribute to and are given in their forthcoming arenas.

Conclusion

Embracing this ethical model provides designers and those that design engages with, the opportunity to understand the 'discipline of designing' and not to relegate design to an activity of mere pastiche. Addressing ethics opens doors to discuss what it is design does, what it is design may contribute to and what designers may affect in their work. Ethics provides the tools with which designers are able to be proactive and not reactive, to aspire and constantly reevaluate where and to what ends they strive for personally and as a body of applied knowledge. Disciplinary ethics provide designers the platforms with which they may explore new areas of engagement while assuring those in these new areas that they are responsible enough to be considered. For design not to discuss 'Discipline Specific Ethics' would be to relinquish the design ethics to a series of decisions on gestalt, intellectual property and functionality. This would not only be a disservice to all that practice design but it would also say to everyone else that the discipline of design is singularly the crafting of the brilliant insight of others and not a discipline at all. Ethics make design self-aware and require designers to acknowledge that there is a value to their work that goes beyond just the re-arrangement of artifice.

Note

1. These compositions were the groundwork from which the next project was created. This involved the production of community action pieces using participatory design to create outlets for community members to record and share their perspectives, experiences and perceptions relative to their community or 'place'. These were then mailed in pre-addressed packaging to local Congressional Representatives. The idea was to provide the representative with a more accurate perspective on their constituent's thoughts, concerns and interests and also to reinforce to them that a 'place' is the result of the people and their experiences in it.