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Equipping Designers for Democracy: Mock Trials in Design Education.

..... Fernando Secomandi

Democracy is a formidable concept with numerous intersections in design and, specifically, design education. This reflection explores a pedagogical experiment using the *mock trial* method and its potential to cultivate basic democratic principles in design students. Mock trials can enhance students' ability to engage in public debates, articulate their opinions on societal issues, substantiate their viewpoints while respectfully challenging others, and uphold equality in discourse. This innovative approach transforms the traditional design studio into a "courtroom," where students simulate legal proceedings on real-world controversies, navigating conflicting perspectives while honing their professional expertise.

Design for Our Future

Upon entering the Faculty of Industrial Design Engineering (IDE) at TU Delft, where I teach, students encounter the portentous message "Design for Our Future" adorning the façade. When they graduate, they typically stand before it one last time, holding their diplomas for a commemorative photo. In crossing the faculty's front door upon arrival or departure, they can be sure that the education offered here truly shapes our shared future, not only locally but globally. This is a promise of design education that only a few institutions of comparable size to the IDE Faculty can fulfill.

What IDE students will often learn—like design students in institutions across both the Global North and South—is that designing carries significant responsibilities and is anything but straightforward. Nowadays, students are often asked to tackle societal challenges, and these are invariably complex. The future may appear deeply uncertain, with impending environmental collapse, developing wars, internal dissent, and border conflicts. How does a designer resolve these issues individually? What specific contributions can designers

bring when working collaboratively? The lived experiences of those most affected by their decisions may seem distant and unfamiliar to students. Should students focus on benefiting others while they must address immediate personal challenges, such as learning to design with emerging technology to find a job? Is striving for the “social good” at odds with securing financial independence and a career?

In this troubling context, design educators must help students avoid two pitfalls: the trap of desperation, which can lead to paralysis, quick fixes, and passivity, and the trap of nihilism, which results in disengagement from meaningful contributions to shaping the future. Of course, the question of how to educate designers for successful integration into existing production-consumption systems is not new. In 1961, during the second General Assembly of the International Council of Societies of Industrial Design (now the World Design Organization), Tomás Maldonado addressed the issue, envisioning the industrial designer as:

“a man [sic] with high professional efficiency and great influence in the competitive society. Therefore, I see him neither as spectator nor as judge, but as active participant in the reality in which he acts and lives. Intensively dedicated, without doubt, to the task of equipping the world. But never in the extreme to ignore or to be indifferent against the conflicts, the calamities and the risks of the world which he wants to equip.” (Maldonado, 1961, p. 11).

How can educators properly equip design students while raising their critical awareness of social responsibility?

Design Justice and Emerging Technologies

Design Justice and Emerging Technologies is a course developed as part of the recent revision of our Master’s program *Design for Interaction*. This knowledge-based elective helps students explore the intersection of design, emerging technologies, and social justice while reflecting on their responsibilities as professional designers.

The course introduces historical and contemporary writings in design research that connect these topics. Through individual study and class discussion, students apply insights from the readings to analyze ongoing developments and controversies in the world. They present seminars on self-selected topics, and from these, a few issues are selected for litigation in a mock trial format.

In addition to these activities, students engage in self-reflective exercises inspired by Leslie-Ann Noel’s (2023) techniques for examining one’s positionality and recognizing social oppressions affecting others. As she states, “Knowing who I am informs what I want to change” (p. 4). I firmly believe that encouraging students to reflect for themselves on this principle through democratic debate should always accompany the assignment entrusted to them to design for our future.

A Tribunal for Technologies and Designers

The two mock trials conducted this academic year focused on artificial intelligence (AI), an emerging technology that students overwhelmingly chose to discuss. This is unsurprising, given AI’s growing significance and the ongoing debates about designing *for* and *with* it

in design education. However, complex challenges like this are often framed in ways that constrain students' ability to articulate their own positions. The mock trials aimed to do the opposite—encouraging students to develop their own understanding and proposals through critical thinking and respectful debate.

Traditionally used in legal education, mock trials engage students in litigating contentious issues by assuming opposing stances and performing roles such as attorneys, witnesses, and jurors. They prepare and exchange pre-trial briefs outlining their core claims and evidence. During the trial, they present opening and closing statements, interrogate witnesses, cross-examine opposing witnesses, and introduce supporting evidence.

In our adaptation, the jury for each mock trial consisted of student groups from the other trial. Rather than delivering a verdict or sentence, the jury provided feedback on the strengths and weaknesses of both teams' performances. The performing students then reached their own verdict, reflecting on the mock trial experience and determining their aspirations as socially responsible designers.

The course lasted a quarter, and the mock trial was conducted within two weeks, followed by a final week dedicated to reporting on the experience. One trial debated the potential banning of AI from design education due to its environmental impact. Students had to frame their arguments using Tony Fry's (2020) concepts of *defuturing* and *unsustainment*. The second trial examined whether users have a moral duty to redesign AI systems that perpetuate social oppression. Students structured their arguments based on the theory of *user oppression* by Rodrigo Gonzatto and Frederick van Amstel (2022).

Being Both Spectator and Judge in Democratic Debate

As a design educator with over a decade of experience teaching at various schools in Brazil and the Netherlands, I was genuinely impressed by the depth of engagement in the mock trials. I had not previously seen students develop such extensive knowledge of complex issues and their associated literature while reflecting on their learning objectives in such a short timeframe.

In retrospect, both the students and I recognized that a powerful feature of the mock trial—beyond creating an engaging competition—was the requirement to assume and enact distinct roles. Students were neither mere “spectators” nor “judges”; instead, they actively engaged with multiple perspectives, using self-reflection to form their own standpoints as budding professionals. Importantly, the necessity of explicitly articulating opposing arguments in pre-trial briefs compelled students to seriously consider alternative viewpoints, ensuring that their claims were substantiated effectively.

As a testament to the potential of mock trials in fostering democratic principles in design education, I conclude with a reflective quote from a Dutch female student with a Bachelor's in Design at IDE. She participated in the mock trial on banning AI from design education. Her words eloquently demonstrate how democratic debate can equip design students to, as Maldonado envisioned, actively engage with the realities of our world while remaining committed to shaping the future, without indifference to ongoing conflicts:

“The trial forced us to acknowledge that the current state [of how AI is integrated into design education] is unsustainable [...] Our group’s verdict—a cautious integration of AI with ethical safeguards—was a middle ground [...] As a designer educated in a European context with a high-level education, I benefit from the privilege of access to these cutting-edge technologies [...] The privileges I have come with the responsibility to recognize and challenge the systemic biases embedded within the tools we use and how these tools impact those outside my bubble, especially marginalized communities [...] We’re living in a reality where AI development is dictated by a few dominant corporations with immense power [...] Right now, AI is optimized for speed, efficiency, and automation. It makes sense in a capitalist framework. But what if AI was optimized for social justice instead? [...] Instead of AI being a tool for monopolization, it could be a tool for redistribution of knowledge, of power, of resources. That’s a vision worth fighting for [...] I’ll be honest: my use of AI has been largely self-serving. It makes my life easier. [...] But these are individual benefits, not systemic solutions. Have I truly explored AI’s full potential? Definitely not [...] How can I, as a designer, contribute to shaping AI’s purpose? I should take a critical look at the projects that I’m working on in my education. Can I integrate it into my projects not just as a tool, but as a means to empower those who need it most? [...] Can I explore alternative AI models that aren’t owned by monopolistic tech giants but rather serve community-driven goals? As a designer, I hold more power than I sometimes realize. No, I might not be able to dismantle Big Tech overnight. But I can make choices in my field that either reinforce or resist the existing power structures. That realization is crucial.”

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