Creative Authenticity: A Framework for Supporting the Student Self in Craft Education

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Abstract— *This article introduces a pedagogical approach in design education referenced as creative authenticity. Creative authenticity is defined as an ongoing process of learning to create through intrinsically motivated, self-aware and self-affirming actions and rationales. The concept is grounded in Constructivist learning theory, Postmodernist views of pluralism and cultural position, Anthony Giddens' theory of reflexive identities, and scholarship on intrinsic motivation in learning. This ideology seeks to personalize the learning experience for each student in ways that are meaningful to their person, not just useful to the design industry, at large. This conversation proposes four samples of methodology by which to infuse creative authenticity into curriculum as a starting point for shaking off implicit biases; focusing on student learning and growth; initiating meaningful and empowering discussions; and redefining success through collaborative and participatory educational design. This work promotes teaching with creative authenticity as a foundation to help students realize their strengths through their ever-evolving identities. In a broader context, authenticity in education supports marginalized groups to see themselves, their histories and their experiences authentically reflected in their education and work.*

Keywords— *creative authenticity, identity, design education, dialogue, collaboration, introspection*

I. INTRODUCTION

Providing an authentic learning experience in the design classroom is often viewed through the lens of practicality and applicability to the professional field. 'Authenticity' is thus seen as recreating an experience in the classroom that is analogous to how it is in the 'real world' (e.g., design studios and agencies or in-house departments). Martha C. Nussbaum warns us that leaning into the corporatization of higher education emphasizing usefulness and timeliness over thoughtfulness and criticality—could lead to the production of 'generations of useful machines, rather than complete citizens who can think for themselves, criticize tradition, and under- stand the significance of another person's sufferings and achievements' (Nussbaum, 2010, 2). In opposition to the over-commodification and corporatization of the university classroom, which foregrounds learning as largely pre-vocational instead of scholarly (Coté & Allahar, 2011), we suggest a different view of authenticity—one rooted in creativity and identity—as a means of creating more meaningful, empowering and engaging learning experiences for our students.

A study by Reid & Solomonids (2007) showed that students' experience of design and design learning is 'strongly related to sense of self' (Reid & Solomonids, 2007, 37). According to their findings, students can achieve a 'Sense of Being' through higher engagement and creativity, which enables them to consider the personal effects of their work and their emotional commitment towards specific design problems (Ibid., 28). This personal engagement with course content leads to students gaining intrinsic motivation for learning and growth, identified by educational scholars as a key factor for high performance and critical thinking. The aim of our perspective—what we are calling creative authenticity—is to personalize the learning experience for each student in ways that are meaningful to them, not just useful to the design industry. This new view does not negate the applicability to professional work as an integral part of learning, but enhances it by providing internalized understandings of,

and progressive challenges to, the future of inclusion in the profession.

Issues Surrounding Authenticity in Education

As with any progressive suggestion of this sort, it should be noted that there are arguments against the case of authenticity in relationship with education. First and foremost, defining authenticity—what Dutton calls a 'dimension word' whose meaning shifts depending on the dimensions being discussed (Dutton, 2003)—is a challenge in and of itself. Jongman-Sereno & Leary (2019) argue that behavioral researchers often disagree with the best way to conceptualize and measure authenticity. Further, they discuss the implications of authenticity for psychological well-being thus arguing whether or not, in the grand scheme of things, behaving authentically is always desired. For example, they explain, 'Contemporary perspectives implicitly assume that authenticity is uniformly beneficial, without recognizing that behaving congruently with one's undesirable attitudes, beliefs, values, motives, and other characteristics can be highly problematic' (Jongman-Sereno & Leary, 2019, 137). In addition, they raise the argument of inevitable authenticity; that all intentional behaviors, regardless of external pressures, are shaped by people's personal characteristics, attitudes, beliefs, values and motives—calling into question if anything we do can ever be considered 'inauthentic'. Tracy and Trethewey (2005) add to this discussion by highlighting a perceived dichotomy between the 'real self' and the 'fake self,' arguing that this dichotomy encourages '(a) strategized self-subordination; (b) perpetually deferred identities; (c) auto dressage; and (d) the production of organizationally preferred "good little copers"' (Tracy & Trethewey 2005, 170). As will be seen later in this paper, a poststructuralist approach to identity is applied when discussing authenticity as a crystallized, intersectional and reflexive construction.

Additionally, the issue of evaluating authenticity in creative works brings its own challenges. In a study of two undergraduate arts programmers, Belluigi (2020)

found that while authenticity—which she defines as intentionality and authorship was discussed by faculty throughout the process of the students' creation of work and writing of artist statements, that content was rarely 'referenced, discussed nor given weight during grading processes' (Belluigi, 2020, 10). Studies in education (Meyers, Rowell, et al. 2019) show that designing policies that uphold academic standards while allowing for flexibility communicates empathy, understanding and inclusion of authenticity. The current design of higher education classrooms does not enthusiastically support this kind of flexibility. In actuality, it often presents itself as a rigid classroom structure where we experience imbalanced student to teacher ratios, a fixation on timely completion of degree plans, strict attendance policies, hard grading, etc. These terms make it difficult for students or educators to validate flexibility or access opportunities to discuss authenticity in the classroom.

Authenticity through the Lens of Creativity

Creative authenticity, as we define it, is an ongoing process of learning to create through intrinsically motivated, self-aware and self-affirming actions and rationales. It is grounded in Constructivist learning theory (Chuang, 2021), Postmodernist views of pluralism and cultural position (Davis, 2012), Anthony Giddens' theory of reflexive identities (Bontempo e Silva & del Carmen Flores Macías 2017), and scholarship on intrinsic motivation in learning. By using a definition of authenticity that incorporates aspects of what Newman & Smith (2016) classify as 'value authenticity' and 'self-authenticity,' we provide opportunities for the student to determine their own authentic creative identity through the act of making and reflecting on their work. Who they are as 'creatives', or who they see themselves as, is constructed through critical analysis of what they create (output/execution/ style), how they create (both the physical and mental processes of creation), and why they choose both the what and how of their creative endeavors. It is important to note that this is a process—which, by its very nature, is not finalised. Creative authenticity is not about creating a fixed, unchanging identity, but continually adding layers of understanding to one's sense of self through making, reflection and discussion—akin to Tracy and Trethewey's concept of the 'crystallized self' (2005, 186).

Creative authenticity is not to be confused with Auteur Theory (Sarris, 1973, 50–51) in that the process of identifying one's own creative authenticity is not a means to generate sole ownership or auteur ship over one's work. We do find it important, though, for the designer (and design student) to have a personal connection to and perspective on their work, regardless of perceived level of control or agency. This connection and understanding of personal contributions to work—a degree of authorship—allows the designer/student to, in the words of Michael Rock (2009, 114), 'rethink process, expand design methods, and elaborate our historical frame to incorporate all forms of graphic discourse.' By opening the design student's eyes to the inherent agency, they have in any kind of creative endeavors, we help them to challenge their preconceptions and assumptions about client work, collaborative work and their role in the creative process.

When a student takes their responsibility of the design practice beyond the realm of production, they are invited to recognize the obligation they have over their design

research and practice. Schiffer (2020, 419) states, 'closely linked to reflexivity are considerations of positionality'. Positionality describes people's social standing or representation as influenced by personal characteristics such as gender, marital status, age, level of education, ethnicity and even personality. Thus, positionality is entwined with issues of intersectionality, implicit bias, and of power and representation. Schiffer affirms, 'designers ought to reflect on the values, attitudes and assumptions they have carefully to negotiate power relations and methods during the design process', (Ibid., 419). This ideology recognizes that in order to more fully practice creative authenticity and student agency in our design classrooms, it includes a call for renouncing outdated power models between student and educator as they claim their own education and style of learning.

II.   APPLYING CREATIVE AUTHENTICITY IN DESIGN CLASSROOMS

There are different means of including creative authenticity into curricula, each with its own strengths and purposes. From our collective experience, we have found the easiest application in project-based learning, though we believe that the concepts and methods presented in this essay are applicable (with some adaptation) to any type of creative coursework. Just as we seek to inspire creative authenticity in our students, we recognize that we, too, must bring ourselves and our identities to our classrooms in order to lead by example and create a safe space open to vulnerability, experimentation and discovery. Even between the two of us, our application of the methods varies as we bring our own approaches, experiences, knowledges, skills and identities to our pedagogy. We encourage educators to take our work and shape it to fit their own personal pedagogy and teaching styles.

Method 1: Leading with Why

In our classrooms, we often see students hyper fixate on the what of their work: the output, style, execution, materiality and form of their work. In critique, especially in foundational classes, students focus on the colors, shapes and other formal elements of design when evaluating others' work without much thought or question to purpose or intent. On the surface, this makes sense; our students, especially in today's world, are already well-accustomed to visual language when they step into their first design classroom and are being trained in the fundamentals of visual language. Many are entering our programmers with pre-established knowledge of creative software, arts backgrounds and even their own design practice (e.g., making logos for friends, e-motes and frames for their personal Twitch streams and TikTok videos), not to mention the over-abundance of visual stimuli in their daily lives. Leading with Why reframes critique and evaluation of the what through a preliminary discussion of why.

To begin, students describe the purpose of their work without yet showing the outcome. They lay the foundation for comprehension and evaluation by providing the objective of the work and any relevant context. This introduction helps create a framework by which the other students (and the faculty) can offer constructive criticism based less on aesthetic value and visceral reactions, and more on the success of the work in reaching its desired outcome(s) or objective(s). From an educator's viewpoint, Leading with Why also provides a glimpse into the nuances of how a student approaches their work, creating opportunities to highlight individual strengths, areas of interest, as well as areas of improvement.

Method 2: Reflections on Work and Process

It is a common gesture to use ice breaker exercises at the beginning of a semester or at the start of a student gathering to better understand group working dynamics, build rapport and community, and help foster a productive learning environment. This practice, while helpful, is often offered with a short timeframe and is relatively superficial.

We advocate for practicing deeper, more mindful activities that cultivate the foundation for transformative learning experiences. According to Taylor and Cranston (2012, 76), transformative learning is a process by which we 'transform our taken-for-granted frames of reference (meaning perspectives, habits of mind, mindsets) to make them more inclusive, discriminating, open, emotionally capable of change'. This, in turn makes our perspectives reflective so that they may provoke new beliefs justified to guide our actions. To do this, we experiment and formulate a series of reflective questions for students which invite them to investigate their processes of making and thinking. The questions allow students not only to answer directly, but to consider the process by which they have answered, and why they have answered that way in the first place. It is in this practice that students practice active reflection. Rothstein and Santana (2011, 120) support reflection as it 'gives students the opportunity to name for themselves what they are learning, and when they do that, they own the skills more strongly and deepen their understanding of how they can use what they learned in other situations'. The questions, while simple on the surface, intend to provoke thoughtful contemplation, and an opportunity for students to notice the uniqueness of their own and their peers' creative identity.

For instance, we might ask each student to creatively respond to prompts such as: 'What is your superpower?', or 'What brings you joy?'. Then, we propose they analyses

their responses based on questions of personal and creative authenticity (see Table I).

Giving the students agency over how they respond and having them reflect on

that choice invites them to explore the authenticity of their creative identity and encourages interest in their work and processes.

Table I Personal and Creative Authenticity questions for student reflections

Personal authenticity	Creative authenticity
What was the subject of your response?	**What** was your process for creating your response?
How did you choose that subject?	**How** did you choose that method/process?
Why do you think you chose that subject?	**Why** do you think you chose that method/process?

This teaching is formed from an asset-based mindset, or strength-based teaching, where curriculum deciphers students' potential by focusing on their innate talents and interest in contrast with a deficit-based framework which focuses on what the student lacks. Asset-based concepts stem from a capacity-focused community development process by Kretzmann and McKnight (1996), which pushed for mapping and recognizing the skills and experience of community-based organizations. This type of approach adapts for educational encounters where educators meet students where they are, authentically. According to Paris and Halim (2014), it is an infusion into culturally sustaining pedagogy that displaces the deficit model of teaching approach that spans years and years in the history of education in the United States.

The concepts of these exercises reappear in the form of statements in the more substantial projects to come later in the semester. In these statements, students are asked to submit their creative work alongside a Statement of Intent, a Statement of Process and a Personal Statement. Again, they are asked to understand their own creative authenticity and share not only what they made, but how they made it, and why they made it.

Method 3: Collaborative Assessment

As mentioned above, evaluating authenticity in creative work offers its own challenges. As educators, we bring our implicit biases into our classrooms, especially when critiquing and assessing work; this includes our subjective opinions about what constitutes 'good' work, or 'good' design, as well as what we deem important for our students to learn. According to Taylor & Cranston (2012, 81), education involves a 'transfer of authority from the educator

to the learners,' adding that the 'successful educator works herself out of her job as educator and becomes a collaborative learner.' We can apply this philosophy by applying a participatory design strategy of working with our students to identify and implement core objectives and criteria for work. Likewise, through the lens of Human-Centered Design (Wheelock et al., 2020), design education requires not just the understanding of our students as the recipients and beneficiaries of learning, but as collaborative and equal partners in the act of learning.

One application of this method is through the philosophy of 'upgrading', which focuses on metacognition and understanding over compliance and execution. Alfie Kohn (2020, xvi) sums up the argument for upgrading as such: 'The more [students'] attention is directed to how well they're doing, the less engaged they tend to be with what they're doing' (original emphasis). Similarly, Rohrbach (2010) shows us that, in most design classes, assessment focuses solely on the artefacts created by students, not the learning process, 'which encourages students to work passively with the intent to please their instructors instead of striving to solve complex problems independently'. By shifting focus away from grades, the student is free to explore, practice, and learn through experimentation and failure, feed- back, and reflection rather than a numeric ranking from an esoteric and arbitrary rubric. This structure creates opportunities for more authentic engagement and intrinsic motivation for learning and success.

Upgrading can take many forms: through rubrics made collaboratively with student input, reflection essays/presentations done by students throughout their coursework, or 'grade contracts'—in which students and educators work together to identify the quality and deliverables necessary for different grade levels—to name just a few (Blum, 2020). These methods allow us, as educators, to differentiate our own goals for our students from their personal objectives for their education; to create a shared vision of what a course can and should be; and to help encourage and emphasize individually authentic understandings and applications of course content.

Method 4: Discussion and Dialogue

Throughout the application of our methods, we continue to find that uncovering a creative authentic identity requires as much extrospection as it does introspection. After practicing active reflection, the students are led to share their responses with classmates, creating awareness of differences and similarities between their and others' personal and creative authenticity. While the self-reflection exercises help unravel personal identity, it is the conversations and access to different perspectives which allow students to gain a deeper understanding of the

complexities of self. Transformative learning, mentioned earlier, requires constructive discourse to 'use the experience of others to assess reasons justifying these assumptions, and making an action decision based on the resulting insight' (Taylor & Cranston, 2012, 76).

Similarly, discussion around personal interpretations and perspectives situates

each student as an expert on their own lived experiences. As educator Josh Halstead (AIGA Eye on Design 2020) says, 'when we guide students through the process of honoring lived experience as expertise and questioning the role and function of design through non-design discourses, we invite them into this critical work,' with the 'work' being the deconstruction of perceived realities and challenging of dominant narratives. These discussions also allow us to better get to know our students on a more personal level, allowing us to craft individual learning plans, address personal barriers to learning and encourage areas of excellence and differentiation.

As educators, facilitating a space for intentional opportunities for students and educators to get to know one another through discourse at the beginning of (and throughout) a course helps build trust and foster a sense of community (Conrad & Donaldson, 2011). Building community cultivates inclusion as the birthplace for authenticity, empowerment and creativity. A research laboratory at the University of Ottawa led by Dr. Jude Mary Cénat invited people suffering from anxiety, stress and sleep deregulation during the COVID-19 pandemic to participate in sharing their experiences with others (Cénat et al., 2020). They discovered that inviting members to experience community in a collective, empathic and humanistic setting helped them recover effectiveness and motivation that will likely outlive the pandemic. Cénat shares, "Often resilience must be supported, and keeping research groups impersonal can result in losing bright students along the way." Facilitating a space of open discussion and dialogue gives all students not only permission to be themselves, but encouragement, release and actualization for the long run.

Situating Creative Authenticity

In a broader context, authenticity in education supports marginalized groups to see themselves, their histories and their experiences authentically reflected in their classes. In alignment with Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI) efforts, creative authenticity follows the philosophy of culturally sustaining pedagogy, which 'positions dynamic cultural dexterity as a necessary good, and sees the outcome of 13

learning as additive rather than subtractive, as remaining whole rather than framed as broken, as critically enriching

strengths rather than replacing deficits'. (Paris & Alim, 2017, 1).

Creative authenticity sits within the larger practice of decolonizing design education by centering the students' identities and embodiments within their process to, in the words of Josh Halstead, 'cultivate critical consciousness and emancipatory world building' (AIGA Eye on Design 2020). Creative authenticity is not just about our students, though; we, as educators, also bring our identities into our classrooms, along with our experiences, biases and perceptions. Educator Kim L. Morrison (2017, 180–181) relates, 'I am attempting to decolonize my mind. .so that I can participate as a scholar while describing the conditions of being a colonized scholar. while describing the conditions of being a decolonizing educator, while describing the conditions of being someone who was colonized through education, shifting constantly'. The critical reflection and investigation of our processes and understanding relate to our teaching and pedagogy as much as it relates to our students' learning. In essence, design educators need to design better learning experiences.

III.   CONCLUSION

Elizabeth White (White, 2019) offers this statement on a more holistic idea of teaching: 'Teaching to the whole student requires taking layered complexities into account and shaping a definition of success that incorporates students' capacity to find personal fulfilment and make meaningful contributions to their communities; developing their skills to both navigate the world as it is and to make it as they want it to be'. We believe that teaching with creative authenticity in mind helps students realize their whole selves as a means to identify their own strengths and goals in an ever-shifting, ever-changing, ever-developing world of complexity. The methods introduced in this paper are a starting point for shaking off implicit biases; focusing on student learning and growth; initiating meaningful and empowering discussions; and redefining success through collaborative and participatory educational design. While we have already begun to implement these strategies in our classrooms through the methods mentioned above, we also see the potential for these strategies to build into workshops that promote creative authenticity in various communities seeking to understand and take ownership of their place in the world: immigrant populations, LGBTQ+ youth, even new parents. One such workshop was held at SXSW EDU 2022 in Austin, Texas with other educators as a way to introduce the framework and help other educators realize their own authentic identities within their classrooms. We believe that understanding one's ever-evolving identity is

an integral part of more fully and positively participating in society.

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