

Design is for Everyone

The title of Nigel Cross's article, 'Design Education for Laypeople', is a striking expression of the paradox of design in general education. For it suggests (as an unwanted offshoot of professionalism perhaps), that design activity is not self-evidently, or not often, the business of everyone. Now, that can be a bothersome aspect of professional design practice. Yet we, as practitioners working in general education, are concerned with *all* pupils.

Nevertheless, away from professional design practice, the paradox continues to raise questions: questions to do with the relations between specialist teaching and everyday experience, and the possible unwitting distortions that may be introduced by specialist professional education. General education should hardly possess a category, 'lay people': the acceptance of such a distinction would surely tend to be consequential upon specialist teaching 'forgetting' its general educational context. On this view, perhaps design education developments are to do with 'giving back' design activity to everyone, from whom it has been separated by professionalism.

My position coincides very closely, I suspect, with Nigel Cross's. I would no doubt look with a slightly different perspective on specialist teaching and general education. Specialists may be inevitable, but then the pedagogic problem is to do with enabling different groups of specialists to make contact with each other and with 'everyman'. Having said all this as preamble, many teachers will feel pleasure that Nigel Cross has offered something of a summarising statement of the present state of the art. That is, he describes something of the expansion of familiar practices as well as the actual and potential lines of curricular development. But practice precedes good curriculum theory, and my present interest is in considering his comments in their relation to the school practices that have led to the comments. I shall attempt this simply by offering some running comments.

I think it would be difficult to find evidence to support the hypothetical cynic's view that the design professions might be concerning themselves, for their own ends, with developments in secondary education (never mind shaping those developments). I think the 'vocational justification' is also not sufficient as explanation. Rather, the minority having a vocational interest represent a particular case subsumed by the general argument for design studies being developed. Of course, the origins of cultural change are impossible to specify precisely, but we might speculate that curricular changes are symptomatic of changes in the epistemological bases of pedagogy, of structural changes in institutionalised education, and of cultural pluralism.

Importantly, Nigel Cross indicates the centrality of the significance of the order, of the structure, of the design activity. An easy acceptance of some of the rhetoric surrounding this centrality would certainly fail to discriminate between 'participation' in, and transparency of, design activity. Acceptance of the rhetoric might well suggest that 'better understanding' = accepting some responsibility for

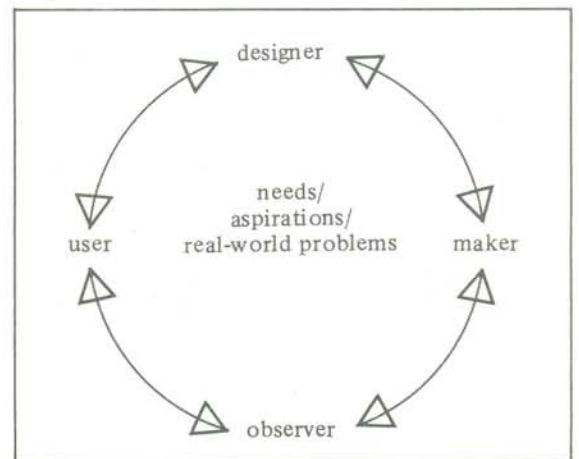
accepting or for declining to accept 'design decisions'. But, if the socio-political dimensions of the design activity were revealed it seems unlikely that *all* design decisions would be found as acceptable as appears to be the case. In opposition to such a static condition, a 'better understanding' would surely, at least, raise proposals for quite radical changes in an institution's management structure. That is, the functioning of the essential design activity is, axiomatically, not to be contained in pre-existing subject boundaries and, therefore, by a typical institutionalised curriculum structure. (If this point were pursued – at some length – it would not be difficult to construct a rationale for the groupings of subjects into Faculties; but that is another story.)

But are schools intended to raise such radical questions? In principle, we might think Yes, but, in practice, how far do they, can they, ought they to?

But to get back to practising teachers. I support the view that the aspirations of design educationists are towards making operational Nigel Cross's conclusion. My view would be that the pedagogic development of problem-centred (rather than problem solving) learning is in this direction. Here, I think that what might be called the 'first-generation' of concepts and techniques associated with 'problem solving' are being superseded. There is a sharp distinction between problems and puzzles, and the first-generation were (and are) puzzles; it is of course also the case that some problems can be reduced to the puzzle form. The following is a representation of a generalised approach towards problem-centred design activity – when design activity is seen using the role perspectives of the consumer (the user, the observer), the designer, and the maker:

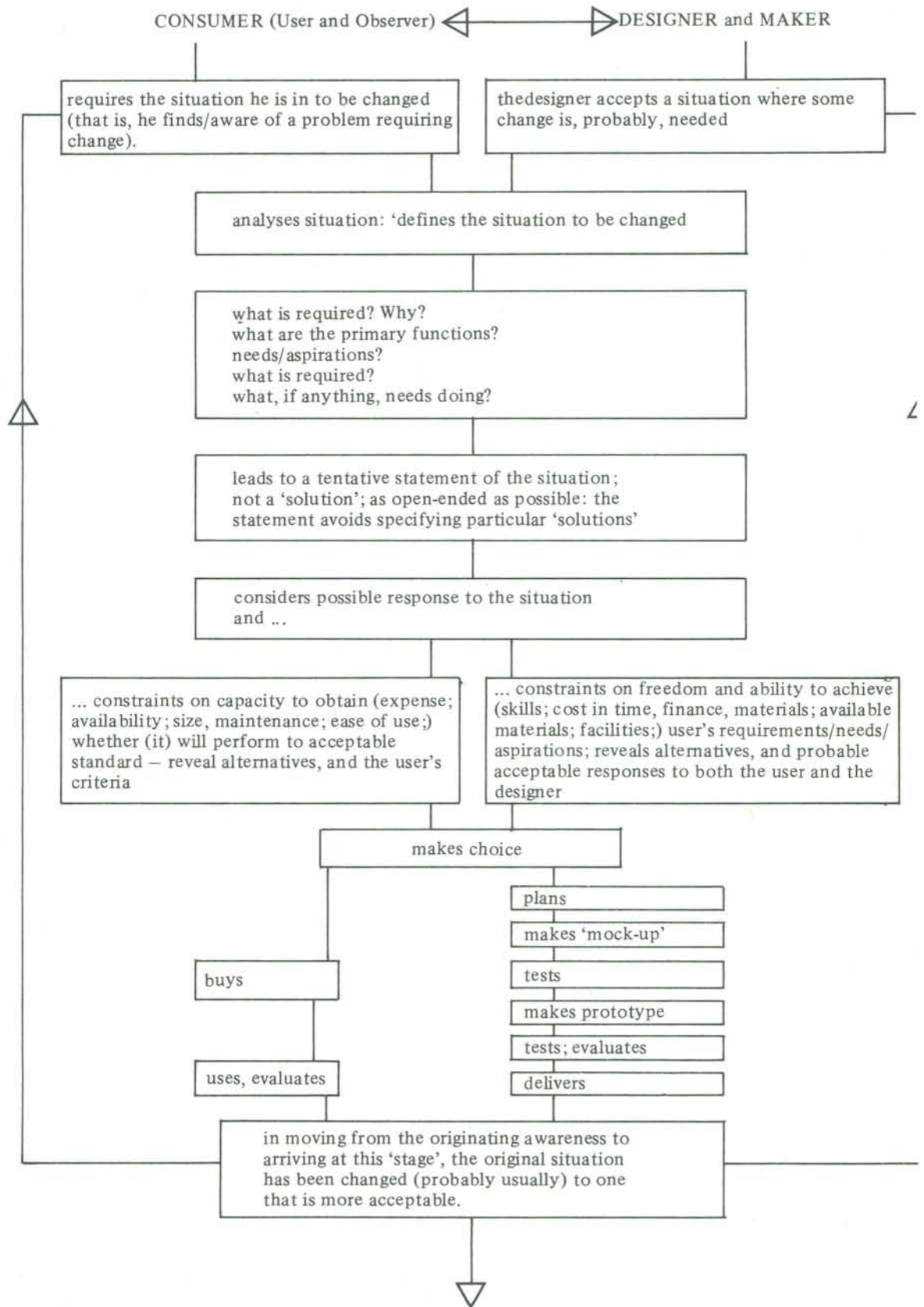
Figure 1
Four Role views on the
design activity.

Figure 1



If we consider Figure 2 in terms of school subjects, a home economist might travel, via consumer education activities, down the left-hand side; others down the right-hand side. We can use this model to make several points in expansion of Nigel Cross's conclusion.

Figure 2
A model of design
activity in education



The first is that some teachers would say that many representations of design action have been too tight: linear when linearity is simply not the case. And in any event, and crucially, there has been a failure to distinguish between the form of the description that is being used (language) and the action that language is being used to indicate or represent.

Having said that, a linear description has been found useful, comprehensible – as a pedagogic model. But, emphatically, there is a large distinction between useful models and the action itself. A naive belief in the linearity of design activity has to be moved away from quickly.

The second point that arises is that the importance of the context of design activity is being more explicitly recognised: the fact that design activity happens in a pluralistic cultural context; and that any artefact (if one is produced) is an element in an hierarchical systemic context which has many dimensions. On this view incidentally, the 'social responsibility in engineering' movement, 'alternative technology', the 'counter-culture' movement may all be seen as signs of an extra-formal curriculum design education practice. Perhaps this is the distinguishing feature of design education developments: that, in their concern with the structure and the structuring of design activity, the message is that design is the business of everyone and we can't wait until the 'experts' have got to grips with its functioning, even if we accept that such fundamental activity should be delegated to someone else in the first place.

I think too that some teachers have also found that a strong commitment to revealing the structure and the pedagogic structuring of form-making places a greater emphasis on the question Why? rather than How? 'What should be designed ...' tends to imply a tangible product; or at any rate it does not express much doubt towards the *inevitability* of products. But 'Why ...?' is a prior question, which may or may not lead to the What ...? questions, and does not *entail* a product. Nevertheless, it, in fact, enhances product achievement.

Similarly in 'consumer education', the issue becomes not 'Which one shall we buy?' but 'Which one shall we buy having first decided whether we are going to buy at all'. So, it is worth making the point that the representation in Figure 2 is in terms of changing and of valuing; and does not 'start' in terms of products.

And the development by practising teachers of such concepts as 'problem' and 'solution' reveals that such pedagogical devices (for that is what they are) are only starting points for designing and towards the better understanding of design. Also, that valuing processes are central: in the emergence, and the recognition by pupils, of *their* criteria and *their* constraints that may be in tension with those of 'society' (and indeed of the school). The design activity at that point is revealed in its political/ethical dimensions.

There are other ploys and techniques presently being developed and created by teachers that could be described. The overall curricular consequences are going to be a transformation eventually from the parent subjects of the developments that Nigel Cross points to. And if we consider the inhibiting pressures of institutionalised education then the developments that practising teachers have started are the more impressive.