

# **Citizen Designers: Transforming student perceptions of social responsibility.**

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**Sancha de Búrca**

**Programme Leader, HND Graphic Design (University of Kent at West Kent College). Doctoral candidate CSHE (University of Kent)**

<https://thegraphicdesignproject.org/design-for-good>

**School: CSHE**

**Email: [sanchadeburca@westkent.ac.uk](mailto:sanchadeburca@westkent.ac.uk) [shd22@kent.ac.uk](mailto:shd22@kent.ac.uk)**

## **Abstract**

Educating graphic design students to re-see their professional responsibilities to others, could transform design's currently problematic 'real world' practices of systemic "defuturing" (Fry, 2009) into agency towards a sustainable and just alternative world. By integrating radical critical pedagogy and critical hope into Pugh's (2011) pragmatic model of Transformative Experience, I have tested iterations of a design-for-good pedagogy (DfGP), giving students experiences of social responsibility that expand perception and develop an ethic of care.

*75 words*

## **Full Paper**

*750 words excluding refs and figures labels*

## **Context**

Financial interests and generalising accountability (Solbrekke and Sugrue, 2012; East *et al*, 2014) have weakened professional vocation as public service (Gardner, *et al*, 2001; Manzini, 2015; Vaughan, 2018; Hammington, 2019). Similarly, in higher education, the production of economy-maintaining professionals (Solbrekke and Sugrue, 2012) erodes discourses of social responsibility (Quinlan, 2017), such as sustainability (Fry, 2009; Boehnert, 2018), civic understanding (East *et al*, 2014), care (Vaughan, 2018). In both arenas, contextualising wisdom - Aristotle's intellectual virtue, *phronesis* (NE vi.3-5) - is lost to fixation on the technical (*techne*

(ibid)) as an end in itself (Boehnert, 2018; Kinsella and Pitman, 2012). Nevertheless, universities should develop students' social responsibility.

Graphic design - where professional practice and social responsibility are uncoupled - is not viewed as a profession of care (Vaughan, 2018). By underpinning ideologies of consumption and the technical (Fry, 2009; Boehnert, 2018) graphic design is implicated in environmental degradation and social injustice. Design educators fail in their ethical duty (Resnick, 2016) if they do not address change-making towards social purposes (Fry, 2009).

However, design has many affordances that should be used for social benefit (Manzini, 2015; Sheppard, 2012). Developing students' beyond-the-self (BTS) outlooks (Damon *et al*, 2003; Moran *et al*, 2010) and capability to design ethically for the greater good therefore form the aims of a DfGP.

## **Framework**

My conceptual framework for research into, and design of, a DfGP, is the model of Transformative Experience (TE) outlined by Keven Pugh and his colleagues (2011, 2017). Pugh describes three elements that comprise the components of TE:

1. Expanded perception or the re-seeing through content
2. Experiential value of content
3. Motivated use of content in free choice transfer (agency)

While socially responsible agency is the aim of a DfGP, I here concentrate on the initial element: expansion of perception. Integrating critical pedagogies of consumption (Sandlin and McLaren, 2010) and ecopedagogy (Martusewicz and Edmunson, 2004; Boehnert, 2018) into TE, radically interrogate graphic design's negative impacts. Critical pedagogies, however, may feel threatening and prevent transformation. Therefore, integrating a pedagogy of hope (Boler, 2014) (scaffolding practical skills, demonstrating real cases and framing social responsibility as having experiential value) allows students to perceive alternative purposes and possibilities for design action. Valued action then promotes students' growth of BTS and motivation to act ethically (Damon *et al*, 2003; Moran *et al*, 2010).

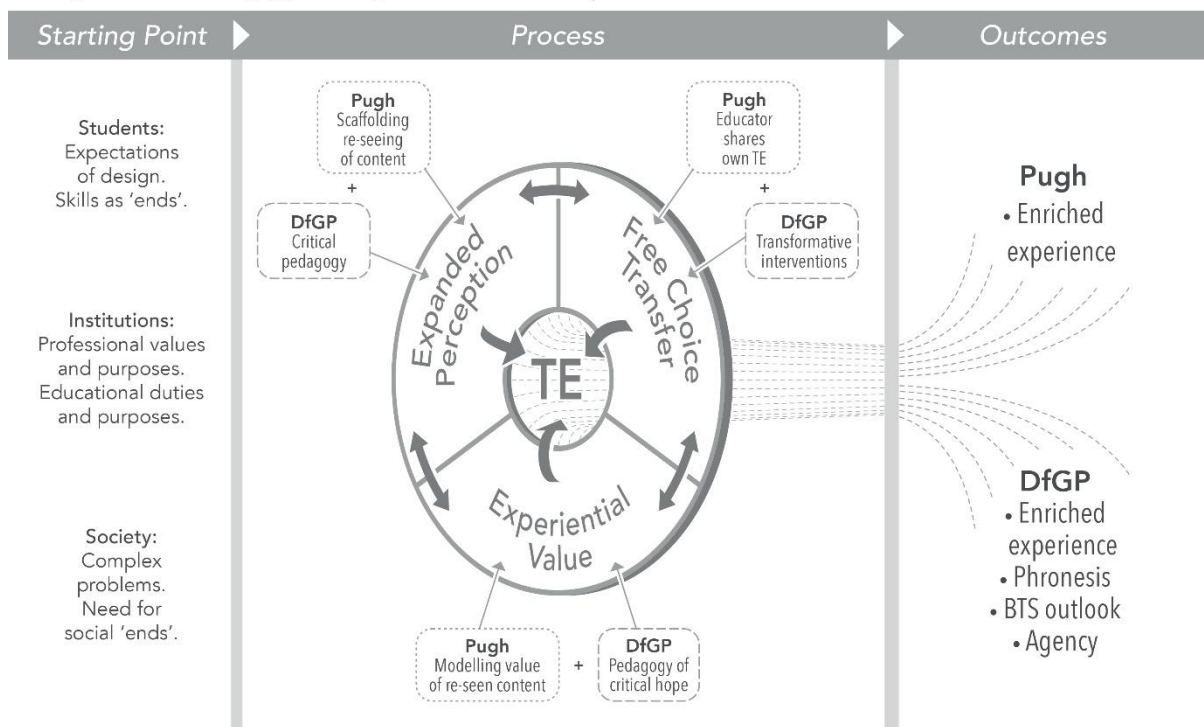


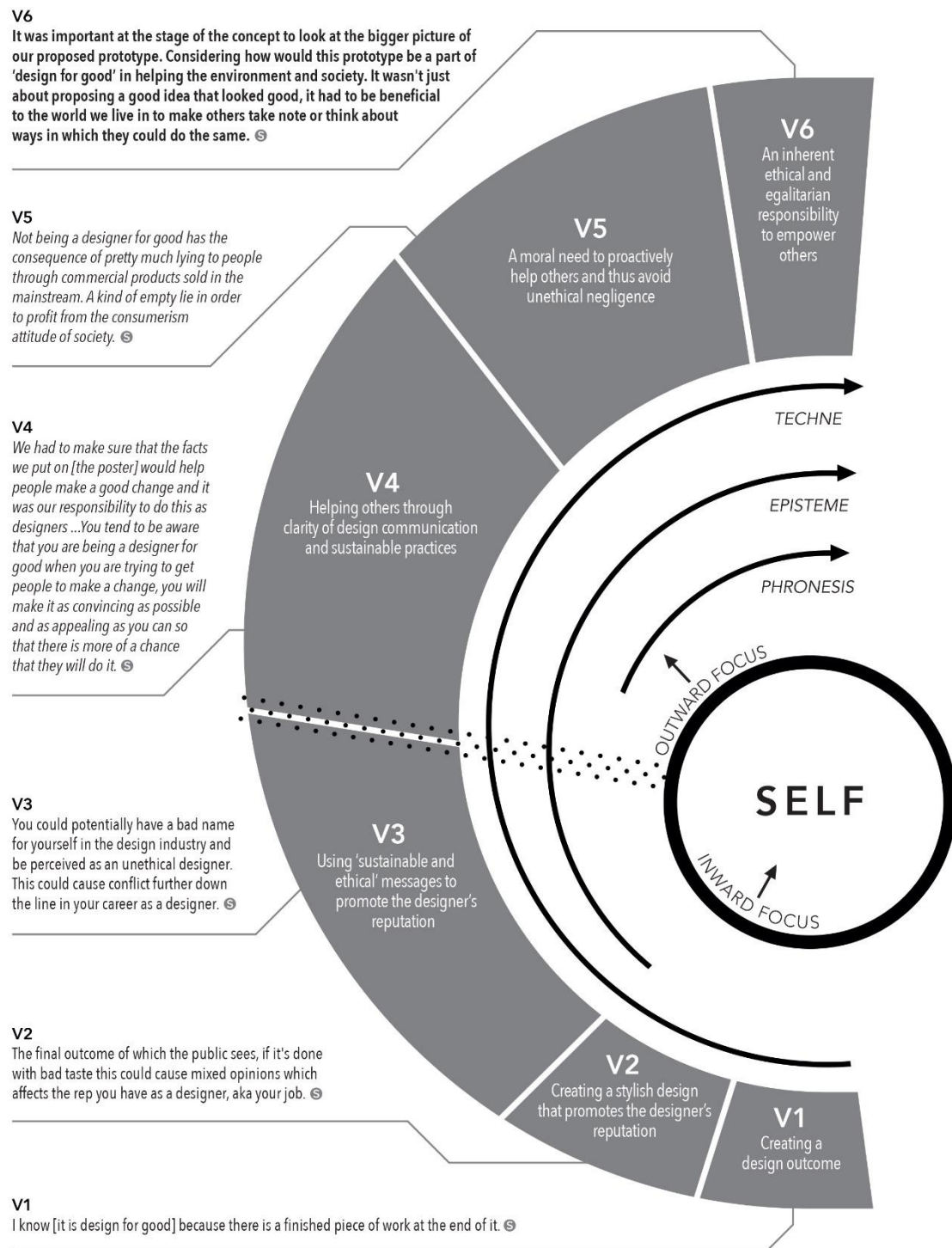
Figure 1: Conceptual Framework for the Project X interventions

## Interventions

Two six-week interventions, Project X 2018 and 2019 (PX2018, PX2019), were part of a wider DfGP curriculum delivered to University of Kent graphic design undergraduates at West Kent College, Tonbridge. Critical and hopeful pedagogies were engaged during group work research and ideation. Students then created designs for 'live' community interaction, where engagement with the public in co-creating design-for-good fostered re-seeing of conventional design practices.

The topic of PX2018 was sustainability in the local area. Students ( $n=37$ ) displayed their conversation-starting design 'provotypes' (provocative prototypes), then co-designed final pieces based on community feedback.

In PX2019 the student cohort ( $n=27$ ) selected the topic, which was mental health. The college counselling team and a national mental health charity participated as guest experts in a workshop and design-pitch panel, representing real others as beneficiaries of design-for-good. In PX2019 individual students also entered the national *Creative Conscience* competition.



Key: **Bold** = year 3    Regular year 2    *Italic* = year 1    ⑤ = Survey

Figure 2. Outcome space of variations of perception of design-for-good in Project X 2018

A phenomenographic approach to analysis of data (Wilson *et al*, 2013) allowed variations of students' expanding perceptions to emerge and be set in relational outcome spaces (Figures 2 and 3) that could inform future iterations in the DfGP. In PX2018 (Fig. 2) six variations in perception emerged, showing re-seeing of design-for-good and its altruistic purposes. Variations 1-3, however, were furthest from design-for-good and demonstrated an inward focus on the self, concern for professional reputation and concentration on technical skills (*techne*) as end outcomes. Variations 4-5, however, revealed growing levels of outward focus, developing BTS in relation to designs' impacts and awareness of ethical reflection (*phronesis*).

### **Ve/"7"**

I realise that a lot of the time we are just designing big plasters for systemic problems ... I think it's important to realise that it's ok to design 'plasters' because at least we're taking some form of action for the benefit of others ... If we do nothing about systemic issues nothing will change. ⑤

### **Vd/6**

I did a lot of research, watched videos and spoke to [sufferers]. After doing this amount of research I felt comfortable enough to design what I thought would work as both a good design as well as something that can make people aware and help people who are affected... I think in this project I finally understood how important research really is - especially with an important topic such as mental health. ⑤

### **Vc/4&5**

It was important to carefully consider the ethics ... I found that I considered the ethics in this project a lot more than any other projects due to the subject. ⑤

I wanted to get a bit deeper to really understand them as whole people. ③

I think I have become more aware of how imagery might make someone feel. I hadn't thought about this that much in terms of emotion. ③

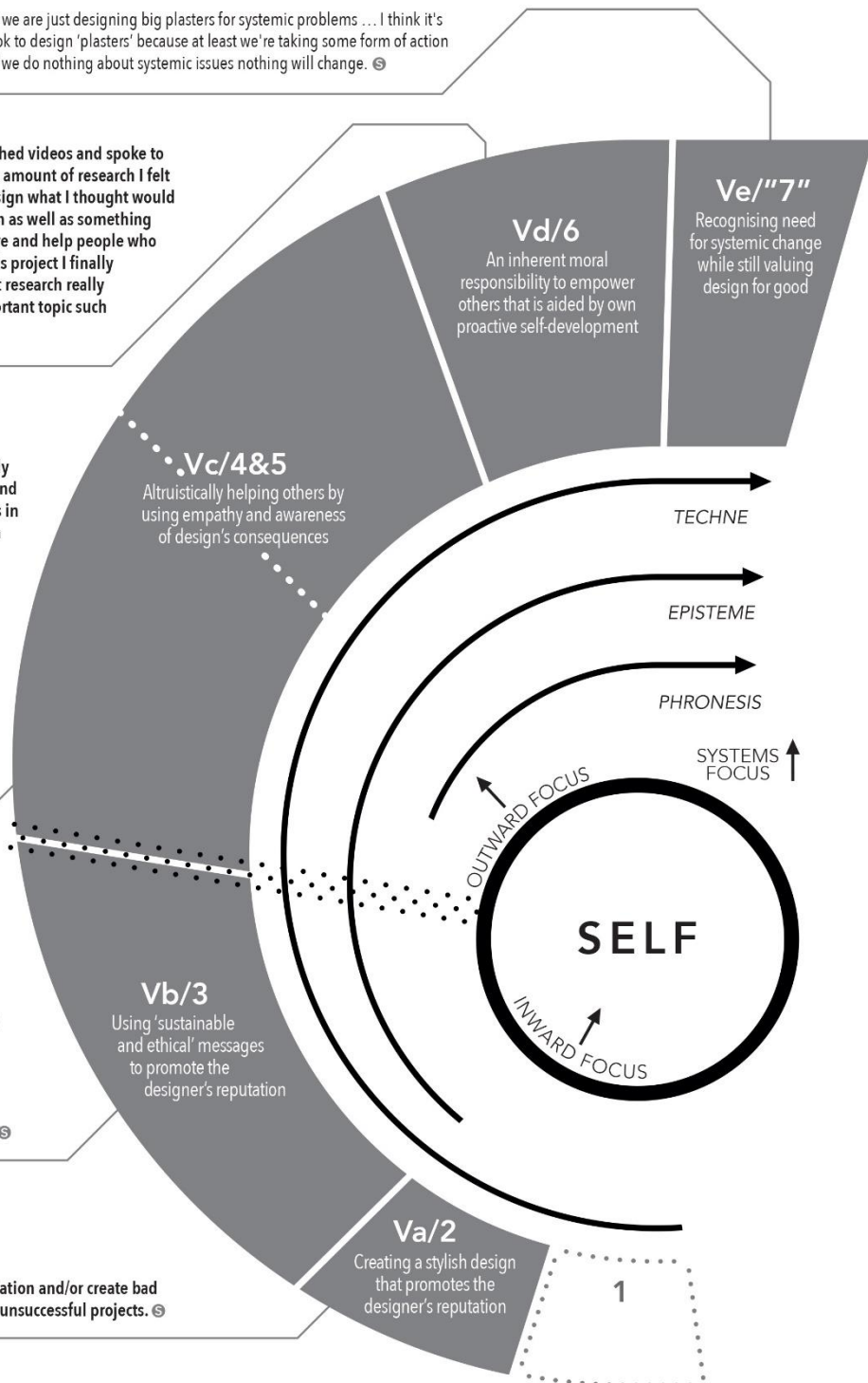
### **Vb/3**

Bad reputation for not taking the topic seriously and respecting the illness. ⑤

You could offend people quite easily if you say the wrong thing or if you assume something about it. ⑤

### **Va/2**

You could earn a bad reputation and/or create bad habits which could lead to unsuccessful projects. ⑤



Key: **Bold** = year 3    Regular = year 2    *Italic* = year 1    ③ = Blog    ⑤ = Survey

Figure 3. Outcome space of variations of perception of design-for-good in Project X 2019

The following year, PX2019's findings (Fig.3), showed that perceptions had shifted towards an outwardly focused ethic of care. The majority of students ( $n=23$ ) participated in both interventions, thus, duration of exposure to a DfGP was an important factor in expanding perception of BTS. Acquisition of practical skills (*techne*) were re-seen as a *means* to achieve the ends of socially responsible design (*phronesis*). Students also reported finding value in BTS through the meaningful mental health topic, which was easily related to supporting others. A seventh variation emerged showing that some now also perceived the need for systemic change in design.

Overall, the interventions demonstrated that a DfGP can expand perception of design's purpose as a profession of care.

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Please send to [heprogsadmin@kent.ac.uk](mailto:heprogsadmin@kent.ac.uk) by 1 June 2020.