Critical memory of three school debates (*)

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1996

Notes for a chronicle of the everyday First debate

A perception of isolation

We have often heard that schools which give both professional and intellectual education are too shut in on themselves, on their own resources and programmes. And we have heard this as an expression of concern in regard to the social, cultural, and technical isolation that this can mean for the students. If the school’s task is to respond to the will of helping to train them for their personal development in a later profession, it is to be hoped that someone is uneasy about the division between contents and study habits and what is characterised as true professional reality.

But professional-intellectual education is necessarily configured as a sort of closure. It is precisely this isolation which allows taking up education as a priority objective: it allows independence from other ends operating in professional practice which often requires a previous guaranteed training. Professional development already makes enough efforts towards a capacity to give an answer to circumstantial and very specific needs, and cannot waste time learning more elementary or extensive themes.

Thus, there is no place for hybrid reflections or subterfuge to escape from pedagogic responsibility. Limiting a teaching area to its own ends, counterpoised to an exterior with other interests, is what makes a more complete development of abilities or attitudes in education possible. As
a special demarcation, separate from the continuous current of the present, it also makes us believe in the possibility of aspiring to a break between present and future; it makes us believe that the later incorporation of students into the professional field, after their education, is an event constituting something which ought to be more than a mere determination of the past. If we are not to fall into sticky sentimentality, closure of a school gives us a further opportunity to hope that those who had been students will possess their own individual or professional-intellectual personalities.

The area of motivation and rules of personal and assigned relations which makes up the everyday exercise of the members of the school, especially the students, tends to find a meaning which belongs to the work generated there; this is the experience of closure confirmed by each student at the end of schooling. Even in the case of schools which show a non frivolous delight in progress, students finishing their studies soon learn that neither a direct transferral of learned habits, nor the meaning linked to them till then, is appropriate in a new professional situation in which they must always start a new in many senses.

However, the concern about isolation is clearly present in many areas of professional education. Without going into the reasons for having and showing this unease, which surely come from other, non-pedagogical, determinants, it is easy to show how, in all cases, real anxiety is spent on counteracting the trend towards closure which must essentially make up each school.

Thus, for example, as an ever positive fact and with no pedagogical criticism, we see that in many school areas there is more promotion of teachers closely linked to the profession than of other teaching experts on more specific assignments. We see that, with little reflection, more attention is given to those activities which can show a slight contact with current professional and intellectual activities than others which need to be constantly and critically reformulated and brought up to date in pedagogical and professional activities. In a strange adulteration of the way of understanding professional activity, we also see how, in cases of nonbusiness technical education, we imagine that it is always more useful to give management assignments than terminology and re-
flection on the activity, as if all intellectual professions were not in themselves a point of view from which a useful specific review of management needs and techniques is possible. We also see that as a consequence of this, exercises on productive effectiveness simulation are proposed, as if the fact of production were governed by laws as determined for ever as those that regulate the balance of a bicycle. And we see all this with a protective and scornful inflexion of the unlucky students who will have to work in that house of horrors which represents competition.

A privileged moment
But even if it is necessary, a school of professional-intellectual education cannot achieve isolation. There is a privileged moment when a link to the outside is established effectively and specifically for each student. It is a period which does not contradict the essential setting-up of insuperable limits which lasts as a constant reference during the whole of education: they are the first teachings initiating school activity. Even more especially, those which, at the beginning, specifically promote the first thematic reflection on the profession, from the beginning, external, purpose of each student.

The aim of a school for an intellectual profession is to promote these first expectations, making up a human and technical environment which must allow each individual to find a place after years of learning, at a level from which it will be possible to begin the specific education needed for developing the profession. The first moments of school education are ideal for students to begin a free though systematic reflection on their first intentions. A self education on criteria for orienting themselves as to other, equally essential, teaching, although more circumscribed to technical considerations. These first moments are what make opening constant communication channels with the studentperson possible, that is, with the current, both external and internal, of those who must accede to the professional environment. This is a real contact with the outside and depends no more on the present than the dependence already existing within each student. The possibility of a future which the school creates thanks to its closure is not altered by
this opening by more than the outside which each student unquestio-
nably contributes in all ways. And it promotes it, as it promotes critical
individual treatment of a constant reformulation of this first intention
for professionalization.
Taking responsibility for promoting this critical systematic self reflec-
tion, along with the professors in the first courses, is, without a doubt,
a privilege. In this sense, the pedagogic intensity reaches a higher level
if the techniques taught are explicitly those of the critical study of the
assignment on reflection on the professional process itself. While in mo-
re instrumental education, where this concern is also present, it is not
always useful to explicitly open the link to students’ expectations, in
education in which preprofessional critical reflection is specific and
essential has a clear and direct reality of current reflection for students
who have just enrolled. Their first purposes and considerations in regard
to the profession are the matter from which to work on education. In
the same way as in other areas of education such as drawing or calcu-
lus, we begin from students’ aptitudes, and forming their critical intel-
lectual reflection also begins from this first situation; whatever is spe-
cial about these assignments is the best will offering its themes to link
up more directly with the students’ will for the future.

A register of events

The memory which contains this pedagogic conviction does not come
only from professional experience and the need to build its coherent
existence. It also comes, among other practices, from a link to the Eli-
sava School, which began in 1983. It is also charged with other conside-
rations which fill it with contents and orient it towards the current si-
tuation.
In fact, in 1983 the methodological paradigm, which had insinuated so
many pedagogic options, was beginning to show its limits in the rules
and regulations excesses it applied on the process of design. At the be-


less necessary. It was only a suggestion of mere methodological techniques, that is, specific procedures legitimated by very limited argument, which could also be applied in specialised education. But the mirage of safety and the power of the rules had forced payment of the tolls implicit in formal generalisation. Gradually, they had spread their environment till they arrived at the complete management of the process. If we read the small print on some of the more radical methodologic treatises, the design profession itself became just an application of a predetermined procedure. This fact provoked not only a legitimate discomfort in many designers, but also the undetermined themes of the profession, that is, a generalisation of the professional limits of design itself. The way was thus open for intervention by other theoretic considerations.

As was surely to be expected, the new option had to upset the proposals of theory. From the reflection on the process, we went to determination of the projected object; we were entering semioticism. But this proposal for analysis also found an effective possibility in other causes, and the need for contrast was not the only motive intervening. In fact, the crisis in industrial and construction production due to high financial costs which affected final product prices brought about an assimilation of design in the professional field in a specialty which seemed to offer an appearance of controlling costs: graphic design. It seemed as if in the field of image, design profession functions were easier to legitimate. The results of a receding material technology returned specialised industrial design to the aura of manual implementation, or legitimated it by scenario proposals against the cultural poverty financial functionality had achieved. In the case of interior design, construction techniques by lineal metre from architectural construction contributed mediocre finishes which had to be excused with the same arguments of a need for change appearing on publicity billboards, the ephemeral mystery of photogenic youth. Specialisations such as corporate image design, older than is usually believed, unblushingly discovered the field of their real development in arguments on seduction and appearance.

But semiotics is not only finding miraculous images. It also offers a theoretic environment which was incorporated into teaching. It is here where it also clearly offered a proof of its application limits. It is true that students require effective instruments for their future, but they must also be apt for overcoming the level of mere instruments and fi-
lling results obtained in school exercises themselves with content, while making current sense. Because of this, methodologism soon proved to be uncomfortable due to its rules and regulations and that semiotic trend showed its application limits when it proved to be just an analytic tool, incapable of offering any of the plausible meaningful models. Approximately four years ago, students’ expectations began to contribute a wish to come closer to an evaluation of the synthesis of their projects and exercises. They not only need to assure their technical aptitudes (they could even do so with minor techniques) but also, and above all, the validity of the results of their future professional activity, as they see it today, beyond cinema stars.

Surely, new fields are being prepared from different areas for a new paradigm which will not again oblige design to beg for charity in the field of production. Ethical technology is an example of this. However, it is not yet defined and it seems too elementary to cover the always radical requirements of design. And its applicability cannot yet offer new ways which are not normative or limiting.

Perhaps what is happening is that no new paradigm can now be born without a conscience of the role it is playing. If plastic functionalism of the 50’s, creationism of the 60’s, later methodologism, and latest semioticism are already experiences of the past, new proposals should make us forget this conscience of temporary usefulness, should reformulate a real new possibility for the future. Perhaps this is no longer possible, we know its tricks too well. Let’s ask today’s students, and thus take advantage of the real door which connects the school to the outside.

*Reflections for a narrative from the institution*

Second debate

A will to unity

The constitutive closure of a professional school is not only the result of experience or pedagogic requirements. It is also the consequence of a will to build the future of the social and cultural entity itself that the school represents; of having to take responsibility for a specific option of professional continuity.
Wishing to understand the past and present of a professional school means wishing to understand a will towards a collective and individual future. In this case, it is the requirement for the understanding of a human environment dedicated, due to the sense of its own existence, to making up a future framework for the profession in the present. Anything else would not be an understanding of the school but rather a mere abstraction of the institution, surely to make some past merit valued today, or perhaps to play with the rarity of an anecdote, or immolate the witness for some secret profit.

That this unifying action of the future be the coherence which hopes to find some reference to a professional school does not mean, however, that it is always easy or even possible. The affirmation of the school as an environment of the future is no tautology; it depends not only on the formal definition of professional school but also on the present framework in which it is formulated. On the present and also on the future which, as we have seen, are already integrated by means of the students in their everyday development. Being responsible for carrying out an option does not establish its effective possibility. It is not the analysis of a will or of the concept itself of the school that discovers the specificity of the future determination of the profession. On the contrary, we must construct contents to be represented with it. In other, more determinant, words: the constitutive, paideic, educational character of all institutional teaching which, as we have noted, allows its real opening, obliges us to effectively determine students' future capacities in which essential freedom must be present, individually and collectively, to make of the profession something really present in history.

The expression effective determination of future freedom has in itself enough contradiction to make the constant arduous construction of a synthesis the only possibility which, as is to be expected, will not always work out with the radiant colours of self-understanding coherence.

Attending to requirements
Theoretic and critical work is essential to understand the past of a school; also for its everyday development, because the meaning of all work carried out cannot be predetermined. The school requires constant review and reforming to avoid stagnation in the sense that it has the task of giving introductory instruments. The development of a pro-
fessional-intellectual school such as the Elisava school requires an attitude of always attending to needs, which carries with it the responsibility for pedagogic and management work carried out, fix them and listen to them, without affliction and also without negligence.

A requirement which is neither normative nor formal, but rather vigilant in its concretion, consequence of a will to integrating unity when it is carried out. Insistently, it requires review and reforming of the axiom that determines the contents which make up the school. If in itself the idea of school does not in a constant way represent any real effective stability, we must then constantly establish base criteria for representing its reality. We must consciously construct base criteria for the school and debate its effectiveness everyday. But this is hardly ever possible. The everyday development of school activities, educational or managerial, carries with it in its rush the mirage of unquestioned coherence which makes the need for reflection appear as an anachronic desire caused by particular needs which do not seem to have anything to do with the provable task being carried out. Current management always needs to place all reflections on criteria sustaining it beyond its limits, beyond the order of its actual correlations, as if this reflection went the other way because it goes more slowly. Due to the rush of the race, everything is coherent, but other things seem to be stopped, immobile, that is to say that the future appears as stagnant as the present, everything is always the same, and history is just anecdotes in an invariable process.

The only possibility for each school’s continuity is constant revindication, theoretic and critical reflection, like bothersome weather, so that it is not easy to think that forming part of it is, in itself, a proof of effectiveness. Once more, the sense of the school, even the institutional one, can only come from its interior determination and not the degree of business in its exterior situation.

Experience of complexity

What is always left of educational needs in the everyday school experience is a feeling of something incomplete. In all schools with professional-intellectual content, both comments on general management made by those directly linked to pedagogic work and the characterisation of this link made by those dedicated to general management is a
mutual and similar reproach of not considering the whole of requirements believed essential by each of those responsible.
Thus, we see how often, with few possibilities of configuring another framework for debate, pedagogic work declares erroneous procedures carried out by the management sector because of the unity of processes. Wrong, arbitrary, due to the supposed lack of attention to the whole of requirements experienced when working with students.
We also see how characterisations managing pedagogic work implicitly reproach the error of not placing themselves in a classification made up of the whole, in the effort of putting in order the overall sense of the institution. Of not attending to the whole of general considerations, of not concerning themselves with more than solving partial problems.
But the true unity of a school for professional-intellectual education is only achievable as a complexity which cannot be put into order. The experience of incompleteness comes from the fact of realising that we are deep in a system, that is to say, a structure of interactive elements, aspects which are mutually defined according to their relations. But this does not prove the possibility of putting into order or classifying an effective explanation of the whole. All proposals for understanding only signal the existence of the general system, bringing about an unsolvable discomfort because of the operative knowledge which ought to orient tasks to be carried out.

For a shared orientation of sense: a design option.
Third debate

Memory of a viability analogy
Often, the act of designing wishes to forget that it is based on a bet. Surely, intending to omit the fact of wishing to believe, with all possible radicalism, in what is proposed as the viability of the profession. But it is also rather a hurried detachment of the management of procedures begun which paves the road to critical return. With the same mistrust as we use to listen to a vainly cryptic expression, with the need for useful transparency, we doubt our own self-criticism as if it were a captious opacity or a nihilist stubbornness.
But criticism does not lie in constantly doubting the generating capacity of presuppositions for viability, it just remembers that they are no more than that, presuppositions, and tries to establish their limits so they do not become mirages. In fact, the bet is precisely this will to critical action, and not each of the proposals the designer tries to make real. It is maintaining the capacity to suggest the possibilities of each proposal. It is the contrary of opacity or nihilism, it is the potential for permanence in each road, through debate on specific and effective project management.

Perhaps this desire to forget that the act of design has takes many different forms whose existing varieties should be investigated. One of them, quite usual, is also established in the confusion between the idea of complexity and that of system. All products resulting from a design process should be a system, that is to say, a unity of interacting aspects, characteristics which mutually self-determine. But design unity returns us to an infinite number of considerations, and makes it up as a complex. Not all systems are complex; however, designed artefacts are always complex because of non-determinable interactions which make up any commission. And not only resulting artefacts, but also the action itself of designing is determined, therefore, as a complexity to be always newly reformulated in each case.

This fact of always making up a complex environment finds an ideal development field in the school. In fact, as we have seen, the nature of a professional-intellectual education school determined as a constant tension for the coherence of its execution, appears analogically schematised as a complexity, in the same way as design. This is the basis which allows that formulation of a subject proper to design, the cultural valence of relations between artefacts and human beings, can find a way in school socialising. Design schools have not wished to be a mere transmitting of established abilities or forming environments of fixed reality. School work has been considered precisely as design work, inasmuch as the School allows carrying out any other bet on design and on the contrary, cannot fall, because of the nature of schools, into a false ordering of complexity. The will to openness of a design school is
not a mere pedagogic or institutional consideration, and hence the debate with its impossibility is even more tense.

Thus, the traditional case of the Bauhaus has been a constant example for many design schools, in spite of the long years and the lamentable stylistic interpretations currently made of this school. If we do not only keep in mind a restrictive vision of what design can be, we can realise that Gropius’ expression «the Bauhaus students will be able to exercise a decisive influence on current artisan and industrial production». ¹ contains a viability for design action itself by believing that what is done at school has consequences on the makeup of both the action of the project and, indirectly, on the quality of the artefacts. Teaching and learning design is doing design, it is one of its viabilities. This makes us believe that this authentic viability is the formal similarity between the tension which makes up the school and the critical tension of artefact projecting-designing itself. Designers find, at design school, a way for the intellectual requirements of the profession; but not because of the fact of being able to verbally link to a social relation of the specific state of their own reflections towards designing-projecting, but because they find an analogy between the problem of the sense of the school and design itself.

Hence efforts made by Walter Gropius himself at the beginning of the school to respect tension between workshop professors’ technologism and the special cultural proposals of the first course by J. Itten.

In the same text as before, we can read:

«Recently, professor Itten has proposed the matter of deciding whether to present individual work totally opposed to the economic world or rather look for contact with industry; I believe that the great unresolved question lies in this problem. I look for unity in the combination, not in the separation of these life-forms.» ¹

A text that consciously follows the same concept structure as the beginning of the foundational article «The worker’s share of art». by W. Morris:
«The worker’s share of art»

«I can imagine some of our comrades smiling bitterly at the above title, and wondering what a Socialist journal can have to do with art; so I begin by saying that I understand only too thoroughly how 'unpractical' the subject is while the present system of capital and wages last. Indeed that is my text»  

If, as we have seen, all professional-intellectual schools always have the problem of what sense they make, if a school is not to be a hiding-place for pusillanimous individuals but requires betting on its concrete and general possibilities, then the school can be built as a meaning for design itself. The appearance of ingenuity in Gropius' expression proves the presence in his words and exertions of the radical bet which makes up design.

Reflection on action from an intentional attitude

Several options have been proposed for effectively carrying out design; those of the late fifties and earlier have proved their limitations, one after another. But they have left design itself with a capacity, instruments, and reflective tension which must be rebuilt so as to definitely keep not so much the techniques, but rather the sense of initial suggestion and its crisis; those that awoke in the first moments and that showed their limitations. If it is true that designers cannot frantically demand more and more exciting theories, if we can no longer believe in them, then we can investigate, on the other hand, results of experiences we have carried out.

And as subjects for teaching. We ought to review efforts carried out in respect to this. We could mention just two relatively recent cases to help us in this review. Although we are not sure of a correct selection, nor do we intend to exhaust the contents presented in them, we will take them as examples.

We mean the pedagogical proposals by Donald. A. Schön (1987) 3 and the reflection on principles ruling thought construction strategies by Daniel C. Dennett (1987). 4

Schön proposes an observational investigation into processes of educational relations between student and tutor’ at the moment of learning project procedures. He means to discover, through its description, the
process of reflecting on the action consisting in proposing answers and decisions to design problems. Contrary to a pedagogic investigation based on educational objectives, Schön bares the need for learning to be basically a self-recognition of processes in project action. From the confirmation that occasionally even in the most specific technical-professional activities we detect the presence of special <<problem situations>> (such as unique cases, diagnostic uncertainty, or value conflicts), he proves that the true education for solving them is the knowledge of cognitive and decisory processes of projecters themselves. Even in other situations which can be considered modelled by technique, they are in fact practicable by self-will in these reflection processes.

«The artistry of a practitioner like Quist hinges on the range and variety of the repertoire that he brings to unfamiliar situations. Because he is able to make sense of their uniqueness, he need not reduce them to instances of standard categories. Moreover, each new experience of reflection-in-action enriches his repertoire.»


Reflection on action must also be reflection on the conflicts on general principles between student and tutor. Thus reflection must also be on the mutual personal relation and, if necessary, also with other students and the whole group.

What is interesting about Schön’s proposal is how he systemises the whole theme. It is evident that personal experience on this subject is obvious to all school members. What is not so clear is that the need be admitted for knowledge of one’s own processes in the act of projecting. Neither is the possibility of systematically ordering them with psychological investigations of individual or collective behaviour of those who intervene in education. In fact, we have evidence, as Schön also expresses, that there is usually a rejection towards openly considering self-reflection on our own processes. A rejection which is produced from two tendencies to flee from the commitment of education: either towards fixing on the mystery of inspiration which must not be revealed, or towards the formal rules of objectivist and methodologist traps.

There is, however, a reason to review Schön’s proposal, which he himself does not point out as a problem:
«The development of a reflective practicum can join with new forms of research on practice, and education for it, to take on a momentum — even a contagion— of its own.»

The experience of design knows all too well these also mysterious contagions and knows they mean weakening the initial suggestion because they simplify it and vulgarise it among existing motivations till it is eliminated. The opportunity for pedagogic proposals must be built from keeping the meaningful tension which analogically joins school and design. Students, like designers in the act of projecting, need to reflect on the process, not only to control an ability, but also because they themselves have constituted a paradigm of possibility for design. Both keep up the tension of the process thanks to reflection on the object which is determined during the development and intellectual and technical responsibility of the commission or exercise. When individual cases, diagnostic uncertainties or value conflicts are detected, then we understand that the direct presence of their reality cannot be scorned with a distant glance while turning them into phenomenons. Complexity is real, that is to say, it implicates.

In this sense, Dennett’s proposal seems to wish to answer implication. From approaches difficult to sum up and which correspond more to a philosophy of action by determined objectives, he indicates the essential intentional attitude for carrying out any intellectual purpose. Against the ruling principle which believes that neutrality is the formal origin necessary for all processes of understanding, forcing it to base itself on axioms, Dennett proposes a formula that intellectual effectiveness cannot set out if it does not do so from a determining intention. An intention specifiable in operative tactics:

«(…) in such an unruly arena of thought, [the philosophy] tactical considerations play an unusually important role. These tactical considerations often masquerade, however, as first principles.»

Treating complexities and the experience of problems in selecting exercises for the meaning they should have for students seems to confirm this view. In fact, a complexity can only be treated as an option for a
point of view, registered as operative and meaningful, which has to allow classification and hierarchization of themes to be considered. Without meaning to be exhaustive about this proposal, what we have exposed till now seems to have forgotten that the designer is more conscious of the limits to what is essentially desired. The experience of design is much more intelligent about the tension between the two extremes of the process itself, between principles and aims. It knows that the design process does not move because it has the energy of coherence, it knows that the indetermination of final objectives does not make it lose the intensity of initial motivations, that these (like a push from behind and not like a carrot in front) cannot be reduced to objectives technifiable by tactics. That the conscience of always depending on something does not produce a loss of the strength of decisions, that it does not lead to unrelieved relativism, that in itself it is a consequence of the unstoppable gesture of a double reflective retreat, of the fact of reflecting on reflection itself. And we cannot now renounce the gesture of radical reflective retreat, surely civilising, by simple decision, because this decision itself would surely also come from this gesture.

Critique of unrenounceable meaning

Design’s bet is unrenounceable and, at the same time, impossible, and it also becomes reality at School because of this. Professional-intellectual education already suffered it itself, and thus chose it as a functional friend and wore it out with backsliding. This is its meaning. If we ask for a witness, a memory, a recollection, what can be expressed if not a constant unease that affirms it but appreciates it? What can be expressed, in spite of everything, if not the frantic enjoyment of the <<more and more., but the yes, but no.? Still another option, perhaps the last, before ending up with only education in techniques such as the old market analysis or CAD instruments, before counting only on a basic non-problematic education, barren because of this. Still one bet while ecodesign, remembering the functional-organic past, does not give up in the difficult search for the bases of a proposal which is not degradable by objectual rules.
It is the option for that which, perhaps too lightly, could be called *aesthetics in design*. It does not seem to be a new proposal of specific viability, but rather an inclusion of this same «yes, but no» testimony, of a conscious and overall critical attitude, as a subject matter for integration into teachings themselves. Building and training a continuity of reflection in each student towards initial expectations, towards the School's real exterior, past and future; taking advantage of the privileged moment and turning all moments into privilege, *attending to requirements* by means of *reflection in action from intentional attitude*; all because the *perception of isolation*, the *will to unity* and *the memory of an analogy for viability* achieve meaning with the specific *register of events* and the *experience of complexity*, that is to say, *the critique of unrenonciable meaning*.

Or is it more worthwhile letting the automatism of each passing fad take root, of that which we have heard ...

«Schüler, die durch das Bauhaus hindurch gegangen sind, werden mit dem Können, das sie dort erworben haben, in der Lage sein, entscheidenden Einfluß auf bestehende handwerkliche [Betriebe] und industrielle Werke zu nehmen, wenn sie nur den Entschluß fassen, in diese hinein zu gehen und aus ihnen heraus zu wirken.»
(Pp. 63)

«Meister Itten stellte neulich unter uns die Forderung, man müsse sich entscheiden, entweder in vollkommenem Gegensatz zur wirtschaftlichen Außenwelt individuelle Einzelarbeit zuleisten, oder die Fühlung mit der Industrie zu suchen, Ich glaube, daß in dieser Fragenstellung das große “X” liegt, das der Lösung bedarf. Um es gleich vorauszuschicken: Ich suche die Einheit in der Verbindung, nicht in der Trennung dieser Lebensformen»
(Pp. 62)

(These English translations are from the partial spanish version)

