Ethics in design and issues of social class: reflecting on the learning unit: Design and the Construction of Class Distinction

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Abstract

The second year Design Studies learning unit "Design and the Construction of Class Distinction" (BA Communication Design, Industrial Design, University of Johannesburg) introduces students to definitions of social class in terms of capitalism (Olin-Wright 2008, Goldthorpe 1980, Crompton 1998, 2003) as well as to Bourdieusian concepts of habitus, field and capital (Bourdieu 1989; Weininger 2005, Bennett, et al 2010; Jenkins 2003; Grenfell 2003). In this unit, students are asked to relate these concepts to taste, style and design through individual essay writing and, emerging from this, a small-scale, empirical research project related to their own cultural environment as students in Johannesburg. It prompts students to raise powerful questions about the ethics of design in capitalist societies and engage in complex and rich conversations about consumption in post-apartheid South Africa. The strong sociological focus on social class and inequality seemed to provide a potent catalyst for this interrogation. By drawing on the critical pedagogies of Mclaren & Scatamburlo (2004), Dolby (2001), Willis (1999), Apple (2015) and the praxis of Neville Alexander (2013) I present a case for sociologically reflexive (Wacquant 1992) design theory linking this to the structure of the learning unit. I show that explorations of social class allowed design students to ask relevant and difficult ethical questions about their profession and its transformational agenda.

Keywords: Capitalism, social class and distinction, taste, Bourdieu's reflexive sociology, design theory, critical pedagogy, neo-Marxist class analysis

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Class-based analysis and the fashioning of identity in post-apartheid South Africa

How are the self-fashionings of South African youth constructed when so much identity work is configured, both through the "historical time" of apartheid and across the global space of popular, global consumer culture (Dolby 2001, pp.7-8)? In terms of the legacy of the "racial capitalism" of apartheid (Alexander 2013, pp. 115-131) race and class may continue to structure, in potent ways, the experience of young people in South Africa.

As the reality of inequality and poverty expresses itself visibly and spectacularly through various forms of real and "symbolic violence" enacted, spontaneously on the ground (von Holdt 2013, pp.46-50) - in phenomena such as xenophobia, service delivery protests, intermittent wildcat strikes, the burning of municipal property, the defacement of historical statuary – young, marginalised people may be developing new frameworks to make sense of their lived experiences. How are students doing this? What theories do they bring to bear on their experience and what theoretical frameworks are they exposed to in their formal education that allows them to develop critical professional, political and civic agency? These are difficult issues and demand that educators, including design educators, understand, in sophisticated ways, the *habitus* of their students.

But what may this entail and how is this important for the education of designers? It may be argued that conventional class analysis, as a 'universal' model for understanding the modern world (Wright Mills 1962), is still very much relevant to the task of understanding the post-apartheid, South African youth habitus. However, at this historical juncture, are purely economistic readings (Apple 2015) of

the social enough to producing ethical consciousness in the youth? In her analysis of the scholarship of political economy in post-apartheid South African scholarship, Narunksy-Laden (2010, p.4) asserts that this is no longer the case because "the impact of non-economic socio-cultural factors has received insufficient attention in South African socially-minded scholarship". The failure to understand the cultural economy of domination means that, as educators, we may lose touch with young people whose identities are increasingly defined and disturbed by consumer culture. Although traditional, class-based readings still remain indispensable in understanding the economic basis of domination and inequality in the developed world globally and in the 21st century (Piketty & Goldhammer 2014) does it have explanatory power in a 21st century, post-apartheid, South African context.?

Neo-Marxist theory describes, in novel ways how various forms of social power are "intertwining" (Weininger 2005, p.113) in youth practices. Class identity may now be working in concert with a range of issues in the everyday life of young South Africans operating on multiple registers. This may be especially true with regard to self-fashioning. Combining traditional production-oriented with consumption-oriented approaches (Crompton 2003, 2008) to class analysis and identity analysis may offer young people powerful new ways of being in the world. However, this view is not without criticism. Education critics such as Mclaren and Scatamburlo (2004, p.58) have criticised these non-economic, 'postmodern' and hybrid approaches as overly "culturalist". As such, they draw political energy away from combatting what are primarily struggles for economic power and rights to claim the surplus for the commons (Harvey 2012, p.85) that should be fought exclusively in the political arena. With their emphasis on the symbolic in identity construction, culturalist approaches are criticised on the basis that they forget that working classness is experienced primarily as a lived, bodily suffering (Mclaren and Scatamburlo 2004, p.58). This may be obfuscated by a shallow, middle-class identity politics. An over-determination of on the cultural aspects of intersectionality may valorise middle class ideas and in the process marginalise the real, but hidden experiences of working class students that are based on stratification.

What I will be arguing here is that these debates and an overall sociological approach is of special relevance for design students learning in a South African context because self-fashioning and the presentation of identity is key to the formation of their vocational identities and their vocational work. I will further argue that it is precisely because of these tensions that a Bourdieusian approach to class analysis may provide the ethical impetus to intellectualise the identities of young designers.

Design, taste and class distinction

Exploring taste and lifestyle in sociological terms gives students in creative disciplines opportunities to explore issues of social power and self-fashioning. The focus on taste and lifestyle in the unit "Design and the Construction of Class Distinction" provided an immediate social entry point (Fairclough 2001, p.129) for students. Taste allowed them to critically examine the intersections of race, class and gender in identity work in their everyday experience. Taste is an important, but undervalued concept in both design theory and design practice. Designers require a strong understanding of it in their day-to-day work as "cultural intermediaries" whose work, under neoliberal capitalism, entails commodifying identities. As "symbolic production", taste is central to the work of "cultural intermediaries", such as designers, curators, marketers, advertisers. An understanding of taste is "crucial for contemporary commodification to occur" (Negus 2002, p.504). Cultural intermediaries use their understanding of taste to commodify products for identity work on the part of creative consumers (Willis 1999, p.140). As cultural intermediaries, designers "shape both use values and exchange values, and seek to manage how these values are connected with people's lives, through the construction of markets linking a product to a potential consumer by seeking to forge a sense of identification" (Negus 2002, p.504). These are reasons why class-based analysis may be intellectually attractive to design students. It can give insight into the shifts in professional identity of creatives under, entrepreneurial, cognitive capitalism (McRobbie 2011), illuminate the performative and precarious work identities demanded by in corporate culture (Sennett 2007, du

Gay 2006) and ultimately show that the figure of the designer is enmeshed in the capitalist search for accumulation and profit.

Bourdieu's concept of *habitus* reflects a complex dialectical relationship that exists under capitalism between the positional aspects of class and the dispositional, 'meaning' aspects of identity. His oeuvre shows that the relationship between class position and identity formation is an intricate one. His project really means complexifying our understanding of class in terms of everyday practices and importantly in terms of *consumption*. The concept of taste, to which Bourdieu has devoted a major study- Distinction (Bourdieu & Nice 1989)- demonstrates the how *the consumerist* lifestyle spaces have become as important as traditional work and labour in defining domination. Earlier in his career, Bourdieu developed a conceptual framework of great fecundity to demonstrate how, within patriarchal societies, domination has both an economic and symbolic dimension and is linked to both production and consumption. His concepts of *species of capital* - educational, cultural, technical, and symbolic capital (Thwaits 2002) – linked to field and social space, habitus, legitimacy and legitimate culture demonstrate how social power is also invested consumption as identity formation. Applied across multiple institutional fields including higher education, the visual arts, literature, museums, photographic practices, politics, television, journalism Bourdieu employed this conceptual framework of in combination with statistical empirical techniques in order to explain the symbolic and practical dimensions of domination in everyday life. Some commentators have criticised Bourdieu's concepts as perhaps reductive in terms of their theoretical power in understanding a contemporary context (Bennett et al 2010; Buroway 2013, p.176) but also comment that it is because of this that they are good for thinking.

But good for thinking what? If it is important for designers to understand, in an instrumental, 'bread-and-butter' sense that an understanding of lifestyle, habitus and taste is important if they are to succeed as "cultural intermediaries" this is not enough for them to become *critical designers*. In a local South African context where identity is more than ever, not just a matter of lifestyle but is marked by severe forms of racial discrimination and class domination (as they are in situations of scarcity) – exploitation, ageism, sexism, racism, classism, xenophobia, language and other forms of prejudice - is it not enough for designers to simply exploit their knowledge of class and intersectionality to manipulate consumer behavior? Class-based, Neo-Marxist analytical frameworks return students to the capitalist "mechanisms of inequality" (Olin-Wright 2008, p.336) that support disparate lifestyle spaces and consumption rituals. By combining Bourdieusian approaches with traditional forms of class analysis design students may appreciate the way in which their manipulation of consumer behavior underpins class domination.

Case Study, "Design and the construction of class distinction": reflections

The seven-week learning unit, "Design and the construction of class distinction", is offered as one of four themed units in the Design Studies 2 course (the other three units themes being "design and social responsibility", "national identity", "modernism and utopia"). This is offered to BA Industrial and Communication Design students in their second year of study and was delivered by myself, in collaboration with a highly experienced tutor. The purpose of this unit was presented as follows:

> The unit gives students the opportunity to critically examine how contemporary design products produce class distinctions and class identities. Much of the theory for this unit draws on the work of late sociologist Pierre Bourdieu in particular his theories around aesthetics, taste and lifestyle. The unit introduces students to broad Marxist critiques of consumerism in relation to Bourdieu's major theoretical constructs such as field, habitus, class distinction and capital as they relate to design and cultural production. The unit gives the students the opportunity to explore, through designing a study, how design products shape consumer identities and construct class distinctions.

The unit presented framing lectures and discipline-directed tutorials. The assignment outcomes for the unit were modified to suit the needs of each department. The weekly, two hour, tutorial format gave ample time for intensive and rich interactions between lecturer and students and was flexible

enough to give the lecturer a variety of modes of engagement in the learning process. Students were encouraged to complete readings, reading and writing tasks on a weekly basis in preparation for each tutorial session so that their interactions and discussions would take place within a rich hermeneutic circle.

Given that curriculum at The University of Johannesburg is driven by prescribed, learning outcomes, classroom activities are usually directed toward the completion of standardised assignments in which the demonstration of practical and reflective competence is prioritised. Following this, in the first assignment, individual students were asked to write essays that critically discussed the concept of taste and to argue whether the Bourdieusian concepts of *habitus*, field and capital - as encapsulated in the volume edited by Grenfell (2003) - were useful in defining taste and to explore whether a relationship exists between social class and taste. In their essays, students were encouraged to use illustrative visual examples drawn from their everyday experiences of life in Johannesburg to support their conceptual explorations. These essays were then shared in groups of three to four in order to identify problems. From this the groups embarked on the second part of the assignment where they designed an empirical study about 'taste in Johannesburg', presented as a large-scale, A1 poster.

As I will show later, my facilitation was centered on drawing upon students' lived experiences into theoretical discussions about taste as well as making every effort to relate their experiences to topical and relevant events taking place at the time the unit was delivered. This included official investigations taking place into the police murder of Michael Brown in March 2015 in Ferguson, Missouri, the coverage of the Rhodes Must Fall Movement taking place at the University of Cape Town in the same month, and the xenophobic attacks that took place in inner city Johannesburg in April, 2015.

Insights into the learning process

In what follows, I present highlights from my experience of the first four weeks of the unit, showing the learning tasks and offering brief teacherly commentary on each interaction. The narrative below should give a strong sense of how the activities were scaffolded to build an understanding of theoretical concepts so that students could then develop exploratory positions about social class, race and taste in South Africa through the design of their research projects. In this narrative, I foreground my pedagogical journey in the unit. I conclude this section by providing some examples of the research titles developed by the groups of students in response to the assignment to give a sense of the richness of their responses.

Week 1

Lecture: Consumerism, design

Tutorial: Organise yourselves into groups of three or four for the second part of the unit. Discuss your responses to the following questions that were prepared for the class:

What work do your parents and grandparents do? Is there a relationship between their social position and your aspirations? Do white children have better or worse life chances than black children in South Africa today? What is the difference in experience between attending a public and private high school?

Look at the groups that formed in the class and discuss by what criteria you organised yourselves? What criteria did you use to create your groups? Did race, gender or social class play any role in the self-organisation of the class into groups? What groups do you organise yourselves into in other design classes and other informal social contexts within the university? Discuss your responses in your groups and take a position on whether the groups should be organised differently.

Homework: Is the Rhodes Must Fall campaign strategy in bad taste? Conduct basic desktop research on the history of Cecil John Rhodes on SA History Online and consider this in light of the grievances and demands of the students leading the UCT campaign. Examine the interview between the SABC

morning anchor Eben Jansen and EFF Spokesperson Mbuyiseni Ndlozi, an interview that deals with the protests and defacements taking place at historical monuments around the country in the past three days (SABC news anchor loses cool on EFF's Ndlozi, April 10, 2015). To what extent do the participants in the interview employ taste categories and binaries ('offensive', 'crude', 'vulgar', 'refined') to support their claims in terms of rhetoric? What are the implications of this in terms of the construction of 'taste groups'? Discuss these issues in your groups and report back in next week's class.

Reflections: linking group work to social class, taste and legitimacy

A heated debate ensued about the merits of group work versus individual work in which the themes of cultural resources, *habitus* and "social closure" (Olin-Wright 2008, p.339) were explored. The outcome of the discussion was that the class agreed, democratically, to re-organise the groups to reflect gender demographics in the class. The thinking was that this approach would negate the tendency of 'friendship' cliques to form in the classroom. Black working class students in the class asserted that group work 'was good', or more ethical, because it encouraged the mutual exchange of resources and cultural capitals.

The discussion about the Rhodes Must Fall Movement and Ndlozi/Jansen interview elicited hoots of nervous laughter and dismay. Students lacked the political sophistication and knowledge of current affairs to engage in a serious way in the discussion but succeeded in recognising the extent to which taste categories were employed by both speakers to gain political legitimacy in a context of face-to-face struggle and although the class branded Ndlozi's argument as 'radical' it had greater evidentiary force and logic than that presented by Jansen.

Week 2

Lecture: Class analysis and class schemes

Tutorial: The documentary "Phakati: Soweto's Middling Class" follows the journey of Mosa Phadi, a researcher in the Center for Sociological Research at The University of Johannesburg as she attempts to understand why her respondents, come to define themselves so assertively as "middle-class". Her respondents, Soweto residents from substantially divergent economic backgrounds, include Sabelo Lukhele, a 37 year old tour guide working at JAG who lives in and owns a small house in Pimville, Zone 9; Charles Moloi a 57 year old fridge repairman and jazz aficionado living in his mother's home and supporting his unemployed nephews; Andronica Phephe, a 48 year old, unemployed woman living in Chris Hani squatter camp with her husband, child and grandchild; and the 54 year old Mpho Hilda Mkhene, the owner of two nursing training colleges, and homeowner in Diepsloot extension.

Follow Mosa as she attempts to develop a theory to explain why the respondents identify so strongly as "middle class". Pay close attention to the scene where Mosa introduces Andronica and Mpho and observe the tension between these two characters as they negotiate their identities and class positions. Identify the gestural, visual and verbal strategies adopted by both characters to create social distance, the arguments they put forward in their definition of 'middle-class-ness'. What legitimisation strategies do each adopt as the meal progresses in terms of appearance, manner, setting, gesture and what role does taste play in this?

Olin-Wright asks the question of what explains the inequalities of life chances and material standards of living. What causal mechanisms do you think contributed to each character's life chances?

Reflections: class distinctions in everyday life.

Students were clearly uncomfortable in discussing the documentary particularly as it related to ethics. After engaging with various class schemes such as those of Goldthorpe (1980), Giddens (1997) and Olin-Wright (1998) many students came to the conclusion that Mpho, despite her superior class status, in fact revealed poor taste and was vulgar in her outright rejection of Andronica's generosity as a host and were startled by this realisation. They remarked on the dominance of Mpho in the

lunch conversation and her patronising attitude toward Andronica, interpellating her as ignorant, as a servant and an inferior. The class began to explore the historical and economic mechanisms that led to the privileges enjoyed by both characters and many rejected the notion that Andronica was individually responsible for her circumstances. The notion of *habitus* was discussed in relation to the way that both characters referred to themselves in their conversation.

Week 3

Lecture: Legitimacy and power

Tutorial: The art and design studio crit.

Watch "Art School Confidential" (2006). The film tells the story of the protagonist, Jerome, an American, small town, working class student who, despite his success as an art student at his parochial high school, struggles to make it 'big' as an artist in college. He is dismayed to find that his peers and professor find his realism and verisimilitude tepid and mock his many attempts to develop and experiment stylistically. Only when Jerome is (falsely) found guilty as the campus serial killer does his work become 'important' and ironically it is only as a convict that his work gains in value.

Comment on the power play in the three art critique scenes in the film. Who has power and why? In terms of Bourdieu's concept of 'species of capital', what capitals do the various participants in the critique possess? How do art works come to gain value in the field of power in which the art students in the film are participating?

What is your experience of critiques held at The Faculty of Art, Design and Architecture. What kind of art and design is deemed legitimate in your department? Why?

Reflections: the unseen class distinctions in the learning space.

The students recognised in their group discussions, that the film reveals in comedic terms that cultural commodities such as artworks, on their own, have no intrinsic value. Rather through complex, situational practices of consecration and negotiation they come to gain value on a market, always in relation to other artworks, and various social actors (other artists, academics, agents, gallerists, critics, buyers, collectors and so on) that play in the field. Artworks act as indices of social power, conferred upon agents through complex consecratory practices. Through a discussion of the film, the students consolidated their understanding of Bourdieusian theories. Interestingly, working class students in some groups spontaneously identified with the character of Jerome confessing that frequently, in studio crits they 'had no idea what was going', felt ignorant about what good design was about, and struggled to understand how value came to be assigned to their work from one lecturer to another. In plenary the students broached the topic of whether taste plays an important or unimportant role in the academic success of a student at The Faculty of Art, Design and Architecture linking notions of cultural capital to ethics.

Week 4

Lecture: Constructing an argument: evidence and warrant in research

Tutorial: At this stage you are in the process of developing a research study based on 'taste in Johannesburg'. You will need to defend your study and think about how claims become valid.

Find sources that show The University of Johannesburg's response to the xenophobic attacks of 2015. What kinds of claims are at work in these documents? Look specifically at the pamphlet advertising The University of Johannesburg's Convocation against xenophobia'. What sorts of claims are favoured over others? How would one go about establishing the validity of these claims?

Carefully consider the SABC footage of the xenophobic attacks in Jeppestown. Whose realities are represented in the coverage –whose perspective? What kinds of assertions are associated with these

perspectives? What assertions are being made about the causes of xenophobia and the way it should be responded to? How would one go about establishing the validity of these assertions?

Reflections: reality constructions

From their comments in this discussion, students were asserting more confidently that value, power and claims were socially constructed. There was an awareness in the session that the ontological stability of phenomena that they were exposed to in the unit required serious interrogation.

This created an opening for the groups to begin exploring the main themes of the unit in the development of their own research studies based on 'taste in Johannesburg'. Below, I outline some of the themes for their proposed studies to give a sense of the rich and situated learning that took place in the unit:

- Taste and status: the experience of bursary girls in prestigious private schools in South Africa.
- Self-representations and representations of transgender in the 21st century Indian society.
- Conspicuous consumption and destruction in Izikhothane status groups.
- The role taste plays in the depiction of feminists in the media.
- The tyranny of taste on social media platforms: the experiences of 20 year-old women on Instagram.
- The role of lecturers' taste in the assessment of student design work.
- Born frees versus the struggle generation in the townships: comparing tastes.
- The legitimisation of local graffiti: a disruptive form of expression?

Conclusions: intellectualising designers' professional identities.

The first four weeks of the unit provided design students with many and diverse opportunities to theorise their experience, to think the real "relationally" (Wacquant & Bourdieu 1992, p.243) to relativise and humanise (Berger 1963) the world by practicing sociological imagination. This provided the ground upon which to generate collaborative research interests and questions. Although the learning seemed to allow students to develop an awareness of the impact of social class on practice and identity and, at the same time developed strong interests and potent inquiries about consumption, it was not enough to develop critical and ethical designerly dispositions. This would require more concerted pedagogical action where students carried out their research proposals in collaboration with other social science disciplines and, based on their findings generated creative, human-centered design solutions. This would require developing a coherent curricular strategy on the part of the Department and Faculty.

My experience of the unit led me to ask if the business-as-usual approach to the education of the designer, as is so prevalent in 'industry-oriented' curricula is sufficient in a context where critical engagement, one attuned to the complexities of the social, is not 'a nice to have' but a moral imperative given the condition of humanity in the 21st century. Putting ethics and critique at the forefront of design education promises to inject a much-needed disruption into the professional identities of designers, one that I believe should redefine design as an intellectual undertaking, a discourse that must be retrieved. If we do take this brave step forward, what analytical frameworks can we provide so that students can articulate the heterogenous social phenomenon that they encounter on an everyday basis in a context as fraught as contemporary South Africa? Is class analysis worthwhile in describing self-fashioning and social power? My experience of teaching the unit provoked me to ask if we need to challenge the notion that designers are merely cultural intermediaries working in the service of capital, and agents of instrumental reason. Can we imagine design students as more than future professionals but as utopian intellectuals and scholars, designing social futures and "imagining alternatives to capitalism" (Hahnel & Olin-Wright 2014) based on their analyses of class-based societies?

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