

## “Dis-course is Killer!” Educating the critically reflective designer

Veronika Kelly,

University of South Australia, Australia  
veronika.kelly@unisa.edu.au

Design practice knowledge is culturally and socially mediated, and historically situated. It is a discourse. Discourse, when conceived as a social practice, is simultaneously a method of understanding and signifying the world, a mode of acting upon the world and other persons, and also a means of transforming these operations (Fairclough, 1993). The significance of conceiving of design as a discursive practice is that it draws attention to the ways in which design knowledge is (re)produced by a particular culture and tied to human conduct. In these terms, a critical approach to analysing discourse as a social practice can be an active force for rethinking ideas about design and what it means to “be” a designer. In the context of design education, such an approach provides a means of enabling students to take up more critically informed positions in their practice. This paper discusses research into the development of a theoretical framework that follows Fairclough, Foucault, and Schön in linking their thought on discourse, culture, and practice respectively as the basis for a critical pedagogy. The framework is discussed in relation to the results of a pilot study with undergraduate communication design students at an Australian university. The paper argues that applying the framework through the integration of theory and practice has recourse to students’ conduct as emerging designers that also presents a potential to transform design practice and its operations.

**Keywords:** Design education; Design practice; Discourse; Culture; Theory

### 1. Introduction

Communication designers play a distinct and purposeful role in shaping meaning and identity in global human communications. In this regard, these designers also take part in the exercise of relations of power: they advocate certain courses of action and attachments to beliefs for human subjects through the designs they are involved in creating. At the same time design practitioners – as the ones engaged with the doing of design – have been criticised by both designers and scholars for lacking a critical stance on the socio-cultural



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/).

effects/conditions and social role of their profession (Dilnot, 2009; Fry, 2009; Margolin, 2006; van Toorn, 1994). A deeper understanding of how one should act (Dilnot, 2015) is essential for design and design pedagogy, to find ways to address a future “to be imagined as an obstacle course with all we have deposited in it” (Fry, 2015, p. 105).

There is ongoing scope in design pedagogy for methods that integrate learning about theory with practising design to interrogate human conduct – including that of the learner’s position as an emerging designer. In this paper I propose that a critical orientation to discourse analysis, a method used in a number of disciplines, is appropriate to inform such an approach. In particular, rather than a view of discourse as language use examined through structural variables, albeit socially situated, my aim is to focus on discourse as a form of social practice (Fairclough, 1993), and how any discourse operates through its own rules (Bacchi & Bonham, 2014).

The first part of the paper introduces the background to the theoretical framework that underpins the approach to design as a discursive practice, following the thought of Fairclough, Foucault, and Schön respectively. I then discuss how the framework has been linked with an experiential learning approach and piloted in an advanced design theory course<sup>1</sup> with undergraduate communication design students. In setting out the results of the pilot study, I describe how the approach has assisted these students to begin to take up more critically informed positions in designing, and how integrating design theory with design practice has helped them to become more critically informed as designers.

## **2. Background to the theoretical framework**

A detailed discussion of my approach to the theoretical framework was published in Kelly, 2015. In this section I set out the key aspects of the framework introduced to students as relevant to design practice by considering the concepts of discourse, culture, and practice and their interrelations.

### *2.1 Design as a discursive practice*

#### THE CONCEPT OF DISCOURSE

The common conception of discourse is that it is socially situated language use. The framework in this study is informed by the thought of Norman Fairclough (1993) to further consider language and its use as “a form of social practice, rather than a purely individual activity or a reflex of situational variables” (p. 63). Language use as a social practice is therefore a discourse; it is “a mode of action, one form in which people may act upon the world and especially upon each other, as well as a mode of representation” (Fairclough, 1993, p. 63). For instance, designers use systems of representation – verbal, visual, textual, physical – when they interact with each other, talk with clients and other people about

---

<sup>1</sup> The term “course” is used here to denote a unit or subject of study that together with other courses comprises an overall degree program. The term “program” here refers to a degree program of study i.e. a Bachelor or Masters degree.

design(ing), and through the designs they create. In these terms, design practice discourse is a form of semiosis and knowledge production as well as a way of acting. Furthermore, discourse contributes to shaping and regulating social relations and structures, at the same time that it is shaped and constrained by them. Design discourse can be conceived then as a means of a (re)production and regulation of design knowledge.

A critical orientation to discourse enables both reflection on language use and draws attention to the ways in which design practice knowledge is constituted by individuals in particular communities e.g. a design practice, an educational design studio. Such an approach can also assist to bring to light the way that everyday design discourse is naturalised, obscuring “the fact that ‘the way things are’ is not inevitable or unchangeable. It both results from particular actions and serves particular interests” (Cameron, 2001, p. 123). In this regard design knowledge can be understood as produced by people in a particular culture (e.g. a design practice) that operates through its own rules, which make a domain of knowledge (such as design) “manifest, nameable and describable” (Foucault, 1972, p. 67). Such rules underpin how design discourse is expressed, constituted, legitimised – in other words, accepted as knowledge. For example, the discourse of function in design (not unexpected despite its modernist legacy) can contribute to hiding a designer’s identity (Krippendorff, 2006) and elide the role of the designer as a social actor.

I want to point out that it was not the purpose of the pilot study to ask or teach design students to “do” critical discourse analysis (CDA).<sup>2</sup> As a method, CDA requires technical and linguistic expertise, is problem-oriented, and seeks to critically investigate social inequality (Wodak & Meyer, 2009, p. 32). Whilst encouraging a critical stance on discourse, the aim of the pilot study was primarily to develop students’ self-understanding of their identity as designers and how this is shaped, through a theory of discourse as a social practice. Discourse was introduced to students as a means of producing design knowledge that shows how knowledge can also be transformed, and the social forces and conditions that shape its operations.

#### THE CONCEPT OF CULTURE

In speaking of culture, it is necessary to explain how it is meant in its context of use. For example, culture can be conceived as a set of practices concerned with making meaning (Hall, 1997), as a set of values, as well as the beliefs, values and attitudes that materialise through artifacts (i.e. material culture) (Prown, 2009). Following the thought of Michel Foucault, culture as a set of values can be further understood as a “hierarchical organisation of values” (Foucault, 2011, p. 179). For him, there are four conditions on which culture can be talked about. Firstly, as “a set of values with a minimum degree of coordination,

---

<sup>2</sup> Discourse Analysis (DA) is a diverse area of study incorporating a variety of approaches and used in several academic disciplines, and is a well-known method of qualitative research. DA developed in linguistics, philosophy and anthropology and as a method of understanding discourse, largely spoken and written. Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) (sometimes termed Critical Linguistics) – grew from critical theory. In CDA, reality is constructed and shaped by a range of social forces. DA is understood as “non-critical” and CDA as “critical” (Fairclough, 1993). CDA approaches emphasise language use in context and follows critical theory in its intent to produce and communicate critical knowledge that permits people to free themselves from forms of control through self-reflection.

subordination and hierarchy.” Secondly, that this set of values is given as universal but also accessible to only few, thereby giving rise to “a mechanism of selection and exclusion”. Thirdly, that “a number of precise and regular forms of conduct are necessary for individuals to reach these values”, and “effort and sacrifice is required”. Lastly, these values are accessible and contingent on “regular techniques and procedures that have been developed, validated, transmitted, and taught, and that are also associated with a whole set of notions, concepts, and theories [...] with a field of knowledge” (2011, p. 179). These are all conditions that speak to a commitment to something, such as what it means to be and act as a professional designer.

In these terms culture, as a prioritisation of values, constitutes and constrains discourse because discourse is a human construct created in and by a particular culture. Individuals understand themselves through specific techniques and practical reasoning borrowed and imported from other discourses, as well as those discourses that are produced and reproduced within the context of one’s own field of knowledge. In other words, design culture is constituted in the way that individuals have learnt to make sense of the world and how they conduct themselves through regular and precise procedures within a knowledge domain (i.e. as designers in design practice). This thinking on culture has bearing on understanding how design discourse is shaped, and also how design “practice” can be understood.

#### THE CONCEPT OF PRACTICE

Donald Schön (1983) points to the ambiguity of the term “practice” in that it can refer to both “performance in a range of professional situations” (e.g. a design practice) and to “preparation for performance” (e.g. the activity of designing) (p. 60).

The first meaning of practice can be understood as the focus and scope of design work, the things designers do and the people they engage with (e.g. clients) in a professional practice, in which their actions and beliefs are shaped by culture and context. Schön refers to the second sense of practice as the “element of repetition” in which “a professional practitioner is a specialist who encounters certain types of situations again and again” (1983, p. 60). This sense of practice – experimental and repeated activity to increase proficiency – is the activity of designing and is also indicative of design culture. It includes the regular procedures and techniques by which designers have come to know and be skilled in their field, and that are particular to a professional practice. This idea of practice is consistent with Fairclough’s view of a practice being:

“On the one hand a relatively permanent way of acting socially which is defined by its position within a structured network of practices, and a domain of social action and interaction which both reproduces structures and has the potential to transform them.” (Fairclough, 2002, p. 122)

Communication design as a practice therefore can be understood as both experimental or repetitive activity linked to increasing proficiency and routine behaviours and procedures in a professional practice. The implication is that how designers act in practice is tied to social

conditions and to culture as a hierarchical organisation of values. Both can be recognised as consistent with Foucault’s third and fourth conditions of culture: “precise and regular forms of conduct” and “regular techniques and procedures that have been developed, validated, transmitted, and taught, and that are also associated with a whole set of notions, concepts, and theories [...] with a field of knowledge” (2011, p. 179). For instance, these forms of conduct, techniques and sets of procedures are layered and socially constituted (Julier, 2006), evident in approaches to designing, processes and ways of working, to operating a business, and the beliefs and attitudes that are developed about what it means to “be” a designer. In this way it is easy to see how ideas of discourse, culture, and practice are interrelated and form a basis for critically reflecting on design practice.

### **3. Design theory and experiential learning**

“Theory explains phenomena and dynamics that exist out there. You might have known instinctively that a piece of graphic design is successful, but theory helps to explain why it is successful – or unsuccessful – and hopefully the theory can also translate into some sort of a guiding strategy as well.” (McCoy, 1995)

The perception of a binary between theory and practice is not uncommon in undergraduate design programs where a studio-based curriculum is emphasised and textual and visual are seen as polarised (Apps & Mamchur, 2009). This scenario can perpetuate a view that history and theory courses are where the academic writing is done (taught in a “classroom” and not practice), and the latter is viewed as the site for modelling professional practice (taught in a “studio”).

Additionally, students are often drawn to design education for its practice-based learning approach and potential job prospects. Although scoping and writing briefs, rationales and research reports is seen as part of design practice learning, this acceptance does not necessarily extend to academic writing. However, envisioning theory learning as designing and as a creative process can be a means of linking the analytical, conceptual and propositional processes of design learning and an active force in rethinking ideas about professional design practice.

Communication design students also develop familiarity with a number of concepts as part of their design education, including those around identity, meaning, (visual) language, culture, function, rhetoric, and metaphor. These have theoretical roots in fields such as cultural studies, linguistics, media studies, and the social and behavioural sciences, and have relevance for visual communication design practitioners and their roles. As McCoy (1995) pointed out two decades ago, theory not only explains why design is or is not successful in achieving its ends, it can help to clarify the forces at work that have recourse to occurrences and relations. At its broadest, to study theory is to explore such concepts as the means to understand a particular phenomenon or relation, the world, and oneself situated in relation to it. At its most resonant an engagement with theory engenders insight and critical reflection, facilitating a change in thinking and shifts in human conduct.

Furthermore, students come to university with skills and knowledge gained from prior learning and everyday life, and with “social and emotional experiences that influence what they value, how they perceive themselves and others” (Ambrose, Bridges, DiPietro, Lovett & Norman, 2010). So when students can bring themselves into the experience, and learning is understood as a process, rather than as outcomes or products, they are more motivated to learn (Ambrose, et al 2010; Kolb & Kolb, 2005). A central proposition of experiential learning theory is that all learning is relearning, a continuous reconstruction of experience, and drawing out students’ values, beliefs, and ideas on a subject for examination, analysis and integration with more refined ideas helps to facilitate learning (Kolb & Kolb, 2005). Integral to drawing out students’ beliefs and ideas is exploring the positions that they take up in design discourse(s), and those that are available to be taken up. As Holloway points out:

“The availability of a position in discourse which is positively valued and which confers power must be accompanied by a mechanism at the level of the psyche which provides the investment to take up this position [...] the investment in these positions is produced in the individual’s history.” (Holloway, 1998, p. 256)

Analysing design as a discursive practice therefore requires an examination of the positions available to be taken up that has recourse to one’s own values and positions. For any student this can be challenging.

#### **4. Method**

The students involved in the study were all in their final year of an undergraduate communication design program at the University of South Australia. The students were introduced to the theoretical framework in the context of an advanced design theory course. The aim of the study was to determine how these students interpreted the theoretical framework in relation to their own design process as part of their regular course work.

The overall course aim was to extend students’ ability to exercise critical thinking and judgement in the integration of the history, theory and social contexts of design through communication design practice. The course as a whole was scheduled over 12 teaching weeks with a two-hour seminar session scheduled each week. The cohort was divided into three classes of roughly 23 students per class for these weekly sessions and scheduled in regular studio teaching spaces. The use of studios was intentional so that students had familiarity with the teaching spaces. The aim was to posit theory learning within the arena of the signature pedagogies common to design, in particular the dialogic and material aspects of studio-based learning and critique, that relate to professional practice (Shreeve, 2012).

There were three assignments in the course, with the second assignment – a critical analysis of the learner’s design process – the focus of this study. In this task students were asked to individually analyse and reflect upon their own design process by analysing design discourses so as to formulate a critical perspective on design practice and its conditions. The objective was to produce a piece of critical design by integrating theory and practice and in so doing reflect on one’s own position and values in designing.

The theoretical framework for the course was introduced over four lectures, and discussed in relation to the topics and readings aligned with the assignments. The duration of the second assignment was nine weeks, and was scheduled for discussion and review for five of the total 12 sessions. The readings for the course as a whole dealt largely with the changing roles of designers and design practice over the past 50 years, drawn from international design journals and seminal design texts. Additionally, for the second assignment a number of "Readings on Method" were provided to students to assist with considering how they might approach identifying, examining, and critiquing discourses in design practice. All readings were available from the outset of the course so students could select those of interest at any point.

The lectures provided a meta-level framework for discussion about the readings and how students could reflect on their own positions – both those that they took up and saw available to be taken up in their design process – to the ways in which an ideological position might be naturalised in discourse. Students were informed that the presentation of their analyses and critical reflections could take any immaterial/material form that they determined most suitable to the communication purpose and ethos, whilst addressing the criteria and learning outcomes. They were asked to demonstrate with clarity, an understanding of design as a social practice, and to identify relevant information and resources (including the readings they considered most pertinent) to critique their own thought and design process so as to independently support decision-making in producing an appropriate piece of critical design. They were also able to contextualise the work in relation to an existing design project they had completed or were currently engaged in. The lecture topics and themes, seminar activities and readings on method are set out in Figure 1.

LECTURE	TOPIC	THEMES & SEMINAR ACTIVITY	READINGS ON METHOD
1	<b>“Practice” and the practice of communication design</b>	<p><b>Themes:</b> What “practice” can mean; Design (as a social) practice; (Visual) language and semiosis; Discourse as a social practice; Towards a critical practice.</p> <p><b>Studio seminar activity (Week 1):</b> Discussion and introduction to assignments.</p>	<p><b>Key texts:</b> Fairclough, N. (1993) <i>Discourse and social change</i> (pp. 62-100). Cambridge: Polity Press. Foucault, M. (2011) <i>The courage of truth (The government of self and others II) lectures at the Collège de France 1983-1984</i> (pp. 178-180). UK: Palgrave MacMillan. Schön, D. A. (1983) <i>The reflective practitioner: How professionals think in action</i> (pp. 21-69). New York: Basic Books.</p> <p>Drucker, J. (2013) Critical journalism in graphic design. <i>Design and Culture</i>, 5(3), pp. 395-398.</p>
2	<b>Value, meaning, visualising design process and producing design knowledge</b>	<p><b>Themes:</b> Visualising the design process (models, metaphors, discourse); Culture, values, and self: prioritising values as a means of selection and exclusion; Design as cultural production.</p> <p><b>Studio seminar activity (Week 4):</b> Peer review/critique in small groups of 4-5. Lecturer works with each group in turn, providing feedback to assist students with contextualising their work and reflecting on design process in relation to theoretical constructs.</p>	<p>Cross, Nigel. (2001) Designerly ways of knowing: Design discipline versus design science, <i>Design Issues</i>, 17(3), pp. 49-55. Drucker, J. (2001) The critical “languages” of graphic design. Presented at <i>Looking Closer: AIGA Conference on Design History and Criticism</i>, February 2001. Foucault, M. (2003) What is critique?. In P. and R. Rabinow, S. Nikolas (eds.), <i>Essential Foucault: Selections from essential works of Foucault, 1954-1984</i> (pp. 263-278). New York: New Press.</p>
3	<b>Theory as practice as process</b>	<p><b>Themes:</b> Discourse as language use and thought, activities accompanying knowledge, materialisations (designs); Example: discourses of ‘house style’ and ‘personal ambition’ in design practice; Influence of wider discourses (institutional, economic, political); Suspending binaries and fixed ideas.</p> <p><b>Studio seminar activity (Week 7):</b> Work in progress is pinned up, laid out on desks, on screen etc; Small group and whole class discussion/review with lecturer.</p>	<p>Connellan, K. (2012) The psychic life of white: Power and space. <i>Organization Studies</i>, 34(10), pp. 1529-1549. Davis, M. (2012) A new paradigm. <i>Graphic design theory</i> (pp. 210-233). New York; London: Thames &amp; Hudson. Kelly, V. (2014) Metaphors of resonance for visual communication design. <i>Visual Communication</i>, 13(2), pp. 211-230.</p>
4	<b>Design rhetoric and design as a discursive practice</b>	<p><b>Themes:</b> Design and rhetoric; Taking up a critical stance in design practice and a critical reflection on self.</p> <p><b>Studio seminar activity (Week 8):</b> Discussion with whole class on similar and contrasting views in design processes; individual and small group reviews with lecturer.</p> <p><b>Studio seminar activity (Week 9):</b> Submission and critique of final work in class; Each student presents to the lecturer and class as a whole.</p>	<p>Ehse, H. (2009) <i>Design on a rhetorical footing</i>. CEAD: Mexico. Kelly, V. (2014) Design as rhetoric in the discourse of resonance. In Lim, Y.-K., Niederer, K., Redström, J., Stolterman, E., &amp; Valtonen, A. (eds.), <i>Proceedings of DRS2014: Design’s Big Debates</i>, Umeå, Sweden. McCarthy, S. (2013) <i>The designer as author, producer, activist, entrepreneur, curator, collaborator: new models for communicating</i> (pp. 129-151). Amsterdam: BIS Publishers.</p>

Figure 1 Schedule of lecture topics and themes, seminar activities in the design studio, with readings on method for assignment 2.

Being design students in their final year they were familiar with discussing and showing work in progress to their peers. During the sessions scheduled for the second assignment, the students discussed what they had read, whose thought they were or were not drawn to,



possible approaches to visually/materially conceptualising thought, and what the student her/himself was doing and thinking. This took the form of pin-ups and small and large group discussions that are typical of studio-based learning. Small group discussions involved 4-5 students, with large group discussions involving a whole class (i.e. 23 students). A more formal peer review and critique was conducted four weeks into the semester, with each student discussing their understanding of design practice broadly and their own process specifically. In this session, all students presented their work in progress to date either as pin-ups, digital files, or prototypes.

The student work that was discussed ranged from written notes and annotated readings to sketches, prototypes, and video recordings. They were asked how these ideas and thoughts might be visualised and described textually; what kinds of relevant activities, subjects (and their social relations), instruments/tools, objects, time and place, values, and language they included in these. They were also asked to describe the intent of their work and how it was situated; the kinds of discourses (ideologies, social conditions, cultural, and economic, histories and contexts) that informed and influenced their values and beliefs about design. This included describing the position(s) they would take up in their design process (e.g. a hidden actor in the design, a social agent, an author of design) and those positions which they found most consistent with their own view as designers.

## **5. Results and discussion**

The works that students produced were diverse in approach and predominantly combined the textual and visual. At the same time, how a number of students related theory to their design process was not unexpected in that they translated theoretical constructs into visual representations and drew on theory to signify visual forms.

For example, the use of metaphor to explain design process was particularly strong in many of the works, which enabled wider discussion of how metaphor in thought manifests in everyday language use (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980) and makes visual communication a form of semiosis. For one student, his design process was akin to a jigsaw puzzle with no particular starting point or boundary that could develop in any direction. The pieces were parts of him – his thinking and values – that carried through the design process. In this way he viewed his position as a designer relative to context and time, all the while cognisant of uncertainty and the way that designing can take multiple directions depending on context (Figure 2). Similarly, another student illustrated an aerial view of a domain mapped with many different entry points and terrains to chart, representing the fluidity and challenges of her design process. While the former example grew outward in relation to possibility, the latter was more a journey towards a resolution.



*Figure 2 Metaphor of the student’s design process as a jigsaw puzzle – multi-directional depending on context, history, and design problem. Image reproduced with permission of the student, University of South Australia, 2015.*

In considering the positions they took up as designers a number of the students described themselves in relation to a craft, an artistic, or a rhetorical approach to design (Ehse, 2009). One student presented a “design process soup” with these three approaches in differing proportions as ingredients in her practice. Whilst initially the student saw herself more aligned to a craft or artistic approach, as she developed an understanding of a rhetorical approach she saw its relevance to her process that resulted in it being a main “ingredient”. That she engaged in a rhetorical approach to her process and in effect advocated courses of action and attachment to beliefs for others was not something she had previously considered.

Another student was drawn to Papanek’s (1985) thought on integrated design (introduced in Lecture 2) as a series of evolving, cyclic design events and an interrelated process of convergent and divergent thinking and design activity. In response, this student designed and wrote a non-linear piece that has multiple possibilities for interaction but is accessible and logical in its communicative intent. On one side of what she terms “a mapped journey” the student discusses her process and ideology of design, and on the reverse it reveals another part of her life – in particular how music is interwoven with and a constant in her process. Depending on how the piece is read, the music is more prominent and part of the process at times than others (Figure 3).

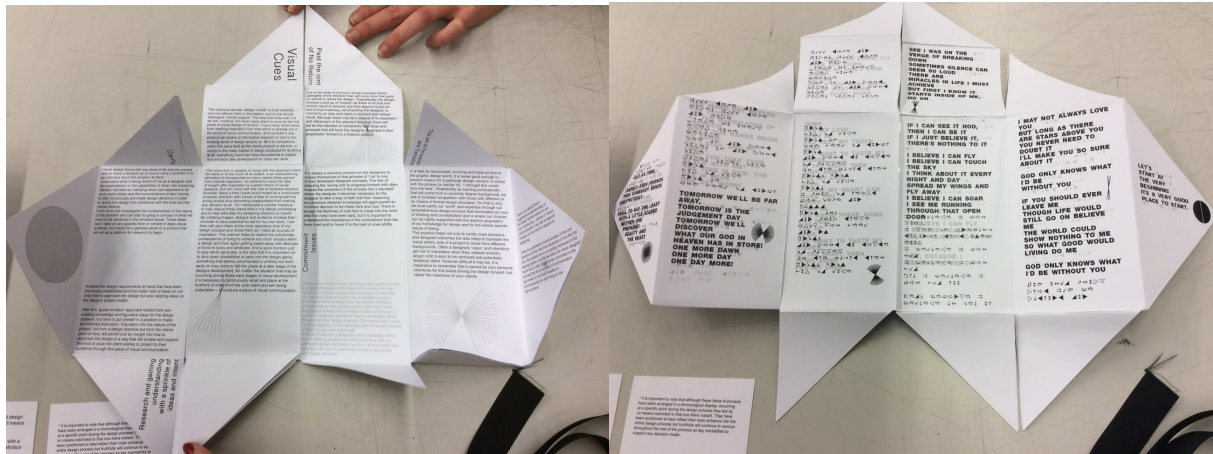


Figure 3 Design process as an interrelated process of convergent and divergent thinking and design activity interwoven with personal influences (front and back shown). Image reproduced with permission of the student, University of South Australia, 2015.

Additionally, the writing slips between first and third person as the same student takes up different standpoints, such as:

“All of the choices one makes during the design process stem from our pool of pre-existing knowledge that dictates the way we think about anything and the opinions we form.”

Then in the following comment, the student defies the “big bang theory of design” whereby an idea springs from “a sudden jolt of inspiration” as she states:

“So I write here now to bitterly disappoint those who carry such beliefs and present to them my own design process ... where the rallying of information provides the backbone to the visual outcome.”

The ability of this student to critique an approach that appears in professional design discourse and then put forward her own with conviction challenging the discourse of the “big idea” is indicative of the means by which the work was developed. Through the opportunity for students to relate learning tasks to their own beliefs, experiences and interests, a more active engagement with learning has taken place (Kolb & Kolb, 2005). The value of the theoretical framework as a whole is that it helped students to understand, by integrating theory with practice and their own experiences, how their approach to designing is driven by how they think and what they value, as well as being shaped and regulated by wider discourses.

These aspects were revealed in evaluations completed by the students (n=48) in response to the study as follows:

- 81% of students agreed/strongly agreed that through the assignment they developed a more informed understanding of how they approach the design process;

- 89% agreed/strongly agreed that approaching designing from a critical perspective is important to creating informed design;
- 79% agreed/strongly agreed that contextualising their design approach in relation to the design literature provides them with a better understanding of who they are as designers and their underpinning values (17% were unsure);
- Although 81% agreed/strongly agreed that integrating design theory with design practice helps them to be more reflective designers, slightly less (50%) had an improved understanding of how design theory relates to their own design process specifically, with 43% unsure.

Individual student comments further supported their engagement with the integration of theory and practice as a means of developing critical reflection as follows:

“Assessment #2 was a particularly tough assessment for me, however it was an insightful topic dealing with self-reflection which I have not particularly considered previously”

“It has opened up the doors for me to develop deeper meaning into my design work, and also to think about the future of my design career, and what that may look like”

“The emphasis on thinking critically about our works was great. Now when I look at my work I think 'Why did I make that choice?', 'What does this shape mean to the audience?', 'What message does this piece of work send across to the public?’”

The students’ understanding of discourse as a social practice was less clear. Although 50% of the students agreed/strongly agreed that conceiving of discourse in this way is useful to understanding the influences and conditions that shape design practice, 43% were unsure. Comments ranged from “Dis course is killer” (sic) to responses being that they either did not understand or were still attempting to understand the concept. The overall results of the study are positive however because they indicate that theoretically the approach to discourse is suitable, but suggest that further development of the teaching and learning approach is needed.

There were also two survey statements about a designer’s voice in relation to the design outcome. These questions were intended to flesh out how students saw themselves as designers e.g. that their identity should be hidden in the work, or that they should be recognised as social agents or authors of design. More than half the students surveyed (60%) disagreed with the statement: *A designer should never be part of the story in the design outcome*, while 10% agreed, and the remainder were unsure. This was reinforced in response to the second statement: *As a designer, it is important that your own voice comes through the outcome*, where 43% agreed, 40% were unsure and 17% disagreed. These results and additional individual comments showed that while students are aware of the significance of context to their practice and how it affects their own positions, at the same time they see their role and voice as central to the design outcome.

To sum up, through the task most students could clearly see how an integration of theory and practice helped them to be more self-reflective designers, but the ability to interpret a

direct relationship between theory and their individual process was somewhat less apparent. The majority of students however were able to articulate a non-linear approach to the design process and to recognise that possibility and uncertainty are central to their work as designers, and therefore to their actions. Whilst these aspects can be perceived as part of the suite of "soft skills" that characterise design learning, in this context students could see these skills and thinking materialise through their learning. The results indicate that in the context of this study, a critical self-awareness of one's own values and capacity for acting can be brought into being in a more explicit way that goes beyond critiquing what others have thought or written about design, to one's own position and actions in designing.

## **6. Conclusion**

This paper set out to discuss research into a theoretical framework combining particular thought on discourse, culture, and practice, and its application to design pedagogy as a means of enabling design students to take up more critically informed positions in their practice. The framework conceives of design as a discursive practice in order to draw attention to the ways in which design knowledge is produced by a particular culture and tied to human conduct.

The results of the pilot study with undergraduate communication design students in an advanced theory course indicate that through the framework and the integration of design theory learning and design studio learning, students were able to develop an improved understanding of their own positions in designing and ability to critically reflect on their practice. Additionally, they were able to articulate and make explicit their design process and its relationship with uncertainty and possibility. This aspect is significant as it indicates further potential for this research. As discussed above, the practice of design involves advocating possible courses of action for others and so it deals with uncertainty and possibility in the relations enacted between design and human subjects. Communication designers are therefore inextricably linked to the exercise of control in social situations. The implication is that the theoretical framework and its application is beneficial to design pedagogy as it develops in learners an awareness of how one acts upon oneself and in relation to others – in effect one's conduct – that is essential to design practice and to the future that requires addressing.

## **7. References**

- Ambrose, S. A., Bridges, M. W., DiPietro, M., Lovett, M. C. and Norman, M. K. (2010) *How Learning Works: Seven Research-Based Principles for Smart Teaching*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Apps, L. and Mamchur, C. (2009) Artful Language: Academic Writing for the Art Student. *International Journal of Art & Design Education*, 28(3), 269-278. doi: 10.1111/j.1476-8070.2009.01622.x
- Bacchi, C. and Bonham, J. (2014) Reclaiming discursive practices as an analytic focus: Political implications. *Foucault Studies*, 17, 173-192.
- Cameron, D. (2001) *Working with Spoken Discourse*. London; Thousand Oaks: SAGE.

- Dilnot, C. (2009) Ethics in design: 10 questions, in Clark, H. and Brody, D. (eds.), *Design Studies: a Reader* (pp. 180-190). Oxford: Berg.
- Dilnot, C. (2015) History, design, futures: Contending with what we have made, in Fry, T., Dilnot, C. and Stewart, S.C. (eds.), *Design and the Question of History* (pp. 131-271). London, New York: Bloomsbury Publishing Plc.
- Ehse, H. (2009) *Design on a rhetorical footing. CEAD: Mexico*.
- Fairclough, N. (2002) Critical Discourse Analysis as a method in social scientific research, in Wodak, R. and Meyer, M. (eds.), *Methods of Critical Discourse Analysis* (pp. 121-138). London: SAGE Publications Inc (US).
- Fairclough, N. (1993) *Discourse and Social Change*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Foucault, M. (1972) *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (A. S. Smith, Trans.). New York: Pantheon Books.
- Foucault, M. (2011) *The Courage of Truth (The Government of Self and Others II) Lectures at the Collège de France 1983-1984* (G. Burchell, Trans. F. Gros Ed.). UK: Palgrave MacMillan.
- Fry, T. (2009) *Design Futuring: Sustainability, Ethics and New Practice*. London, New York: Bloomsbury.
- Fry, T. (2015). Wither design/Whether history, in Fry, T., Dilnot, C. and Stewart, S.C. (eds.), *Design and the Question of History* (pp. 3-130). London, New York: Bloomsbury Publishing Plc.
- Hall, S. (ed.). (1997) *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*. London: Sage/The Open University.
- Holloway, W. (1998) Gender difference and the production of subjectivity, in *Changing the Subject: Psychology, Social Regulation, and Subjectivity* (pp. 227-263). New York: Routledge.
- Julier, G. (2006) From visual culture to design culture. *Design Issues*, 22(1), 64-76.
- Kelly, V. (2015) Design as a discursive practice: a working methodology for exploring knowledge production in communication design using a critical orientation to discourse analysis, in Collina, L., Galluzzo, L. and Meroni, A. (eds.), *The Virtuous Circle Design Culture and Experimentation: Proceedings of the Cumulus Conference, Milano 2015*, pp. 1037-1049.
- Kolb, A. Y., and Kolb, D. A. (2005) Learning styles and learning spaces: Enhancing experiential learning in higher education. *Academy of Management Learning & Education*, 4(2), 193-212.
- Krippendorff, K. (2006) *The Semantic Turn: A New Foundation for Design*. Boca Raton: CRC/Taylor & Francis.
- Lakoff, G., and Johnson, M. (1980) *Metaphors We Live By*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Margolin, V. (2006) The citizen designer, in Bierut, M., Drenttel, W. and Heller, S. (eds.), *Looking Closer 5: Critical Writings on Graphic Design* (pp. 118-128). New York: Allworth Press.
- McCoy, K., and Poyner, R. (1995) Reputations: Katherine McCoy. *Eye*, 16(4).
- Papanek, V. (1985) *Design for the Real World: Human Ecology and Social Change*. London: Thames & Hudson Ltd.
- Prown, J. D. (2009) Mind in matter, in Clark, H. and Brody, D. (eds.), *Design Studies: a Reader* (pp. 220-230). Oxford: Berg.
- Schön, D. A. (1983) From technical rationality to reflection-in-action, in *The Reflective Practitioner: How Professionals Think in Action* (pp. 21-69). New York: Basic Books.
- Shreeve, A. (2012) Signature pedagogies in design: Linking teaching, learning and practice. *Art + Design \ Education: Collection # 04*(Spring 2012), 43-51.
- van Toorn, J. (1994) Thinking the visual: Essayistic fragments on communicative action, in Bouman, O. (ed.), *"And justice for all ..."* (pp. 196). Maastricht: Jan van Eyck Akademie Editions.

Wodak, R., and Meyer, M. (eds.). (2009) *Methods of Critical Discourse Analysis* (2nd ed.). London: SAGE.

About the Authors:

Dr Veronika Kelly is Program Director and Senior Lecturer in Communication Design, School of Art, Architecture and Design at the University of South Australia. Her key research interests are in design and rhetoric, design practice culture, and critical design pedagogy.