
A survey of definition and its role in strengthening design theory

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Overview

1. Why definition matters
2. Survey of definition: types, approaches
3. Proposal for appropriate type and approach of definition

About me

- Practice: Web/Graphic Designer, VisCom Design
- Education: Instructor, University of Alberta
- Research: Masters of Design, University of Alberta

Design research, education and practice are more complex

- Emphasis on **research and methods** in design
- Playing **central role** in product and service development
- Recent expansion of **new media and technologies**
- Emphasis on **social responsibility, ethics and environment**

This complexity requires theory to properly understand and manage

- Emphasis on **research and methods** in design
 - Requires *epistemology* to determine appropriate methods
- Greater **central role** in product and service development
- Recent expansion of **new media and technologies**
- Emphasis on **social responsibility, ethics and environment**
 - Theories to *link research from other disciplines* (business and marketing; comm. & social sciences; polysci, engg)
 - Theories to *build bridges: research, practice and education*

Design needs its own body of theory

- “a lack of a specific design discourse with ongoing development, argument, criticism, research findings, etc. hampers development of design as a discipline and prevents design from contributing its knowledge more broadly”
(Poggenpohl, Chayutsahakij, Jeamsinkul, 2004)
- While there is agreement that design is a synthetic discipline, Poggenpohl, Chayutsahakij, Jeamsinkul disagree that this means it cannot have its own internal discourse

Tension between pluralism and unification

- “one of the strengths of our field is that we hold different views” (Buchanan, 2004)
- “it is in the interest of the very same research community - and of community at large - that disintegration of design theory into rivalling design theories does not get out of hand. As researchers we have an obligation to produce theory that is generally credible and widely sharable outside our own circles; but the more such disintegration we allow, the less credible and sharable our products become.” (Galle, 2008)
- “10 PhDs with no common literature” (Margolin, DRS 2010)
- Even if we argue

Design theory requires philosophic foundations

- agreement upon “core concepts and terminology” in design
- to clarify “the scope, bounds and foci of fields of research and theory-making about designing and designs”;
- greater investigation into epistemological, ontological issues in design; and lastly, better “integration” of design theory and “other bodies of knowledge”
(Love, 2002)

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Why definition of design matters

- Central term
- Highly ambiguous
- “Insidious inconsistency” (Galle, 2008)

Ambiguity of “design”

“Design is when designers design a design to produce a design.”
(Heskett, 2001)

- a professional practice: applied art
- a professional practice: umbrella for all applied disciplines
- a plan or intention (“well designed football play”)
- a decorative pattern
- a drawing or sketch (of a plan)

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Why should designers understand definition?

- “There has been an unfortunate misunderstanding about the nature and use of definitions, and this has caused our discussions to become unproductive and wasteful of time and energy.” (Buchanan, 2001)
- For example: PhD Design List

Why not leave it to philosophers?

- “definitions put into practice a special sort of social knowledge—a shared understanding among people about themselves, the objects of their world, and how they ought to use language” (Schiappa, 2003, *Defining Reality*).
- As designers, we maintain this shared knowledge through communities of research and practice, making us experts on how to define our world
- Unique understanding of: communication and systems design
- Ability to visualize this system of concepts
- If designers must play a central role in definition, we must **clarify the process itself to make it more productive for designers**

Survey of definition

- Tradition dating back to Socrates: “What is justice?”
- Often very mundane
- Types and Issues
- Proposed type

Types of definition

- Ostensive: showing or pointing to an example
- Lexical: report on past usage – dictionary
- Stipulative/Operational: proposal for future use

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central – is an argument for how a community ought to use the term and within a given context.

Key issues in definition

- essentialism vs anti-essentialism
- real vs nominal

Essentialism debate

- design is a word that cannot be defined using necessary and sufficient conditions, instead it is a patchwork of 'family resemblances' (Weitz, Wittgenstein)
- probably true of all words, in terms of how they naturally evolve within a community
- essentialist approach allows one to operationalize the definition

Genus-species

- similarity-difference
- taxonomy
- allows one to develop principles based on the categorization and listing of essential attributes

discipline

applied discipline

applied art

Nominalist vs Real approach

- Real
 - a definition that describes the “true” and “universal” nature of a term
 - independent, “objective” structures of essences that are knowable “in themselves”
- Nominal
 - no objective essence exists for any concept
 - “[a] thing-as-experienced may have as many essences as we have interests” (Schiappa, 2003)
 - how one defines “tree” depends on one’s interest

Proposed type and approach

- Stipulative-operational
 - start with the purpose and audience
 - why are you defining the term, and for whom?
 - agree there is value for given purpose
 - criteria will follow from this
- Essentialist
 - operationalize the definition
- Nominalist
 - essential characteristics are highlighted by interest in definition

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Benefits of this approach

- Highlights need to determine purpose
- Allows for multiple proposals
- Can apply in many contexts (research community or team)
- Avoids metaphysical absolutism
- Avoids 'Humpty-Dumptyism'
- Must consider previous usage of audience/users
- Develop criteria for judging proposals

Criteria for an effective definition

- **Stipulative Purpose: Unify design theory** (Love, 2002)
 - Be an epistemologically well-bounded theoretical construct
 - Have the same role and purpose across all the intended areas of research and theory making knowledge researchers developing theories about designing and designs use
 - Fit with other core concepts to form a complete set of theoretical building blocks with which to construct and develop a larger body of theory/knowledge
 - Align well with the concepts and definitions developed in other disciplines that interface with designing and designs, or whose bodies of knowledge researchers developing theories about designing and designs use

Criteria for an effective definition

- **Essentialism: Requires logical consistency**
 - Be distinct and not overlap other core concepts
 - Provide both necessary and sufficient conditions for the definition to apply
 - Not be constructed solely of other concepts at a similar level of abstraction

Criteria for an effective definition

Additional criteria

- **Ostensive**
 - Should allow us to point to exemplars / prototypes of design
- **Lexical**
 - Should be informed by past usage, if we want a community of users to adopt it

Will defining design **destroy** it?

- Either the word has meaning or it doesn't
- If it has no meaning, then there is nothing to destroy
- If it has meaning, then we ought to understand what we mean by it (shared or personal) - **we ought to articulate it**

Hegemony

- Definition is not a call for legislating language
- Definition is a tool for thinking about design
- Definitions should be encouraged to spark debate, indentify “insidious inconsistencies”
- Community of users will judge whether it serves their interest

Definition as a tool

“Definitions serve strategic and tactical purposes in inquiry. They do not settle matters once and for all, as many people seem to believe they should. Instead, they allow an investigator or a group of individuals to clarify the direction of their work and move ahead.”

(Buchanan, 2001)

“Conceptual and verbal tool kit useful for thinking about how to improve the practice of [design]”

(Galle, 2002)

Questions

- presentation:
designtheory.wordpress.com