Bisociation within Keyword-Mapping;

An Aid to Writing Purposefully in Design

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Abstract

'"Connect, Always Connect..."' (Koestler, 1964, p231)

This article employs Koestler's concept of 'bisociation' (Koestler, 1964) as a practical way to capitalize on the awkward, clumsy or tentative early stages of a design project. The presence of uncertainty and maladroitness is likely to be more prevalent with interdisciplinary collaboration, or 'metadesigning', because the task is, of its nature, more complex, interdisciplinary and collaborative, therefore less familiar to all. The article discusses the findings of a workshop co-developed by the author and the 2005-6 cohort of MA Design Futures students at Goldsmiths, University of London.

The workshop adapted Buzan's mindmapping system as a prelude to writing. (Buzan, 1995) Where the essence of writing is often assumed to be a narrative process, a keyword mapping approach may be preferable in cases where narration may be too premature, convergent, or rigid for the task in hand. This may be true for authors who are practitioners, working at an early stage of the creative process. By expecting or even, indeed, welcoming awkwardness, rather than fluency at this stage of the process the students usually uncovered unexpected consequences that were nevertheless germane to the task in hand.

In this workshop the first step was the elicitation and choosing of a single salient keyword that described the student's individual design research proposals. Students then worked in pairs, using Koestler's notion of 'bisociation' to find unforeseen possibilities latent within the relationship between the two words. This invariably enriched the produced new meanings within the context of their own work. In the second phase, the students designed set of keyword cards. The students discussed their keywords and facilitated a bisociation workshop with invited participants from design industry, hand picked to assume the role of a 'reader' at which the students could direct their written proposals.

Finally, the students went back to their individual written proposals to cohere the findings from the keyword workshop with the tetrahedral model of design writing (Wood, 2004, 2005) that encourages students to map their written proposals within a relational framework. Typically, this is a dynamic, four-fold model that focuses principally upon the designer, the client, a proposal, and larger context. This structure links all players and tends to define their actions in relation to the other three, hence delivering an imperative to exhaust all of the six dialogues implicit in the figure.

Figure One. Keyword Workshop, Spitalfields, 2006

Introduction

This paper will discuss the findings of a keyword workshop (See Figure One) devised by the MA Design Futures students 2005-6 at Goldsmiths, University of London. The students on the course spend one year (full-time) producing four written design proposals and a final written thesis for which they are assessed at the end of the year. Each year group often finds a common interest. This year group's students identified strongly with the idea of metadesign. Some of the key attributes of metadesign, as defined by the 'Benchmarking Synergy Levels in Metadesign' AHRC funded research project in the department of design at Goldsmiths,

University of London, are that it is in nature 'participatory', 'emergence aware', 'self-creative' and 'flexible' (http://www.attainable-utopias.com/tiki/tiki-index.php?page=MetaDesign). Throughout the process of metadesigning, participants experience the sharing of knowledge or the growth of a knowledge ecology (http://www.co-i-l.com/coil/knowledge-garden/kd/index.shtml). Each person in the group will not individually have all the information or expertise that they need to realise a design. Our MA Design Futures students spend a year standing back, and reflecting upon their experience as practitioners. They often seek to ignore their expertise they have developed as specialists and start again from a different perspective. In this particular year group the majority of students chose to frame their design proposals as meta-design projects, in that they are usually addressing a process or system rather than critiquing an object or end product. In this article, when I talk about writing purposefully in design I am therefore talking about the challenge of writing metadesign proposals.

Stepping out of design practice and embarking on a year of writing is often a daunting challenge for designers. To support them with this task we have devised an inter-relational writing model that encourages a more three-dimensional way of thinking, mapping and writing (Wood, 2000; 2005). This 'tetrahedral' model of writing is intended to enable the students to design their writing or write their designs (See Figure Two). The writing becomes a tool to help students reframe their own professional self, situate their design idea within a broader context and empathise with a potential client. This article does not focus directly on the writing model but explores a workshop with keyword cards devised by the students to help them to embody the writing model and experience the relationships that exist within their proposals.
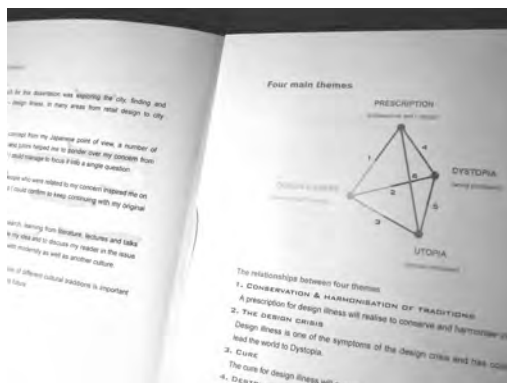

Figure Two. Student essay

1. Using Keywords to Seed a Design Proposal

'The creative process defines a "seed" able to generate endless variations recognizable as belonging to the same idea but open to change by the client.' (Giaccardi, 2005)

At the beginning of writing a design proposal the students define a set of keywords that communicate the 'information, thoughts and assumptions' (Sperber and Wilson, c1986) that come together to begin to form the proposal. This process could be described as a 'seeding process' (Ascott, 1995, cited in Giaccardi, 2005) that begins to mark out the territory explored within the proposal. Selecting, defining and sometimes engineering new keywords is an important part of the design writing process. Raymond Williams discusses the relevance of exploring keywords in his book 'Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society.' He describes how a dictionary contains the etymological tracings and the meaning at the time of publication of particular words but the words themselves are disembodied from the actively changing language to which they belong and out of which they have emerged. Words do not appear in the dictionary until it been proven with written evidence that they exist and so words that are not written down but are used in conversation will not be in the dictionary.

Williams observes how there are some 'key' words that are 'significant, binding words in certain activities and their interpretation; they are significant, indicative words in certain forms of thought. Certain uses bound together certain ways of seeing culture and society, not least these two most general words. Certain other uses seemed to me to open up issues and problems, in the same general area, of which we all needed to be very much more conscious.' (Williams, c1976, p13).

Williams's book on keywords is far more contextual, more personal and more relational than an orthodox dictionary. The exercise of identifying keywords and exploring 'formations' of keywords and understanding their relevance as part of an 'active vocabulary' is especially useful in the field of design where designers are often seeking future solutions for situations or phenomena within culture and society that have not yet been identified and found their way into our vocabulary. It is also useful for designers to clarify the use of terminology in design discourse to become better at finding solutions (Wood 2005, p20). Identifying keywords can become a way of 'recording, investigating and presenting problems of meaning'. (Williams, c1976, p13) For example, a keyword such as 'sustainable' has many different meanings in different contexts that can sometimes create confusion and misunderstanding.

In 2006, the students from MA Design Futures decided to create a pack of keyword cards to facilitate a workshop with specially invited clients that were to act as readers for their final thesis. (See Figure Five) The keyword cards would represent this multi-cultural and multi-disciplined group's 'active vocabulary', representing the broad range of ideas and areas of interest covered by these eight students. They decided that as part of this process they would work together in partners to find relationships that existed between the keywords that represented their individual design proposals.

2. 'Bisociating' Keywords from Different Proposals

'Things may be too far apart, too near together, or disposed at the wrong angle in relation to one another, to allow for energy of action. Awkwardness of composition whether a human being or in architecture, prose, or painting is the result.' (Dewey, J, 1934:211)

At the scattered beginnings of writing their metadesign proposals, the students decided to work together to look for unconsidered, oblique relationships between their proposals. Arthur Koestler coined the term 'bisociation' in his book 'The Act of Creation' to describe the moment when two seemingly unconnected contexts or 'matrices of experience' form a new relationship and develop a shared meaning or purpose. Koestler used 'bisociation' to refer to a creative act that is dynamic and unpredictable, belonging to several 'planes' of existence rather than a non-creative act that derives from a linear or causal chain of events.

In the case of the keyword workshop, the term bisociation may refer to the synthesis of keywords and the new meanings that emerged from the students working together. One of the purposes of bisociating the keywords, was to explore the different interpretations of keywords and for the students to clarify their own keyword definitions to their partner. This exercise is especially helpful at the awkward, clumsy and ambiguous beginnings of creating a design proposal or idea. Defining the keywords and discovering the relationships between the keywords is a gradual process. Secondly, the students were looking to find new meanings or unconsidered perspectives that might emerge from bisociating the keywords. The bisociated meanings, in the form of questions, images and examples would be associated with both design proposals, stretching or 'vibrating' across the two 'self-consistent but habitually incompatible frames of reference…not merely linked to one associative context, but bisociated with two.' (Koestler, c1964)

The students both invited one chosen reader for their metadesign proposal to participate in a keyword workshop. These readers could be potential clients or knowledge holders or future collaborators that the students could direct their writing towards. In this workshop the students would introduce their early design proposals, their keywords and the bisociations they had discovered with their partners for a group discussion.

3. The Keyword Workshop

Metadesigning with keywords

'Metadesign represents a cultural shift from design as "planning" to design as "seeding".' (Giaccardi, 2005)

Each of the students were presenting proposals that could be described as belonging to a growing culture of 'metadesign' in that they are usually addressing a process or a system rather than critiquing an object or end product. As we have already observed, the use of keywords instigates a seeding process at the beginning of writing the design proposals. The keywords then act as bisociative entities that facilitate a cross-fertilization of ideas within the group. Rather than the students writing a thesis plan and then following that plan in a linear fashion, the process of seeding and working together is less hierarchical and perhaps more organic. The students are working in an interdisciplinary group, compiled of two students from different design backgrounds and their invited readers who are also from different professional backgrounds. The students experience the sharing of knowledge within the group and at this early stage of the research process each student alone will not have all the information or expertise that they will need to realise their proposal. The students are able to

keep their proposals relevant by addressing their proposal to a reader that will benefit from the proposal. The reader acts as a reference point at this very open stage of the design process. The workshop designed by the students enables the readers to participate in a collaborative cultivation of the design proposal, at the 'blue sky thinking' phase, which is usually resolved to a certain degree before the designer meets the client. (See Figure Three) Therefore, in the case of this workshop 'metadesign allows a sort of creative and unplanned opportunism' (Wood, 2000) to take place between the two students and their two invited guests.

The structure of the workshop

The process of working in pairs with keywords and the structure of the workshop that followed are presented in a series of 10 stages below and illustrated with a diagram in Figure Four.

1. First of all the students identified four keywords that represented the design proposals for their final thesis.
2. The students then co-designed a set of forty one keyword cards (See Figure Five) which included thirty two cards presenting keywords with accompanying definitions or descriptions or supportive quotes, eight profile cards that provided the contact details of each of the students and one card that gave a brief description of the MA Design Futures course.
3. Next, the eight designers paired up and each chooses two of the four keywords to 'bisociate' with the other through a process of discussion.
4. The two designers produced new possible questions or visual examples that emerged out of the bisociations.
5. The students then held a two hour workshop as a part of their annual public event at Spitalfields Market in East London.
6. The students facilitated a discussion with their two invited clients using keyword cards and materials gathered through bisociating their individual keywords. (See Figure Three) The workshop was made up of four groups of four participants.
7. In the first phase of the workshop, students introduced themselves and their design proposals to their invited guests using the keyword cards.
8. In the second stage of the workshop the students present the bisociated keywords and the clients also 'bisociate' the ideas to provide another layer of reflection or feedback for the designers. Explaining the definitions, hearing the reader's interpretations, re-

defining keywords and clarifying ideas, creates new viewpoints and examples to work with in their proposals.

9. The invited guests and students give feedback at the end of the workshop on the discussions.

10. Finally, the designers go back to their original proposition with new insights as to the purpose and direction of their design proposals.
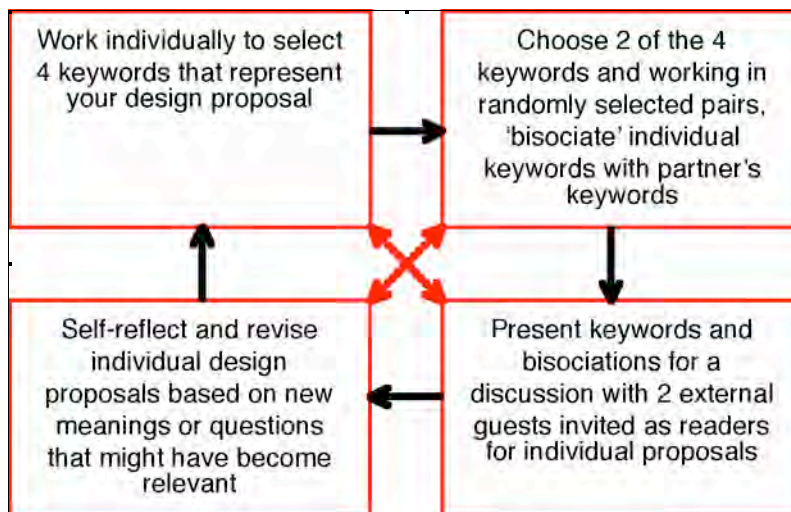

Figure Four. Diagram illustrating the 'bisociation' exercise and the structure of the following workshop

4. Student Example

One of the four student partnerships has been chosen to illustrate the outcomes from the bisociation of individual keywords. This is an example of one of the bisociations discussed by Tomohide Mizuuchi and Cecile Toubeau.

Tomohide Mizuuchi's keywords:
EXPERIENCE
EVERYDAY LIFE

Cecile Toubeau's keywords:
URBAN
SUSTAINABLE

Bisociation 1: SUSTAINABLE + EXPERIENCE

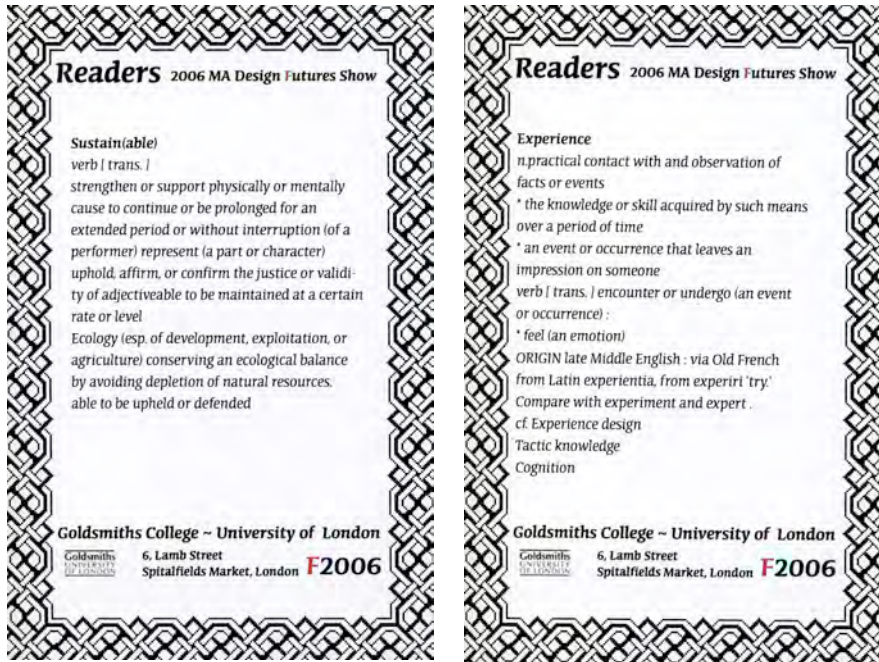Bisociation 2: URBAN + EVERYDAY LIFE

Figure Five. Keyword cards

Bisociation 1: Questions and examples

How can you design a sustainable experience?

How can we create a more experiential approach to designing that supports sustainable practices of everyday life?
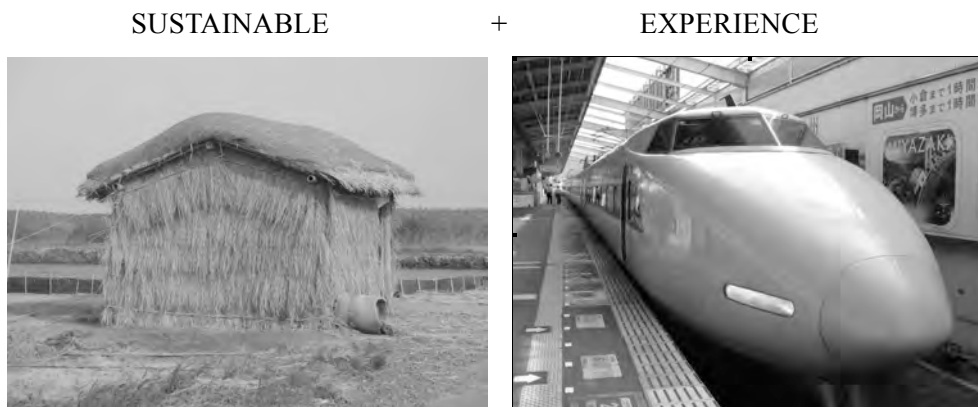
SUSTAINABLE   +   EXPERIENCE

Figure Six. Student's bisociated keywords - visual examples

SUSTAINABLE: A farmers hut on the existing site of the proposed Chinese eco-city, Dong Tan.

EXPERIENCE: The bullet train to Tokyo, an example of 'experience design'.

Invited participants

Cecile invited Prof. Phillip Jones a building scientist specialising in sustainable building and Tomohide invited Prof. Naomi Gornick, an expert in design strategy and design management.

Outcomes from the Bisociation Exercise and Workshop Findings

Tomohide is interested in how you can improve the design of everyday routines such as using public transport by basing solutions on the traveller's overall experience. Cecile is interested in sustainable building and sustainable cities. A tool that appealed to both of their individual design proposals and that emerged as an example through discussing their proposals and bisociating the keywords sustainable and experience is Bill Dunster's ZED wheel (see www.zedfactory.com), which is a sustainable lifestyle design indicator.

This lifestyle-design indicator, was a useful example for Tomohide who was looking at ways to incorporate experience into a design strategy and also useful to Cecile who was investigating the various components that contribute to a sustainable design. It stretches both of their proposals beyond their boundaries. Researching in areas they might not both have thought about individually. The discussion is kept relevant by the input from the readers who constantly provide feedback. It allows both of their proposals to grow, perhaps not in ways that they might have predicted through a more planned approach to early research. It is also a less precious and more negotiated process with the reader's advice early on generating an open discussion and broadening the scope for potential future solutions. The authors are better at communicating their proposal externalising it at an early stage. Defining the keywords opens up a conversation where the participants interpret those keywords differently. The students need to become good at defining what they mean, taking ownership early on of their proposals and hopefully having a stronger sense of purpose. The findings from this workshop

can then be injected into their writing, setting up the relationships highlighted by the tetrahedron between the author, reader, proposal and the context.

5. Student's Workshop Evaluation

An evaluation of the bisociation process and the workshop with external clients was conducted by carrying out interviews one month after the workshop. The key findings are listed below

- Students found it helpful to hear interpretations of keywords from paired up designers and external clients that participated in the workshops.
- Students found it a useful exercise for collecting examples or exemplary cases for their design proposals.
- It was felt that more time was needed for discussion at the workshop. Students suggested spending two days on the workshop, with the first day discussing keywords and the second day working on the bisociations.
- Students suggested including blank cards in the keyword card pack that could be filled in the first workshop session to enrich the shared vocabulary.
- A longer feedback session at the end of the workshop would also be helpful.
- The students found the exercise useful for formulating new relevant questions for their design proposals.

6. Conclusion

The findings from the keyword workshop reveal that creating a pack of keyword cards to facilitate the workshop provided an 'active vocabulary' that represented the group as a whole as well as introducing the proposals of each of the students. The cards were an effective communication tool and opened up discussions with invited participants of the workshop. In retrospect, students observed that perhaps leaving some cards blank, to add new keywords after a discussion with the participants might have created an even richer vocabulary relevant to the whole group. This might have been an even more effective tool for metadesigning with regards to creating a shared, dynamic language across an interdisciplinary group of participants. The invited readers commented on particularly enjoying working with readers from different professional backgrounds.

The keyword cards also provided a tool for toying with and negotiating the awkwardness experienced in the uncertain and difficult early stages of composing a metadesign proposal. The practice of bisociating keywords harnesses the awkwardness within the individual designers and the space in between their proposals to generate unexpected, creative and relevant metadesign solutions.

In the short-term, the bisociation exercise that took place between the two students helped the students to define and take ownership over their interpretations of the keywords and the ideas that they represented within their individual design proposals. Synthesizing the keywords was especially helpful for finding shared examples that supported both proposals. It also helped students to gain a new perspective on their individual proposals through picturing their ideas within another person's interpretation of the context. The exercise was also playful and the students could merge their ideas to create radical hybrid proposals that pushed their creating thinking.

The feedback from the reader's helped to keep the process relevant. Relevance is defined by Sperber and Wilson as 'a property that makes information worth processing for an individual' (Sperber and Wilson, 1986). The presence and feedback from the readers at the workshop creates a clearer goal towards which the students can steer their proposals. This helps them to avoid creating too much irrelevant information from the bisociation exercise with the keywords, which can be chaotic and haphazard.

In the long-term, the keyword cards and the bisociation exercise could be developed as a tool for the emerging culture of metadesigning, where multi-disciplined project groups can co-create a shared 'active vocabulary'.

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Acknowledgements

Figures

Figure Five. Keyword cards

Figure Six. Student's bisociated keywords - visual examples