



The disclosive space as an object of study for practice based research in design

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Charles Spinosa, Fernando Flores and Hubert Dreyfus use the term *disclosive space* to refer to the socially inscribed contexts in which cultural innovation take place. They define a disclosive space as an “organized set of practices for dealing with oneself, other people, and things that produces a relatively self contained web of meanings.” In foregrounding the concept of a disclosive space, Spinosa, Flores and Dreyfus are building on Heidegger's insight that much of our understanding is prior to representation. Heidegger's recovery of the importance of background practices in shaping our understanding of the world opens up an important task for researchers: bringing to the fore aspects of our background understanding. If we accept that much of our understanding is taken over unaware as background practices, then the task of perceiving and articulating aspects of relevant background practices is a significant and inherently creative act.

The concept of a disclosive space is of central importance to design research. The significance of an artefact is not a property of an artefact or of a context. It is a meaning within a web of meanings produced by organised sets of practices. For example, the function of a chair might conform to the conventional conception of being *something to give support or comfort*. Alternatively it might be conceived of as an artefact that *confers power*, that *physically restrains*, or that *challenges our sense of location or our sense of our bodies* depending on the set of practices in which it is embedded. The challenge of many design projects is to sense, and to develop a sense of, the practices relevant to that project. These might be the practices of users, stakeholders, or of the designers themselves. Designers are constantly confronted with decisions as to which sets of practices to prioritise. They engage in speculation as to how particular forms of an artefact might interact with those practices. They are also likely to be confronted with decisions about whether to work within accepted configurations of practices or to reconfigure those practices in significant ways.

In this paper I propose a model of practice based design research where the *object of study is the disclosive space* relevant to the design of an artefact. I explore issues that emerge when practice based design research is conceived as a form of qualitative research. My rationale for the proposed model is as follows. First, speculative artefacts have significant potential as cultural probes. The conversation, reflection and action that occur in response to the generation of sketches, maquettes and prototypes has the potential to form the basis for understanding perspectives and practices relevant to design domains. Second, sensitivity to salient aspects of a situation is a key aspect of the expertise of design practitioners. The development of case studies that articulate and interrogate the perspectives that a designer brings to a design situation would present knowledge of the domain in a form that is most likely to be of use to other practitioners. Finally, speculative artefacts constitute an articulation of the position that the designer elects to take in relation to the disclosive space. Sketches, maquettes and prototypes generated in the course of a practice based research project will be integral to the articulation of position that the practitioner-researcher adopts in relation to his/her findings.

I consider the merits of this model as compared to models of practice based research where the focus of the study is the *artefact*. I claim that the model proposed allows the practitioner/researcher to draw on and extend expertise that is an integral part of their practice. It generates knowledge of a form that is transferable and is of central importance to the development of design domains. Finally it allows for the design of

research projects where self-correcting verification strategies can be brought into play. I focus on two verification strategies: the *articulation and comparison of alternative perspectives*; and *demonstrating that an insight about a practice or perspective is a 'live option.'* Articulation and comparison of alternative perspectives involves demonstrating that the research outcome shows up something significant about the structure and/or limitations of existing alternative perspectives. Demonstrating that the research outcome is a *live option* involves gathering corroborating evidence that the perspectives and practices that have been brought to light through the research, manifest themselves in a range of ways within a particular cultural context.