A Beginner's Mind

PROCEEDINGS
21st National Conference
on the Beginning Design Student

Stephen Temple, editor

Conference held at the
College of Architecture
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Situating Beginnings
Questioning Representation
Alternative Educations
Abstractions and Conceptions
Developing Beginnings
Pedagogical Constructions
Primary Contexts
Informing Beginnings
Educational Pedagogies
Analog / Digital Beginnings
Curriculum and Continuity
Interdisciplinary Curricula
Beginnings
Design / Build
Cultural Pluralities
Contentions
Revisions
Projections

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Beginner's Mind : Design Mind

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"In the beginner's mind there are many possibilities, but in the expert's there are few."
Shunryu Suzuki (1973, p.21)

Abstract
Key knowledge for mastering of design teaching, learning, and practice remains inaccessible because we lack appropriate conceptual frameworks, discursive methods, and vocabulary to express it. This paper uses the conference topic "Beginner's Mind" to start searching for such enabling structures. The insights offered in the book "*Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind"* by Shunryu Suzuki are used to lead the discussion. Parallels between Zen teaching and beginning design education as well as between Zen mind and design mind are examined. The role of thinking, knowledge, goal, perception, sincerity, judgment, trust, and more are considered in light of Beginner's Mind. Seven implications for design education are drawn. The objective of this work is twofold:(1) the utilization of Zen insights to bring out hitherto inarticulate design understandings, pedagogies, and methods, and (2) the development of a scholarly method to make Zen accessible, debatable, testable, and therefore useful to design instruction and related fields such as educational psychology, philosophy of education, and epistemology.

Introduction
There is plenty of knowledge in our discipline regarding how to attain design mastery. Such precious material has been collected through the hard work of generations of teachers and designers and passed down to us in written and oral forms. Yet, much crucial knowledge remains unsaid, unexplained, unpublished, inaccessible. This lack of formalization and clarity at the very core of our field generates considerable frustration among inexperienced teachers, university administrators, non-architects, and, for certain, beginning design students. Although we have sought and found support from other discipline in this task (e.g., educational psychology, philosophy, brain and mind sciences, to name a few), there still a gap separating what we tacitly know, and what we ourselves or our allied disciplines are able to articulate and 'explain'. This gap has been directly or indirectly acknowledged by many for quite some time (Banathy 1987, Read 1966, Rittel 1986, Schön 1983).

Remarkably, this gap is one of the signs of great expertise. It is well known in psychology that experts cannot consciously explain their deepest knowledge or heuristics routines with any accuracy (XXXX). What experts do and how and why they do it is often beyond their conscious grasp. This has been known for quite some time (Polanyi 1964) and what rendered ineffectual the Artificial Intelligence movement efforts of the 1980's. So we are left with the fact that our best design teachers tacitly know it. Our most successful designers implicitly know it. But when/if they manage to penetrate into their deep expertise (the one remaining in shadows), they find themselves unable to transmit it without sounding esoteric, inarticulate, or incomprehensible. Lacking appropriate vocabulary and context, their invaluable knowledge remains 'personal' (as Polanyi puts it) and deemed idiosyncratic or subjective by our objectivist/positivist biased academia (Jonassen 1992) that therefore considered useless beyond anecdotal curiosity. As a

result, the wisdom gained is lost with every great teacher/designer retiring and needs to be construed anew by each individual every generation. Making available a framework or method to share, compare, validate, and encode these fundamental experiences would be arguably one of the greatest contributions we could make to our field.

The topic of this conference, "Beginner's Mind", is in this spirit, The concept "Beginner's Mind" is indeed one of those apparently obscure terms that our great teachers and designers often refer to in their attempt to communicate some essential insight into the nature of design. "Beginner's Mind" makes reference to an unconditioned or creative type of mind able to learn rapidly, see freshly and solve problems anew. This concept by and large stems from the cultural influence made by Shinryu Suzuki's book *"Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind"* that became very popular right after publication in 1973. As often is the case with popularized ideas, the 'street' version of "Beginner's Mind" has some truth mixed with misleading superficiality. The Beginner's Mind condition is indeed of relevance to Beginning Design pedagogy and consequently deserves inquiry. But it may best serve the aim of making explicit the crucial yet inarticulate areas of design knowledge discussed earlier. So, in studying the meaning and implications of "Beginner's Mind", this paper seeks to benefit both goals.

Beginner's Mind: When Design Mind Meets Zen Mind

Zen Master Suzuki describes the beginner's mind as open, fresh, and boundlessly creative because of its freedom from opinion, prejudice and expectations. Having no thought of self or achievement, the beginner's mind dwells in 'emptiness' —an emptiness that in Zen is not vacuum-like but rather full of potentiality for birthing. For Suzuki, *"if your mind is empty, it is always ready for anything; it is open to everything."* (ibid, p.21) Dwelling in such free mind, one is ready to accept or doubt without bias and thus penetrate into the original nature of things. In commenting on Suzuki's book, Zenkei Blanche Hartman (another Zen master) clarifies the concept farther (2001):

> *"Beginner's mind is just present to explore and observe and see "things as-they-are." I think of beginner's mind as the mind that faces life like a small child, full of curiosity and wonder and amazement. 'I wonder what this is? I wonder what that is? I wonder what this means?' Without approaching things with a fixed point of view or a prior judgment, just asking 'what is it?'"*

"Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind" is a book with a mission: to make us return time and time again to the realization that maintaining an innocent or 'original' mind is the secret to act and experience life at our fullest. So high does Suzuki regards the 'beginner's mind' that he equates it with the Zen mind itself!

I think that most designers wouldn't find it hard to agree with Suzuki's insight when considering design excellence. Who would dispute that great design usually results from applying such Beginner's Mind? Of course, we don't call it as such. We prefer terms such as intuition, right brain thinking, lateral thinking, creative problem solving, and alike. In a way, Beginner's Mind *is* Design Mind at its best (Silvestrin 1999, Zumthor 1999). From this perspective, it is not surprising to find design teachers working hard at creating the circumstances for such mind to arise. This brings the discussion close to home. For, of all design educators, few know more of the blessing and difficulty inherent in the Beginner's Mind than us, beginning design instructors.

In their natural ignorance, spontaneity, and naiveté, beginning design students are close to accessing the Beginner's Mind Suzuki talks about and that potentially delivers us to great design work. Yet, by the same token, they are also very near the pitfalls of incompetence, confusion,

frustration, and banality. After all, our beginning design students are far from being unbiased: they have gone through 12+ years of education and even longer acculturation. However, it is still true that, by comparison, these students offer the most unspoiled, uneducated, free minds than anybody engaged in professional design will ever have thereafter. Since these students will probably never be closer to accessing their Beginner's Mind than at this time, our job as teachers takes on remarkable educational, professional, and philosophical responsibilities. Can we make the best of such an unique opportunity? How? The challenge doesn't stop there. It gets more difficult. For the education of beginners in the practice of design invariably means (at least in the short term) the very loss of the student's innate ingenuity and freedom. We are asked to teach students how to become design experts without corrupting their Beginner's Mind!

For millennia, Zen has been successfully training people in the practice of attaining and maintaining a beginner's mind amidst real life conditions. Zen also has an unparalleled oral and written tradition that allows people to frame, debate, and validate deep, highly qualitative, and personal mental experiences. As a result, there is much to learn from Zen when addressing this essential topic. Let me here acknowledge the difficulty of this enterprise. If not careful, I could easily fall into broad and useless generalizations, or inappropriate discussions in the context of our present academic inquiry (e.g., religiosity, spirituality, etc.). However, and recognizing such dangers, I feel qualified and ready to take the risk. I have over 15 years of experience in teaching beginning design studio, been seriously practicing Zen for the past 8, and earned a doctoral degree in Education. Indeed, literature in constructivist learning theories (e.g., Dewey 1938, Newman 1996), epistemology and philosophy of mind (Ford 1975, Lakoff & Johnson 1999, Whitehead 1967, 1961), psychology of mind (Csikszentmihalyi 1990, Block 2002, Kramer 1983), the art and culture of improvisation (Belgrad 1998, Sloboda 1990), qualitative research theory (Morrow et al 2001, Patton 2002), and brain/mind science research (Austin 1998, Pinker 1997) further encourages me in this direction as they suggest educational principles, tactics, and efforts with remarkable correlations with Zen teachings.

Towards a Beginner's Mind

Susuki sets two main conditions for the Beginner's Mind to arise: no thought of achievement and no thought of self. Although these two conditions are quite natural and often experienced when deeply engaged in design practice, some design teachers may find them hard to accept as they challenge common held beliefs regarding cognitive operation. Following I will briefly examine them.

No Achievement

> *"Our effort in our practice should be directed from achievement to non-achievement … Usually, when you do something, you want to achieve something, you attach to some result. [Moving] from achievement to non-achievement means to get rid of the unnecessary and bad results of effort … When you make some special effort to achieve something, some excessive quality, some extra element is involved in it. You should get rid of excessive things."*(ibid, p.59)

From a Zen perspective, seeking achievement means to use a situation for a gain beyond itself. Such pursuit separates us from what we are doing, creating a gap that not only clutters our understanding but also impedes skillful action. The process becomes corrupted and the result is, at best, only half-right. Behind achievement, there is always some expectation of what the outcome ought to be like. This means that we are holding some type of a-priori knowledge, experience or ideal about what is being confronted. As a result, we steer the situation towards

that expectation and not necessarily to what the situation needs. We justify the steering in the assumption that obtaining such result is better than approaching the situation without any knowledge or idea. This attachment to success and this knowledge of what is better are the hallmarks of expertise. In effect, a knowledgeable individual is able to seize an encountered situation within a familiar framework and thus offer a proven (i.e., 'safe') and quick resolution. Resolution that may match our expectation but may not fully address the situation. We get what we want. Nothing less but certainly nothing more either.

This can't be farther from a Beginner's Mind attitude. Acting with a Beginner's Mind means to avoid agendas beyond what is present right here now. It demands to give up *what we want* in order to do *what is needed*, to choose not-knowing over knowing, and to be a beginner instead of an expert. It is this return from authority to innocence that rescues the meaning of the action from the hypnotic hold of a seemingly assured, yet limited and too often self-serving goal. Acting from such non-achievement focused mind grants us the ability to respond best because we are able to contemplate the situation in all its richness and complexity. Because we don't know what we'll get, the outcome is novel and free. Because we see things as they are, we can respond to them in the just measure. Letting go of achievement means dropping off our ideas, preconceptions, and goals which, as we will see, implies nothing less than letting go of the self as well.

No Self

In parallel to abandoning our attachment to result, Suzuki recommends an egoless attitude. He says that Beginner's Mind activity "*is activity which is completely burned out, with nothing remaining except ashes."* (ibid, p.63). He explains:

> *"When you do something, you should be completely involved with it. You should devote yourself to it completely. Then you have nothing. So, if there is no true emptiness in your activity, it is not natural … If it comes out of nothingness, whatever you do is natural, and that is true activity. You have the true joy of practice, the true joy of life in it."* (ibid, p.109)

At one time or another, all designers have experienced that moment in which they have lost themselves to the design in such a way that time, space, goal, and self have been completely consumed. In fact, anybody that has had a peak experience of any sort can attest to such sense of total awareness without a trace of self (Csikszentmihalyi 1990). Full involvement or identification with a situation dissolves the object-subject divide and propels us into the Beginner's Mind.

Hence, totally giving ourselves to a situation makes selfless action (action for the sake of itself) not just natural but unavoidable. Such action burns itself out in the sense that nothing remains afterwards. Because it never had any extras to start with (i.e., no goals, no preconceptions, no self), this action leaves behind no regret, no hope, no what-ifs. It is complete and finished when done. And because the Beginner's Mind has no-thing in mind, it is truly empty. Being empty, it doesn't know, holds no opinion, offers no preference, has no precedent. Yet such empty mind is alive and pulsing with possibilities of engagement. When it is called to do so, it engages the situation coming out nothingness, and therefore offers free, open, attentive, curious, and appropriate response.

Implications and Reflections

There are several implications inherent in attaining and sustaining a Beginner's Mind for design teaching. Unless specified, my use of the word 'we' stands for us design teachers, students, and/or practitioners. The order of implications doesn't follow any hierarchy.

Implication 1: ***We need to give up our desire to (intellectually) understand what is going on***.
Since the Beginner's Mind is empty and comes out of nothingness, it knows that it doesn't know and proactively gives up any desire of grasping the situation. No matter how smart we are, reality is just too complex to figure out. Suzuki offers this insight thus:

> *"You cannot find … nature by vivisection. Reality cannot be caught by the thinking or feeling mind. Moment by moment to watch your breathing, to watch your posture, is true nature. There is no secret beyond this point."* (ibid, p.135)

Suzuki suggests a radical yet humble phenomenology relying on conscious attention and feedback rather than in detached mental ruminations for responding to what is naturally unfolding moment by moment. The message is simple and clear: it is possible to give full response to a situation without fully understanding it

This is very hard to take because it demands, as we saw, to trust in not-knowing as the guarantor of success, and to believe that having no idea is better than having one, and that a Beginner's Mind is more appropriate than an Expert Mind when seeking for a great (design) response to a situation. This of course makes no sense intellectually. Yet this is exactly what is needed. So, what is called for is a suspension of judgment while concentrating in the present practice. Believe it or not, practicing Beginner's Mind this way will eventually get us there. This leads to our second implication:

Implication 2: ***We need to trust and then practice, practice, practice.*** (Trust will be addressed in implication 6)

Implication 3: ***We already have valid pedagogies facilitating students access to a Beginner's Mind***
There are two well known Beginning Design pedagogies used to facilitate student access to a Beginner's Mind. Both rely on creating contexts that deny the mind its codes of engagement to the point that it no longer knows what to seek, think, or do. Actions emerging from this place of not-knowing come from the Beginner's Mind. Creativity is, if not assured, kindly invited.

One of such pedagogies consists of setting up an unfamiliar topic or obscure process that makes it impossible for students to use any preconception or knowledge. The other pedagogy asks students to solve an apparently familiar problem using their existing knowledge when in reality such knowledge cannot possibly do it. In the frustrating situation, students discover their ignorance as a precursor to open themselves up and thus access the Beginner's Mind. The fact that these two methods do work and produce excellent results proves, if not the reality of the Beginner's Mind, at the very least the pragmatic validity of its assumption.

Implication 4: ***We need to acknowledge and make best use of the central role that the Beginner's Mind may play in forging the character of the student.***
Learning how to design naturally encourages students to monitor themselves in operation and thus cast light in whom they are. This metacognitive process, as it's called in educational psychology, gives students tools to guide their own development as well as forge their character. This affective dimension of pedagogy is not much discussed but is central to beginning design teaching, since it sets the foundation of a person's education and life.

Operating from a Beginner's Mind enhances this process. Giving ourselves totally to a situation doesn't cause our obliteration. Neither does abandoning our goals, ideas, and the rest erase

ourselves. Rather, these actions liberate us from much of our emotional, intellectual, and cultural baggage, propelling us to uncover our 'true' self. According to Suzuki,

> *"When you become you, Zen becomes Zen. When you are you, you see things as they are, and you become one with your surroundings."* (ibid, p.80)

In other words, dropping off preconceptions, preferences, hopes, knowledge and alike produces a deep mental cleansing that rescues the self from the grip of conditioning and returns it to its natural Beginner's Mind: what in Zen is termed the "original" or "true" self. From this state, the self is able to see and act without hindrance while still remaining true to its unique character. We can see this situation expressed in every good design work. Although we can appreciate the 'signature' of the individual behind it, no trace of self-consciousness, mannerism, strife, or pride remains. Thus idiosyncracy and selfhood enter design through the sincerity of the commitment to the challenge rather than by imposing one's will. And while such sincerity of giving oneself to the task doesn't always result in great design, great design never takes place without it. This is what Suzuki emphasizes:

> *"More important than any stage which you will attain is your sincerity, your right effort."* (ibid, p.100)

Hence, common sense pedagogy calling for student sincerity and involvement is more than validated. It becomes *the* way to Beginner's Mind and, through it, to facilitate each student realization of whom they are. This realization is no other than seeing first hand that what they had usually considered themselves to be (i.e., their ideas, experiences, prejudices, hopes, preferences) is not really whom they really are. In the purity of the Beginner's Mind, they realize that rather than losing themselves, they are more alive and themselves than they have ever been … Who hasn't experienced this unforgettable moment at a peak design experience?

Implication 5: ***Design teachers need to exercise great caution, patience, knowledge and restraint when working under Beginner's Mind conditions.***

On one hand, asking students to seek no achievement means to ask them to moment by moment surrender themselves to the design process. On the other hand, asking students to seek selflessness means to request the surrendering of their cognitive tools and images of themselves. Although both requests imply a great deal of trust from the student, they are not new in beginning design teaching.

We often ask our students to devote themselves totally to design without worrying about the outcome. The trust, we say, should be placed in the process. Although implementing such pedagogy may result in unfortunate episodes when not properly managed (e.g., sleep deprivation, insecurity, fear, anger), this method has the unmistakable advantage of catapulting students into a Beginner's Mind state. Again, this by no means condones the extreme studio culture situations properly critiqued by the AIAS and others over the past decade. (AIAS 2002). However, it points out the wisdom intrinsic in some of our standard studio practices.

The second request entails a huge transfer of power and knowledge from the student to the teacher. Removing the ordinary means by which students operate, and placing them in an unknown territory and under the total guidance of the teacher demand from the student a great deal of courage, trust, and faith. Not only has the student to 'submit' themselves to the cognitive authority of the teacher, but also to believe that that instructor will exercise those powers wisely and compassionately. In effect, the teacher must offer students a great deal of patience, empathy, respect, and support because experiencing the Beginner's Mind could be quite disconcerting if not scary and frustrating at first. In other words, the affective part of the teaching becomes as (if

not more) important as the cognitive dimension. It is only by creating a safe place that the student will be able to drop off their shield and become both open and vulnerable. A bad experience in this context could be very traumatic and generate permanent scars making it hard to do it again. Hence, extraordinary caution and restrain in the part of the teacher is necessary.

Implication 6: ***Both Beginner's Mind and Expert Mind are necessary.***
This paper thus far may have given the impression that a Beginner's Mind is preferable over an Expert Mind. But this is not so. We need both. A Beginner's Mind allows us to get to the source of creativity, selfhood, great design, deep insight, innocence, joy, and alike. An Expert Mind allows us to bring into reality whatever has been gained from such source. The former gives and the latter develops. One generates and the other critiques. One offers and the other chooses. One creates and the other takes responsibility. Both are absolutely necessary. And yet, greatness lies in accessing the Beginner' Mind.

Unfortunately, our culture, civilization, and profession have been emphasizing the Expert Mind over the Beginner's Mind to such an extent that we are unbalanced (Bergman 1984, Capra 1982, Harrison 1985). One easy way to recognize this fact is the intellectual hypertrophy affecting our society and discipline (Albrech 2002, Sontag 1990). What cannot be rationally articulated, analytically understood, or consciously produced is given little or no value. This needs recognition and fixing. As educators we ought to work towards a balance. And what better than starting at the very beginning of the education cycle? Thus, waking up the Beginner's Mind is not just a good thing for Beginning Design but for our schools, profession and society at large.

Implication 7: ***We need to cease hoping to explain away design***.
Explaining design to students is a common challenge to all design educators. How do we transmit deep design knowledge to people without any experience in the subject while resorting to language plagued with structural limitations and socio-cultural associations? Can we avoid sounding obscure and incomprehensible to the ears of beginning design students? Zen Master Suzuki helps us here:

> *"The more you understand our thinking, the more you find it difficult to talk about it. The purpose of my talking is to give you some idea of our way, but actually, it is not something to talk about, but something to practice. The best way is just to practice without saying anything. When we talk about our way, there is apt to be some misunderstanding, because the true way always has at least two sides, the negative and the positive. When we talk about the negative side, the positive is missing, and when we talk about the negative side, the positive side is missing. We cannot speak in a positive and negative way at the same time. So we do not know what to say. It is almost impossible to talk about [it]. So not to say something, just to practice it, is the best way."* (ibid, p.90)

Whatever side of a subject is illuminated causes the other sides to remain in shadows. In other words, it is ultimately impossible to explain design to beginning design students. Talking about it may only partially point at 'it'. And, of course, the corollary of this implication holds true for this paper. Yet, the hope is that what has been addressed does illuminate those areas of design that tend to remain hidden by the difficulty inherent in observing and expressing them.

Parting Words
Bringing up the concept of "Beginner's Mind" at a national meeting on beginning design education is a perfect opportunity to start discussing topics hitherto considered off-limit academically. It provides us with a chance to begin building a valid framework to save from extinction wisdom

gained over years of hard teaching practice. By sharing age old, Zen insights in relationship to design teaching, this paper humbly seeks to support this important enterprise.

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