INTERDISCIPLINARY THEORY TEACHING: CAN ONE SIZE REALLY FIT ALL?

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Introduction

The purpose of this article is to report on and discuss a course for National Diploma students recently introduced by the Faculty of Art, Design and Architecture at the University of Johannesburg. The Faculty has diverse departments including Architecture, Fine Arts and six design departments, namely, Multimedia Design, Graphic Design, Industrial Design, Fashion Design, Jewellery Design and Interior Design. After years of being housed in geographically dispersed locations, the Faculty recently relocated to one building, and is in the process of consolidating and rationalising its teaching programmes. One area of rationalisation has been modules in the history and theory of art and design, which have been reworked to provide a single offering to which most departments could subscribe. The course, titled Contextual Studies, consists of year modules to be phased in across three years from 2009 onward.

The first year module is a pilot offering for students from the following departments: Interior Design, Graphic Design, Multimedia Design, Visual Art, Jewellery Design and Industrial Design. The premise for the first year module is based on the notion that diachronic Western history (of art and design) is problematic as curriculum content. In this article, a brief outline of the current first year module is given and problems that have arisen are discussed. The curriculum for the second year module has been refined several times, based on the input received from departments, and its evolution is presented along with criticisms that have been encountered.

In short, the dilemma with the proposed new offering is that it replaces a series of previously taught history courses, but that its very premise problematises the notion of history. Departments that participate in the offering feel that the teaching of history remains imperative to their programmes, so the Contextual Studies modules are in the difficult position of attempting to employ both historical methodologies and alternative non-linear approaches to the notion of the history of art and design.

Background

The first year Contextual Studies course was conceived as an offering that provides students with approaches to the history and theory of design and art. Previously, modules consisted of material taught in a chronological manner in terms of the European conception of the history of art and design. The notion of design history is, however, perhaps problematic in itself since it is often seen as an extension of art history. In this sense its methodologies of inquiry could follow

the same approach as that of traditional art history, as outlined by theorists such as Erwin Panofsky, Heinrich Wolfflin or Ernst Gombrich. This is problematic though, because design was not formulated as a distinct area of aesthetic inquiry at the time these theories were conceived. Thus, the idea of design history as another version of art history is awkward.

Furthermore, the idea of history itself has in recent educational and research circles been questioned. This applies to the notion of Western history as having a beginning and an eventual 'end', running from antiquity to contemporary times (Elkins 2005:45-49). Following such a view of history, art history is conceived of as the chronological unfolding of movements and trends within art (one may refer to the 'history of progress'[1] as an example of this modernist notion of a cohesive and complete history). The idea of such a grand narrative of art history has been contested by thinkers such as Stuart Hall and Raymond Williams (Dikovitskaya 2005:79), but also in a more expansive sense by theorists such as Michel Foucault, Jean-François Lyotard and James Elkins.

Many contemporary thinkers who are interested in the notion of history, investigate it from the viewpoint of groups that were historically marginalised as a way to re-think the problematic of the grand narrative. Feminist thinkers such as Griselda Pollock (1988:66) purport that modernity was invented by European men in places such as nineteenth century Paris. Because of socio-cultural ideology, women were not in the position to feature as voices within the development of a movement such as modernity.[2] Ultimately, history in this sense is exclusive, and based on the observations of privileged European men. To contemporary designers the principles and debates that emerged from modernity are still of utmost importance; what is questionable, however, is how one should regard modernity. Where do the values of modernity leave contemporary female designers? Are they to become complicit in their own historical exclusion by taking part in a discourse that fundamentally omitted the female gender?

Similar questions arise when one considers other markers of cultural difference such as race. How do Africans feature in Western history? Where should African design position itself? In a recent discussion with first year Industrial Design students in a class on colonialism, they maintained that Scandinavian countries still dominate the design world in their field. Where does this leave them? One of the students mentioned that he aimed to be an African designer with European standards. This may indicate the problem associated with the 'history of progress'. It assumes that Europe is the standard with the implicit justification for the power relationships between European men and the so-called Others they encountered (such as in colonial contexts).

In recent years, there has been an upsurge in African design and art in the international arena. This is not only linked to global political awareness of Africa, but also to the notion that Africa has been excluded from many aspects of society in the West, such as education, the economy and academia. Exhibitions such as *Africa Remix* in 2007 supposedly began to give a voice to a continent excluded from Western art history except as something exotic and mythical. What is the correct conception of history that should be established? How can we investigate and teach history in Contextual Studies without ascribing to the questionable ideologies of modernity?

Lyotard's (1984) discussion on postmodernity may be helpful in this regard. He is seemingly of the opinion that the only way forward is through a process of

deconstruction. This means examining what was taken for granted as historical fact and deconstructing the ideologies inherent in these 'facts'. He advocates a critical approach to the notion of history. For him there are many contradictory histories and a cohesive version can never be established. In other words, excluded voices cannot simply be added onto history. WJT Mitchell, Malcolm Barnard, Stuart Hall, Nicholas Mirzoeff and James Elkins are among those who seem to align broadly with this approach. According to Margaret Dikovitskaya (2005:78), thinkers like WJT Mitchell believe that visuality is best approached not through the use of specific methodologies (such as that of art history), but rather through the use of a set of tools. A deconstructive approach is one such tool that a student may be taught to apply.

Based on this model, the first year of Contextual Studies intends to provide students with the skills to develop a questioning approach to the study of design and art. Students are encouraged to think and write critically about designs or artworks, without having to rely solely on historical knowledge. Visual analysis to deconstruct the supposed meaning behind cultural products is a large part of the process. The first year module comprises four units, the first of which is an introduction to 'visual culture studies'. Most of the authors cited thus far work in this field, also sometimes called visual studies. Visual studies or visual culture studies differs from design history. Visual studies does not limit itself to the nature of the cultural products it addresses, but embraces fields and disciplines not traditionally covered by art or design history, such as the mass media (Rony in Dikovitskaya 2005:74). Furthermore, it aims to 'chart new inventories and write local histories' in terms of contemporary perspectives around issues that are current (Dikovitskaya 2005:75). The field is interdisciplinary and lends itself to investigating the histories of art and design, although it is neither.

This idea was problematic for many of the departments in the Faculty of Art, Design and Architecture as it was felt that visual culture might not be (or sound) inclusive of design in terms of the study of space and objects. A concern expressed was that the approach may focus too much on the visual (at the expense of disciplines concerned with space), although this view is arguable. The debate remains unresolved, but as a result, the term 'visual culture' is no longer used in the course material. The fundamental thinking underpinning the approaches to visual studies remains relevant, however, in the skills that students develop and employ in Contextual Studies. Much of this hinges on the significance of representation as a process of communicating or leading to the construction of meaning.

Current first year curriculum

Before further discussing the importance of meaning it may be helpful to explicate the structure of the current first year module. There are four units of study taught across the year, governed by four themes. Within each unit there are two contact sessions per week: a lecture to all students, introducing the major theoretical premises of each unit of study (in about seven weeks per unit), and a tutorial elaborating on the lecture and focusing on prescribed reading material. Each unit has two prescribed readings. Every unit is assessed through two assignments, a shorter one earlier in the term and a longer essay at the end of the term. Since many students are not familiar with academic writing there is also one contact session per week of academic support that assists students with essay writing. At the end of the year, students write an examination. The appropriateness of this assessment structure could be questioned, but as this is a process that will be undertaken in 2010 it is not discussed here.

The notion of representation and meaning was introduced to first year students in the first unit of the course, titled: 'Representation (looking, writing, image and text)'. The unit aims at giving students a brief history of representation, which seems chronological, but the emphasis is placed on how representation leads to the construction of meaning, rather than on the facts contributing to the historical development of representation. Thus, the thinking is not to discuss theories abstractly, but rather to use historical and contemporary material to practise theory actively. Instead of providing students with facts to remember (as the idea of legitimate history as grand narrative would), they were engaged in questioning what they encountered (which were historical artworks, designed objects and spaces). Texts by Stuart Hall and Malcolm Barnard were assigned.

Despite the intention to use historical material as a point of departure, some concerns surfaced. The Interior Design Department, amongst others, was concerned with the lack of background knowledge provided to the first year students. Would there be an opportunity in the Contextual Studies curriculum to investigate technical histories such as architectural history rooted in antiquity and Roman architecture? This question of historical background knowledge resurfaced throughout the year from various departments. The counter proposal to address this concern was that the second year module would focus more on historical material, as students would have developed a suitable grounding in critical thinking skills by then.

The second unit of study is conceived around the theme of the modern city, and titled 'The city as visual space'. Urban space is an interesting background for the introduction of some modernist theory, as it enables the foregrounding of industrialisation as well as gender theory. Many authors have seen a correlation between modernist thinking and gender roles as they are played out in the Impressionist paintings of Parisian life in the nineteenth century. A text by Griselda Pollock (1988) was assigned to the students, as she focuses on the division between public and private space and how women were relegated to the domestic realm of the interior and men developed sophisticated manners of interacting with the spectacle of the city, such as the discerning and wandering gaze of the *flâneur*. Another text by Nancy Forgione (2005) dealing with the modernising of Paris during *Haussmannisation* was also prescribed. Students were further tasked with photographically documenting public and private spaces in Johannesburg and with comparing the use of these spaces by different genders to the socio-cultural depictions of Paris by the Impressionists.

Since the first year offering is introductory and serves to provide students with approaches rather than facts, the curriculum aims to avoid well-defined movements and schools of thought within art and design history. Thus, the emphasis of the unit is on ideologies of space, and not on the technical and aesthetic theory of the built environment. Including technical histories was not considered possible in this unit, although there is much discussion of *Haussmannisation*[3] in the material.

A concern that arose around this unit was the level of reading required from the students. Some departments felt that the readings were too sophisticated for first year students, and that the students found the texts inaccessible. Furthermore, the introduction of the *flâneur* seemed inappropriate to some departments, as it was deemed subject matter better suited to more mature students. Although these concerns will be taken into consideration when the module is

offered in 2010, it is notable that students performed particularly well in writing essays for this unit, and Interior Design students in particular seemed to have found the subject matter relevant.

In order to provide students with discipline and context specific visual material in the second semester, the third unit for the year addresses Western encounters with Africa. The unit is titled 'Encountering cultures: Africa', with the sub-theme of colonial theory. A text on colonialism from *Selves and others* was chosen (Holloway, Kane, Roos & Titlestad 2004), as well as a text by Stuart Hall (1997). Both books are for students, and are considerably more accessible than the readings for the second unit. The essay question for the unit was discipline specific, and focused on colonial stereotypes of the 'savage' African as found in contemporary art and design. The emphasis on discipline specificity allowed students to apply or deconstruct colonial theory within contemporary art and design as manifested in their immediate practice. This allowed students to explore the relevance of concepts and theories that may seem 'outdated' in their historical nature.

When the learning guide was distributed to students, some were a little outraged, however, and the concern with specific histories resurfaced. How could they find colonial stereotypes in Interior Design or Industrial Design? It seemed to students that colonial theory was not technically evident anywhere in Interior Design. Through much discussion and visual analysis, examples of stereotypes were found in every design discipline and students who were concerned about finding discipline specific material to write about succeeded in writing their essays.

The fourth unit of study focuses on digital culture and the motif of the cyborg, specifically in the film *Blade Runner* directed by Ridley Scott (1982). The unit, titled 'Blade Runner technological dystopia' takes as its premise the importance of technology in the manufacturing processes present in much of industrialised design. Throughout modernity, technological progress has been seen not only as an improving force in terms of lifestyle and industry, but also as a potential threat to the humanity of society (Sparke 2004:139-149). This is embodied by the 'replicants' in Scott's film. A text by Douglas Williams (1988) was selected which combines the approaches applied thus far in the year, namely, ideology criticism with a focus on difference and gender. The second reading, by Michael Webb (1987), discusses the notion of the city as monstrous motif in science fiction films, with specific reference to the set design of the film. The essay question asked students to discuss the notion of dystopia as theorised by Williams, as well as to find evidence of the specific themes Williams proposes in still images from the film. Film study allowed students to explore the constructed nature of contemporary culture, as various designed layers of the film were unpacked in lectures. The aim of this unit is to increase students' awareness of cultural products as consciously constructed to convey meaning. Thus, no element of the film appeared as it did owing to accident, every aspect had been planned.

Modernity has been central, though implicit, to the course thus far. In an interview with Thomas Gunning, Dikovitskaya (2005:79) writes that he theorises the alteration of the modern experience as intrinsic to the field of visual studies. This is owing to the proliferation of visual media since the inception of industrial reproductive processes such as photography and film, which implied that the visual transgressed the boundaries of what was traditionally seen as culture (in terms of art). Images became abundant and available to many people. This is also sometimes called the pictorial turn (Mitchell 1994:11-34). In contemporary terms, since

modernity, visual culture has become both the visual experience and the record of that experience, which means that one can study it in a manner different to the methodologies favoured by art history. This also relates to the idea that meaning does not reside in the visual object itself, but in the experiencing of that object. In this sense, an historical movement like modernity remains important to the study of the history of art and design, although it needs contestation as some of its premises have become problematic.

The aim in the first year of study is to provide students with basic tools for the development of a questioning approach to the history of art and design. As outlined thus far, the history of design can no longer be thought of as similar to the history of art. History itself should be questioned. When students have acquired the capacity to question cultural products efficiently, they are ready for the proposed second year, which deals with seminal movements and developments such as Modernity itself.

Proposed second year curriculum

The second year module demonstrates an attempt to include specific historical content as requested by staff in the various departments. It simultaneously attempts to ease the transition between the old diachronic approach to art and design history and a new thematic approach, comparable to that employed in visual studies. The challenge lies in accommodating the requirements of all the different disciplines, who were asked to compile lists of historical material or specific information that they consider vital for inclusion. A further constraint was imposed by the Dean who does not wish to present streamed offerings (i.e. a shared offering for the first half of the year and then modules aimed at the different disciplines for the second half of the year), which was the structure initially proposed. Two versions of modules are discussed below; the first was rejected and the reasons for its unsuitability are included. This is followed by a reworked curriculum, which was accepted for 2010 as the result of a process of negotiation.

Proposal 1

Considering that the mandate was to provide a single offering but to make it relevant to each discipline, the suggestion was that, as in first year, there should be a single lecture given to all students once a week. This lecture would consist of an historical overview of the period under discussion. It would include an introduction to the main theorists, the social implications, political changes and the effects of all these aspects on visual and design culture. While visual examples should be referred to as illustrations of the effects of these theories and historical events, this should not be a long and involved visual history but a theoretical background from which to approach the visual history provided in the individual lectures. The lectures would also introduce relevant readings to the students and time should be allocated for unpacking and explaining the readings if necessary.

There would then be a second set of classes each week that would be discipline specific individual lectures concentrating on the analysis and discussion of visual examples. Such discussion would relate these examples to the broader social and theoretical context introduced in the main lectures. These classes could also take into consideration aspects like building innovations and interior styles for Interior Design, for example, or the development of practical objects and technological innovations for Industrial Design.

Stylistic developments in painting and sculpture would be the focus for Visual Art. Tasks such as essays and projects would be allocated and dealt with during these lectures where the prescribed readings from the main lecture could be applied to analyses of specific examples. Each of these lectures could thus be tailored and adapted to the requirements of each discipline.

The initial proposal included a broad overview of possible units for second year, taking into account much of the material currently being taught in the various disciplines and which was requested by each department. Firstly, to make up for the lack of ancient history in first year, and in response to suggestions from the Interior Design department, a unit was outlined on 'The role and influence of Classicism, from Ancient Greece to Postmodernism'. This covers an investigation of the 'canon' resulting in idealism and the impact this has had on aesthetics from ancient Greece through to the present day. It also investigates social implications such as the way Classicism is used to enhance the dignity and grandeur of the state and religion in architecture, painting, sculpture and design throughout the ages. The module culminates in an overview of the ironic re-use of Classicism in postmodern art and design.

In practice, certain elements of Classicism would be emphasised, where relevant, for the different disciplines. Interior Design, for example, could begin by understanding the attributes of the classical orders, and then investigate the way classical architectural vocabulary and sculptural decoration has been used over the years, adapted through various classical revivals, to imbue government buildings with official stature and gravitas, or provide private homes with an air of grandeur. Classical proportions in ancient architecture have also inspired modernist architectural manifestations such as modular proportion in Le Corbusier's architecture and subtle references to a Classical Greek temple can turn an industrial building such as Peter Behren's *Turbine Factory* into a temple to the all powerful 'industrial cult' in Germany.

Visual Art, on the other hand, could consider the use of the Classical ideal, both in its original manifestation and its revival during the Renaissance, to produce images of timeless perfection. Arnold Hauser (1977:82), when discussing Renaissance idealism in *The social history of art,* notes that 'Classical art describes this elite society as it wants to see itself and as it wants to be seen.' A striving for order, permanence, calm, stability and continuity is seen in the lack of transient emotions and physical perfection of Renaissance Classicism. There are ongoing references to classical perfection throughout art history, including examples of contemporary art that could be analysed as part of this module. It is not possible, within the scope of this paper, to explain this application for each of the disciplines in detail, but hopefully it is clear from these examples how the emphases can shift to suit the requirements of each course.

The second proposed unit provides an overview of 'The Enlightenment and the Industrial Revolution'. This unit begins with the search for scientific knowledge and philosophical discussion in the eighteenth century and the effect this had on the visual and applied arts. Two events in particular, according to Mary Pratt (1992:15), changed the understanding that the European elite had of themselves and their relation to the rest of the world. The first event was the publishing of a scientifically based biological classificatory system by the Swedish naturalist Carl Linne (known as Linnaeus in Latin), called Systema Naturae in 1735.[4] The second was the La Condamine scientific expedition, also in 1735, which set out to determine the exact

shape of the earth. Both of these events led to a fascination with collecting and classifying scientific information. Linnaeus in particular created structures of knowledge based on identifying and naming, thus placing the natural world into regulated easily accessible information aimed at the educated Europeans (usually male). The intense public interest aroused by these developments also led to the proliferation of other studies in classifying the world and its peoples during the later eighteenth century, and the hunt for knowledge, often in unknown lands, became a popular European pastime.

It is important for students to understand that this thirst for knowledge, order and classification resulted in an attempt to control the world through access to learning (an access that was carefully delineated by a scholarly knowledge of Latin). One also cannot imagine the Industrial Revolution with its explosion of scientific knowledge, colonialism, technological innovation and huge social change without the preceding Enlightenment. The eighteenth and nineteenth centuries are thus the source of the structures that have dominated our learning institutions and which are now being questioned in postmodern paradigms of teaching practice, as mentioned earlier in relation to the field of visual studies and the work of authors such as Mitchell and Hall. These 'scientific' regulatory frameworks can be identified as the foundation for the hegemony of elitist Western knowledge systems with their linearity, rationality, intellectual logic, patriarchal and colonial domination and the philistinism evidenced in Victorian attitudes towards 'the other' thanks to so called 'scientific' developments like social Darwinism. Such an emphasis on rationality and logic also developed into the Modernist conception of a unified history as discussed earlier in this article.

The Industrial Revolution is also the catalyst for Modernism, which is the proposed topic of the third unit and covers the historical, social and theoretical contexts and various manifestations of Modernism from its inception in the late nineteenth century onwards. This unit also includes the shift towards the postmodern condition (from the mid-twentieth century) and the resulting manifestations in visual culture. Having debunked the notion of a diachronic historical approach at the outset, it is somewhat ironic that the proposed unit appears to develop chronologically and is also based largely in western ideas of linear progression. However, the notion of cause and effect has to be taken into consideration when dealing with a history of ideas culminating in Modernism which is, ultimately, a history of western logic, reason and knowledge, and which is intrinsically tied to a chronological development. The suggestion is, therefore, to allow the history of Modernism to develop along suitably modernist lines and rather to concentrate on the offshoots of the postmodern era subsequently as thematic self-contained units.

Wherever possible and appropriate, the lectures on the proposed topics should include a discussion of the effects and manifestations of each theme within a South African context. For example, the beginnings of colonialism and doctrine of difference that is investigated in the module on eighteenth century Enlightenment and the Victorian era ultimately gave birth to the ideology of apartheid. Such connections must be identified during the course to ensure the relevance of historical material.

The fourth unit covers 'Art/Craft/Design and the Environment' and includes debates that first arose with the Arts and Crafts Movement regarding the advantages and disadvantages of technology on aesthetics. Wider issues around the art/design/craft debate

in contemporary creative discourses would also be considered, leading on to the later effects of technology on the environment and the introduction of 'green design' to counter this, beginning with 'design for need' and the theories of Buckminster Fuller and Victor Papanek and moving on to more recent theorists in this field. Examples of activist art and design aimed specifically at raising awareness about ecological problems (and resulting social problems) can also be dealt with here.

This outline of the proposed second year module was disseminated to all the heads of departments for comments or suggestions. Some criticism was received, particularly from the Interior Design Department, who subsequently withdrew from the programme without allowing us to address their problems. The main concerns cited were that the proposed units lacked specific criteria to fulfil their particular needs, chiefly, relevance to discipline specific and related discipline examples; the application, adaptation and evolution of building technology; and reference to architectural and related design terminology, principles and elements.

In response it should be pointed out that the discipline specific lectures could be devised in such a way so as to cover any particular technical as well as historical knowledge required, as is the case in the present history curriculum. It would not therefore differ markedly from the technical information that is inherent in the present teaching of architecture to Interior Design students and should not disadvantage them in any way. Such criticism arises from a lack of acknowledgement that a historical course arguably needs to engage with broader social issues and to consider belief systems in an understanding of the creative output of any particular society or time period. Nothing is created in a vacuum but rather as a response to a multitude of influences, so both social *and* technological developments must be taken into consideration when looking at material culture. This is in keeping with the visual studies methodologies outlined as possible strategies earlier.

Nonetheless, it is understandable that one cannot impose a specific curriculum or structure on any discipline, so the formulation of a 'one size fits all' offering is fraught with difficulties. The decision to take part in this programme rests with each head of department who is free to decide on appropriate material for their students. Other criticism received was from the Multimedia Department who felt that the historical emphasis was to the detriment of their interest in digital media. This feedback led to a reworking and adaptation of the course to accommodate their needs. After the withdrawal of Interior Design, it was possible to reduce the unit on Classicism (which was a specific request from that Department) and allow for an entire unit on Globalisation and Digital Technology aimed specifically at the requirements of the Multimedia Department but of undoubted value to other art and design students. Classicism can instead be included as an introduction to the unit on 'The Enlightenment and the Industrial Revolution'. After responses had been received from each head of department, the offering was refined and has been accepted for 2010 in the following format.

Proposal 2

As before, two lectures per week will be presented, but unlike the initial proposal, each of these lectures will be given to all four departments simultaneously for the first four weeks of each seven-week term. In these first weeks, the bulk of the theoretical and contextual material will be covered in a concentrated

block. In the last three weeks of term there will be discipline specific individual lectures and tutorials with time allocated for assisting students with assignments and readings. This structure is flexible according to the content of the unit taught and the requirements of the different departments. It should also accommodate the consideration of local and African circumstances.

The content of this revised module includes an expanded version of 'The Enlightenment and the Industrial Revolution' in the first term. This unit begins with a brief chronological introduction to the Enlightenment, through reference to antiquity, where the importance of Classicism in art and design is raised. The subsequent content is as discussed above in the first proposal for this module, culminating in the Industrial Revolution which 'sets the scene' for the emergence of Modernist thought in the twentieth century.

The second unit presents Modernism as discussed in the earlier proposal including the brief introduction to the shift towards the postmodern condition and the resulting manifestations in design and art. By way of introducing postmodern theory, reference can be made to the importance of *bricolage* and the use of dissonant aesthetics such as the ironic revival of classical thought in postmodern design, which also ensures that some of the material originally conceived as part of the Classical unit will be covered here. The third unit consists of 'Art/Craft/Design and the Environment' as discussed above and with no changes.

The fourth term presents a new unit on 'Globalisation and Digital Technology' which looks at globalisation and discourses of digital media in contemporary art and design. This includes new technologies of looking, manufacture and communication, and their importance in influencing art and design trends, and vice versa. Globalisation has had concrete, positive effects on art and design culture, and new technologies facilitate new creative projects for design and art. The unit also explores discourses around global culture and the disappearance of cultural specificity in the face of technocratic utopian societies. A brief introduction may be made to Baudrillard's notion of the simulacrum, as the proliferation of digital technology has implications on culture.

Conclusion

The first year module met the satisfaction of most departments who participated in its pilot year of implementation. The long process of negotiation with each department has culminated in a second year module acceptable to the participating departments as a pilot project for 2010. Changes and adjustments have been continually made to the curriculum and module structure according to departmental feedback. There are still a few misgivings about the relevance of some material in the second year offering and a 'wait and see' attitude from some departmental heads who do not feel that 'one size' is necessarily a good fit for everyone. Previously most departments concentrated on a policy of vocational teaching with specific practical outcomes reflecting the nature of both design and art practitioners. Theory was taught by individual departments with very specific content and outcomes. The new course thus addresses an entrenched system of teaching that is based on the old Technikon emphasis on practicality and linear history, rather than the more theoretical and thematic approach favoured by university systems. The University of Johannesburg is officially a 'Comprehensive University' that offers both diplomas and degrees. The combined theory offering, Contextual Studies, therefore

attempts to steer a middle course by raising the theoretical input, while simultaneously providing specifics for each discipline.

The second year module builds upon a foundation established in first year where the emphasis is on critical thinking, analysis and argument. It is possible, at this stage, to take advantage of the digital generation where information is accessible at the touch of a computer keyboard; teaching can therefore concentrate on how to engage meaningfully with the available knowledge. By second year, the students should be able to approach the historical material with criticality and understanding and make informed connections when constructing an academic argument. The hope is that whatever the content, these classes will engender debate and critical enquiry amongst the students and that this grounding will encourage a positive attitude towards the culture of research that is fostered at the University of Johannesburg. It seems that it is possible to allow students to explore the history of design and art, without implicating themselves in the problematic and exclusive discourses of Modernity and history as Western grand narratives.

Notes

1 The 'history of progress' is discussed by Jurgen Habermas in his seminal discussions on Postmodernity and Modernity, although that is not his terminology. It conceives of history as a European project hinging on the ideals of progress in knowledge and the social and moral betterment of society that is related to the Enlightenment (Habermas & Ben-Habib 1981:4). Adorno sees such a totalising view of human progress as problematic, and foreshadows the deconstructionist thinking of authors like Lyotard in his rejection of such a view of history (Adorno in Phelan 1993:607-610).

2 Modernity is here understood as it was discussed by thinkers such as Baudelaire, Benjamin and eventually Habermas as rooted in the revolutionary thinking of the Enlightenment towards progress, freedom, rationality and individuality (Habermas & Ben-Habib 1981).

3 Baron Eugene Haussman's project of urban renewal in nineteenth-century Paris is discussed in some detail by Forgione (2005).

4 This was a descriptive system designed to categorise all plant forms on the planet according to their reproductive parts.

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