

# **Experiencing the Cross**

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Graduate Seminar I

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Fall 2009

In the name of Plato, Simon, Barnlund, Bergson, Rogers, and Dewey, amen. Had Richard McKeon diagrammed his rendition of “the cross” according to my own personal resonance, mapping the multiple perspectives of interaction and communication would reveal that my individual taste adheres to the aforementioned authors. I say this based on the unit that is my childhood, which is the era containing the most unique example of human interaction in my life and also the era that has influenced me to act as a designer in present day.

With much intent, my parents applied what they may or may not have known as design theory and thinking into raising me, which indirectly contributed to my own approach. Our house was in the country. Both of my parents worked full-time; I have no brothers or sisters, and had no television either. All I knew was an environment that they had created for me, which included, or rather didn't include, all of these things. In a nutshell, my parents agreed with John Dewey when he wrote,

“...the only way in which adults consciously control the kind of education which the immature get is by controlling the environment in which they act, and hence think and feel. We never educate directly, but indirectly by means of the environment.”

Thus, my vision of applying design practice mainly revolves around the variation of roles environment plays in each perspective.

My parents were never forthright about anything, and although it seemed as if I were cut off from the world, have treated me like an adult since birth by encouraging me to make my own decisions regardless of their view. They knew as I do now that the *environment* contributing to my experience (*my life*) was an active force—Especially, as it were, an *isolating* environment. Of course, they could not control my entire surroundings or all of its elements; I did have my school-life.

Some believe that society exists within communication and some believe that society needs communication to exist. For me, the experience of driving an hour to school each day, communicating at a constant—with information being transmitted to me and hopefully received in the classroom (tests later proving accurate or not)—, and then driving home and not needing to communicate at all led me to believe that society exists within communication, and that I existed outside society. Past 4 P.M., my environment reacted more to me than me to it. Past 4 P.M., the representational outside of me and representational inside of me blurred together. Past 4 P.M., and until 9 A.M., I only communicated with two people if at all. The walls of our house enclosed an empty canvas, as Henri Bergson would say. Here, our environment was a representation of how we reflected on the day's communication—a perspective we only took upon interacting with one another outside of “society.” This was my “person-to-person” interaction of childhood according to memory—Time with my parents; they exercised the design of personal communication similar to how they exercised the design of my environment. They wanted an extra degree of freedom to construct the world for me, and thus maybe yield a more powerful experience. They did want to subconsciously, but not forcefully, stimulate my life direction. As Carl Rogers said of more personable interaction,

“The only learning that influences behavior is self-discovered, self-appropriated, or truth that has been personally appropriated and assimilated in experience—it cannot be communicated to another.”

So what does my upbringing have to do with my future in design? First, I don't think my parents did such a bad job—At the same time, when I tell them this, my mom says, “It was all you.” This confirms my previous theory—That in the end, fate occurred by my own determination.

In some respects life can be seen as linear, but mine has come at inception, development, fulfillment without chronological order. And already in my design work, I have begun to apply the “Delaney approach” of my past. Recently, for graduate design studio, my class was asked to develop a motion piece about the “future of reading.” I thought of the following ideas to be included in my project: 1) the people involved in reading are reader and writer (one interaction two-person interaction), 2) a book is an object, format, or a channel (*if you will*), 3) a story is an environment that you interact with, which has parts that culminate into one whole experience, 4) and finally, the connection that books offer is what we *need* and *prize* them for. It is what we cannot explain about them that makes them—Which is also, perhaps, the downfall, as people cannot easily come up with the answer to, “What is the future of reading?” My own answer developed towards my fascination with my childhood, or previous environment—the place you go away from society and away from direct person-to-person communication. Because I wanted to portray that both reader and story were active forces, I needed to show that through a book, people share common experiences because they are affected by the story’s environment, or the experience’s medium. I realized that the format, or channel, did not matter—It was not about what “shell” the words and experience developed in or that they were developed accurately, but more that the experience was maximized. Also, I found that it was not about the connection that the *reader* made with the book—it was about the greater connection that pre-existed within the book and existence. I wrote a poem to connect the dots and used it as a voice overlay in the film:

*You and me*

*How can the covers*

*And now the coverless be judged*

*Without you and without me?*

*What are keys, characters, pens, pixels*

*And paper*

*Without you and without me?*

*Together we have held format, after format, after format*

*We have spoken through these walls*

*But these walls, these formats that separate us*

*Are only there to hold the ceiling.*

*The experience*

*Is not yours, not mine,*

*But ours.*

*We aren't so different now*

*You and me.*

The consummation of my film ended much like the consummation of my childhood. After a subtle qualitative progression, all parts integrated, and once it had finished, the viewer could (and did) sit back and say, “that was *an* experience.” The approach I had taken to making the film mirrored how the user could experience it—perhaps the first sign of “doing and undergoing,” something I will touch upon later.

But this “cross” I speak of—it’s a casual subject in interaction design and it can be rigidly categorized to suit academic speak. But even in its own content does it argue that the person analyzing it must understand the *greater* meaning of human interaction and communication aside from a few buzzwords and concepts. The four points surround the subject I have been talking on,

human interaction and communication. Each point of the cross represents a different perspective on a different variable relative to communication. At the beginning of this paper I mentioned authors sequentially, making an analogy to the Christian-Catholic “Sign of the Cross.”

Therefore, I will start with the “Father.”

The top of the cross discusses the interaction of “person and cosmos.” Other descriptions for it include “participation” (interacting from a common ground with something greater), “knowledge,” and “assimilation” (finding unity among differences). This approach touches upon what manifests beyond experience, and the sole uniting connection that shines through everything. It places reliance on an entity that is greater than the being, because beings are mortal, and souls—the material of this greater entity—are neither created nor destroyed and thus move by themselves (as the nature of humanity moves) in time (Plato).

The left side of the cross discusses the interaction of “person to person.” Other descriptions for it include “transaction” (denoting the exchange of information and experience), “discrimination,” “knower” (depicting that it is about the person(s) involved in the experience), and “interactor” (depicting that it is about the interactor(s) involved in the experience). This approach, as one can tell, happens all in the minds of humans. In communication, it often takes the form of persuasive rhetoric—the desire to influence a mind through words (Plato). Communication, in this area, takes place outside of the reality of humans, which is located internally (Bergson). Thus, each human experience is extremely individual and personally unique. Meaning can only be reached by mutual understanding, which is said to infer some kind of “personal growth.”

The bottom of the cross discusses the interaction of “object to object.” Other descriptions for it include “interface” (the use of stimuli/response interaction), “construction” (a complex whole

that represents the building and the finishing of an experience), “knowable” (emphasis is that there is matter to be known), and “interactable” (emphasis is that there is matter to be interacted with). This approach sees not effects but actions—It sees a stimuli and a response. It sees a transmitter, a signal through a channel, and a receiver (Weaver 1949). It does not see consequence nor look for outer meaning; it is physical in nature. Herbert Simon describes it as seeing the world as an “artificial” one, where the environment can be built little by little to better convenience communication. Communication here is looked at more technically; the authors of this view discuss how best to get across and formulate a message (i.e. using redundancy, using a freedom of choice when distributing information).

The right and final side of the cross discusses the interaction of “person to environment.” Other descriptions for it include “known,” “interaction,” and “resolution.” This side is particularly interesting because it relies on cohesion of force. What Dewey has called “doing and undergoing” represents a cycle of what is happening and what will happen—A duo that cannot be separated from one another, similar to the approach’s idea that what we know is what we experience. Therefore, shared knowledge is shared experience, where life is often the experience in question. Life is not seen as emotional, but the element of emotion does hold life together. This kind of poetic thinking, particularly elaborated on by the Greek philosopher Aristotle, will lead us into the differences of the cross’ sides.

While the top of the cross seems to have a poetic nature to it because of its belief in a self-moving soul, it stresses this belief in firm reality and not in possibility varying by experience. Both find a commonality of sorts between people—The cosmos side calling it a “common ground” and the environment side calling it a “shared experience.” The weakness I find in their comparison is

that they cannot seem to see that under certain circumstances they are both “right.” The cosmos might find that life *is* a shared experience because it *is* common ground. The environment approach finds the environment the medium for experience, where environment could be the “connection” or the “self-moving soul.”

Yet the “person to environment” approach does have many strengths, the first including the way it views the nature of form. Kenneth Burke describes form as the “arousing, fulfillment of desires.” He goes on to discuss different kinds of form. What one can notice about these types is that many are not necessarily sequential. Form in the person-to-person sense is often seen as a series of transactions, a view that allows time to shape form in a linear fashion and sees it in a traceable, detail-specific order. This comes from assuming that people reach meaning through conclusion—In this case, form *is* sequential. Yet because meaning has the capacity to arise out of just human beings, other forces arrange form in the person-to-environment way of inception, development, and fulfillment (Dewey 1934). Analyze the bottom of the cross, and you’ll find that if environment takes any shape, it’s just the placeholder of the communication. Again, if its force takes any shape of pushing back, it’s deemed “noise.” Yet the environment has the ability to send feedback (co aligning with Dewey’s notion of “doing and undergoing”) on the cross’ right side, where feedback is not a subject of interest in the bottom of the cross. Each side of McKeon’s cross contributes some sort of significance to the “right” approach to interaction and communication—and some sides of it more than others. Yet if we can learn something from all sides, it is that we must take parts into account to make a whole.

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