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Discursivity and Creativity: Implementing Pigrum's Multi-Mode Transitional Practices in Upper Division Creative Production Courses

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Abstract: *This paper discusses the practical implementation of Derek Pigrum's multi-mode model of transitional practices* (2009) *within the context of upper division production courses in an interaction design curriculum. The notion of teaching creativity was practically and theoretically connected to a general notion of "discursivity." The concept of "discursivity" was related to students' overall ability to discuss, describe, and engage in a conversation about their creative work. We present a study of (1)the ways in which Pigrum's (ibid) transitional modes can be translated into a variety of course activities, and (2) discuss challenges and outcomes of directly engaging student discursivity in their creative output.*

Keywords: Teaching creativity, multi-mode transitional practices, discursivity, art and design education

1. Introduction

Teaching creativity is a challenging task. On numerous occasions, we have heard students majoring in Interactive Arts and Technology complain: "Everybody tells us to be creative, but nobody teaches us how to be creative." Instructional staff members at the School of Interactive Arts and Technology (SIAT) at Simon Fraser University (SFU) find themselves under increasing pressure to find more 'practical' parameters of teaching and encouraging creativity. To date, Derek Pigrum's *Teaching Creativity: Multi-mode Transitional Practices* (2009) is the most consistent, book-length theorization on the philosophical and practical aspects of teaching creativity. The research presented here – conducted across two semesters and four courses – constitutes a systematic exploration of applying Pigrum's model to assignments in upper division courses focusing on interactive narrative (*IAT 313 Narrative and New Media*), sound design (*IAT 340 Sound Design*), and new media & video production (*IAT 344 Moving Images; IAT 443 Interactive Video*). Extending on Pigrum's multi-modal model, we also implemented the notion of "discursivity" as an essential practical and theoretical foundation of creative practices. We define "discursivity" as students' overall ability to discuss, describe, and engage in a conversation about their creative work as well as situate their creative practices within theoretical and conceptual frames.

2. Research Questions

In order to conceptualize the relationship between discursivity and creativity (as a creative and learning outcome), we formulated the following research questions at the beginning of our study:

- In what ways can discursivity be implemented into production courses and contribute to students' practice and critical understanding of their creative work?
- How translatable is Pigrum's multi-mode model of transitional practices to the kinds of coursework SIAT students undertake in upper division creative production courses?
- Will the application of the pedagogic pattern of rich questions and dialogue, combined with discourse-engaging reading and writing activities improve the discursive and creative skills in upper division SIAT students?
- In particular, will such a pedagogic intervention result in improved abilities of students to create discourse around their work?

3. Methodology

The study was conducted across two semesters, structured as Phase 1 and Phase 2. To address the issues formulated in the research questions, we conducted student surveys for the two courses of investigation during Phase 1 - *IAT 340 Sound Design* and *IAT 344 Moving Images*. The surveys were conducted online, using SFU's web survey tool. In Phase 1 of our project, we noticed a tendency to use the web surveys as an opportunity to complain about work load, TA attitudes, and other issues which were not directly related to the objective of the surveys. Accounting for this problem, we decided to analyze the efficiency of the instructional methods in terms of practical results and students' active performance (meaning quality of students' productions) during the second phase of our report (Phase 2). In order to maintain research objectivity, we measured the quality of students' productions against the following criteria:

- Internal evaluation of learning processes (performed by Teaching Assistants)
- External evaluation of students' projects (a person outside SFU community, but within the field of creative artistic practices was invited to express opinion about students' work)
- Evaluation of production qualities of students' projects between *IAT 344 Moving Images* Fall 2012 and Spring 2013 iterations of the course
- Comparison of content and formal qualities of students' artistic statements between *IAT 340 Sound Design* in Fall 2012 and *IAT 313 Narrative and New Media* in Spring 2013

The above four criteria combined together address each of the research questions through a mix of different aspects and perspectives. In addition, these criteria interrelate in their ability to evaluate not only the teaching and learning objectives of the courses under investigation, but also the level at which these objectives were achieved by the students.

4. Outline of Pigrum's Multi-mode Teaching and Learning Transitional Practices

Building on the foundational work of Donald Winnicott, who elaborated the classical theories of the transitional object and experiences in earlier psycholanalytic and developmental discourses – most famously, the theory of the "security blanket" as the space of negotiation between self and other differentiations in the child, the imaginary object that forms a bridge between inner subjective space and external reality– Pigrum's (2009) notion of "transitional practices" distinguishes between three foundational meta-modes of teaching and learning practices, which are then subdivided into lower-level patterns of interacting and overlapping practices. The three foundational meta-modes are: (1) Sign modes; (2) Operative modes; and (3) Place modes. These are briefly discussed in the following sections.
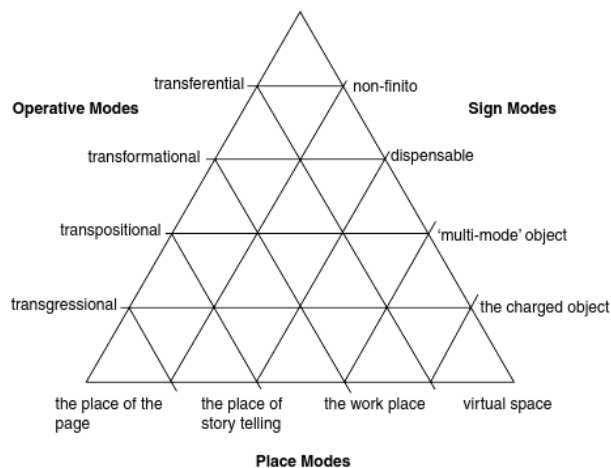
Figure 1. Pigrum's suggested multi-modes of teaching and learning. *Note.* Adapted from "*Teaching Creativity: Multi-mode Transitional Practices",* by D. Pigrum, 2009, London; New York: Continuum.

These three meta-modes are generally related to language and culture (the Sign mode), pragmatics (the Operative mode), and situatedness (the Place mode).

4.1 Sign Modes

This meta-mode treats different types of signs as representational spaces which embody multiple, complex, and imbricate significations. Pigrum identifies four sub-levels of this mode: non-finito sign use, "ready-to-hand" dispensable surface of inscription, the "multi-mode" object, and the "charged" object. The non-finito sign use includes practices such as: approaching ideas and definition with an open mind; modification of creative and progressive practices; leaving space for doing, undoing, and redoing; allowing for the inventive power of indeterminacy; and, implementing sketches as a draft of a thought. The "ready-to-hand" dispensable surface of inscription focuses on the pragmatic logistics of learning and advocates for: working on whatever happens to be there; allowing for things displayed by both "us" and "others"; and, a free play of or between absence and presence. The "multi-mode" object focuses on blurred modes of expression which transgress linguistic or visual representations. These may include: shifts between different modes of representation, such as writing, diagramming, and drawing; and, the inclusion of draft-like entities that involve the use of more than one sign mode. The "charged" object mode focuses on identifying the "charge" that objects have for us. These "charges" may serve like clues that can be followed, evolved, confronted, or conformed to.

4.2 Operative Modes

The operative modes of teaching and learning encapsulate practices which support a journey through the unknown and the transgression of limiting boundaries. The operative modes include: transferential mode, transformational mode, transpositional mode, and transgressional mode. The transferential mode is used in the recording of artifacts of particular interest that can be carried over to present creative activity. The recording can be a copy, note, or records (referential drawings) which serve as a stock of accumulated memories. The transformational mode emphasizes the importance of teaching and learning practices through the conversion of

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one form into another. Activities may include: separating and combining forms, displacing activities, and learning through getting lost. The transpositional mode focuses on the importance of the *process* of learning on formation of ideas. In this mode, there is no time for reifying operations, where all essential information is highly condensed or contracted and thus constructs a higher order of integration, condensation, and displacement. The transgressional mode is the mode of undoing based on things that are not permanently anything. This mode signifies the transgression of the figurative in the direction of the figural.

4.3 Place Modes

The modes of place focus on the things that can be learned from the idiosyncratic structure and transparency of the places that surround us. The place modes include: the ontopology of the workplace, the place of the page, the place of the story, and the mode of the virtual space. The ontopology of the workplace connects the value of being to its situation – to the stable and presentable determination of a locality and the topos of a territory (Derrida via Pigrum, 2009). This mode implies a focus on situations where there are complex patterns to be perceived and where recognition of these patterns enforces certain moves and procedures for solution. The place of the page mode juxtaposes different learning outcomes from various note-taking practices – typing versus handwriting, for example. The place of the story mode discusses how practices are always communicated through stories and the importance of keeping a record of creative and research endeavors as a form of storytelling. The mode of virtual space engages with the shift in sensory and interactive modalities of encountering in virtual environments. Pigrum argues that virtual spaces impose and result in sadness and isolation. Here, we want to mention that there is substantial room for revision in Pigrum's theoretical framing of virtual space. The online sociality of "digital natives" is not explored or understood in a contemporary learning scene. What is of importance is to support online student communities with in-person (in real space) meetings to nurture communication within groups and teams.

5. Mapping Pigrum's Modes to Coursework

The teaching and learning methods implemented in the courses included in this study were aimed at enforcing discursive practices that supported students' creativity in their coursework. We introduced new teaching and learning strategies to the courses which were derived from Pigrum's multi-mode transitional practices of teaching creativity. These teaching strategies are discussed throughout sections 5.1 -5.3 of this paper.

5.1 IAT 313 Narrative and New Media

IAT 313 Narrative and New Media is an upper division course which aims at exploring narrative strategies in multimedia environments.

Critical/Creative Reading

Students were assigned five "dense" essays and were expected to "steal" and apply ideas (hypothetically, as a creative brainstorming exercise), toward revising their first narrative project. Ten essays were posted online and students were asked to choose five of these as fertile territory in which to creatively steal ideas (rather than regard them as texts that they would have to write research papers about). This activity corresponds to Pigrum's *non-finito sign use, transformational mode, transgressional mode*, and *place of story* teaching and learning practices.

Remediation

Students were asked to transform a linear narrative (short story, video or comic) into a non-linear narrative – in our case, a video game. Students were also assigned two major (dense, high page count) readings on the relationship between game play and storytelling, and asked to produce visual materials that prototype what their short narrative might look like as a video game. This activity corresponds to Pigrum's *non-finito sign use, multi-mode object, transformational mode, transgressional mode*, and *place of story* teaching and learning practices.

Draft Narrative

Students were expected to submit a draft of their first major narrative project (linear narrative) and receive feedback from the instructor, teaching assistants and their peers. This activity was not graded on results, but on effort (on time submission, completeness). Students were then asked to revise the story based on the feedback they receive. This activity corresponds to Pigrum's *transgressional mode* of teaching and learning practices.

5.2 IAT 344 Moving Images

IAT 344 Moving Images is a production course which provides the fundamentals of digital video production including: visual theory, composition, lighting, sound, editing, and continuity among others.

Peer feedback groups

Peer feedback groups are formed by four or five students with the aim of organizing online peer evaluation micro-communities. The objective of these micro-communities is the assessment and provision of mutual feedback on each peer-student's work. Prior to forming the groups, students were provided with materials to direct them toward giving meaningful, constructive, and usable feedback. Students were required to submit proof of giving feedback to their peers. The proof consisted of screenshots of the feedback that has been sent to fellow peers. Such feedback organization corresponds to Pigrum's *place of the page* and teaching and learning practices.

A large variety of web-based sources that expand on lecture content

These were sources available via the online platform for the course –WebCT. The main purpose of the materials was to further elaborate and expand on weekly lecture content in terms of both (1) practical skills, and (2) theoretical knowledge/ conceptualization. This activity corresponds to Pigrum's *multi-mode object*, *place of story,* and *mode of virtual space* teaching and learning practices.

Mandatory credit film journals

In Phase 1 of our project, this assignment was optional (extra credit). In Phase 2, students were asked to read writings and interviews with four major filmmakers - Cronenberg, Scorsese, Fellini, and Renoir. This activity corresponds to Pigrum's *multi-mode object*, *place of story,* and *mode of virtual space* teaching and learning practices.

Semi-weekly intensive feedback sessions on staged deliverables (6 in total)

Blended mode instruction was utilized, off-loading much lecture content to WebCT (SFU's course management system) to free up space for individual, one-on-one (team, instructor, and teaching assistant) feedback sessions on deliverables throughout the semester, typically lasting for 30 minutes each. Discursivity employed here refers not only to writing and reading, but also to a dialogic back-and-forth core, in which students articulate and justify their creative decisions. The meetings were set up via Doodle.com and aimed at reviewing the weekly or biweekly assignment deliverables. This feedback organization corresponds to Pigrum's *non-finito sign use*, and *multi-mode object*, *transformational mode* teaching and learning practices.

Film blog

Mirroring professional practice, students were required to create film blogs documenting their process of making throughout the term, combined with such elements as documenting photography, artist statements, adventures in the field, technology used, research in film precedents, and aesthetic ideas. This activity corresponds to Pigrum's *non-finito sign use*, *multi-mode object*, *transformational mode, ontopology of the workplace*, *place of story,* and *mode of virtual space* teaching and learning practices.

Rehearsal Footage & Draft Version of Individual Video

Students intentionally produce "throw-away" footage. They shoot their entire team video seriously but without their actors, using just themselves. They act, light, edit, and shoot their video as a rough draft so that feedback can be given on their overall skills before they engage with their final video version. In addition, for their individual video, they submit a draft for feedback and revision. This activity corresponds to Pigrum's *transgressional mode* of undoing.

5.3 IAT 443 Interactive Video

This upper-division production course explores interactivity through the medium of moving images and video. To support creative learning, we included the following discourse-based elements:

Social issue documentary

The first project was reformatted to be an online interactive (web-based) documentary on any social issue of students' choice. This format of the assignment situates the project in a general social discursive field. In the past, student projects varied significantly in terms of concept and execution. This change located everyone's project in the same general conceptual field of societal issues. This activity corresponds to Pigrum's and *mode of virtual space* practice.

Documentary and interactive documentary theory

The focus of this project allowed for in-depth readings in key documentary and interactive documentary theory (critical reading). These readings develop key modalities (typologies) and students were asked to state which ideas in the texts were closest to their own strategies and intent. This activity corresponds to Pigrum's *multi-mode object*, *transformational mode,* and *mode of virtual space* teaching and learning practices.

Presentations on documentary and social issue concept

Student teams had to present their documentary and conceptual framework to the class for critique, and a Q&A session. This activity corresponds to Pigrum's *non-finito sign use* teaching and learning practice.

Faux kickstarter page

Mirroring contemporary professional practices of independent production with respect to potential funding (crowd funding), students had to develop a faux Kickstarter page (articulating and pitching their project as a potential kickstarter project). This activity corresponds to Pigrum's *ontopology of the workplace*, and *mode of virtual space* teaching and learning practices.

Public art calls

For project 2, which has always been an interactive audiovisual installation (spatial interaction), students were given a multitude of actual public art calls for site-specific installations (from professional sources), and required to articulate their project as a response to an actual site, and a prototype of a project that could work in the specified real space, according to the stated requirements of the call. This activity corresponds to Pigrum's *transferential mode, transformational mode*, and *ontopology of workplace* teaching and learning practices.

Installation presentations

Presentations of final projects have always been required; however, the newly-introduced public art situatedness added a professional aspect and a major discursive element (responding to a real site with limitations, scope, aims etc.). This activity corresponds to Pigrum's *non-finito sign use*, and *ontopology of workplace* teaching and learning practices.

Project a video image on an object

Students are asked to bring in footage to project video onto physical objects which alter the meaning of the footage. This activity corresponds to Pigrum's *"ready-to- hand" dispensable surface of inscriptions, transpositional mode*, and *mode of virtual space* teaching and learning practices.

6. Results
6.1 Internal Evaluation

The teaching assistant for IAT 443 Moving images expressed a positive attitude toward the learning results induced by the instructional changes introduced to the course. It is important to be emphasized that the teaching assistant for the course has also previously taken the course as a student. Based on her experiences both as a teaching assistant and a previous student, the internal evaluator stressed the positive changes in students' performance that the new instructional methods have resulted in.

6.2 External Evaluation

The external evaluation is important as it indicates the level at which SIAT students' active performance is compatible outside academic environments. The external evaluation conducted for IAT 344 Moving Images expressed a very positive opinion in regard to students' production.

6.3 Evaluation of Production Qualities of Students' Final Team Videos for IAT 344 Spring 2013 and IAT 344 Fall 2012

We received 15 final video projects for IAT 344 Spring 2013 and 13 for IAT 344 Fall 2012. To compare the production qualities, we used the following evaluation table:

CONCEPTUAL (concept, narrative structure & elements)	/2.5
TECHNICAL (production values, efforts and techniques)	/2.5
CREATIVE (originality and innovative ideas)	/2.5
OVERALL IMPRESSION	/2.5
Total	/10

After assigning to each video a value out of 10, we calculated an average for each iteration of the course. The average for the final team videos for IAT 344 Spring 2013 was 8.46/10, while the average for IAT 344 Fall 2012 was 7.93/10. The increase in the average from 7.93 to 8.46/10 corresponds to increased quality of students' active performance. We partially assign the increased quality of student production to (1) the introduction of mandatory film journals (Spring 2013) as opposed to optional (Fall 2012), and (2) increased and refined volume of engagement with discursive practices (reading, writing, and audio-visual materials).

6.4 Comparison of Themes in Students' Artistic Statements between IAT 313 Narrative and New Media in Spring 2013 and IAT 340 Sound Design in Fall 2012

The incentive for students enrolled in IAT 313 Spring 2013 to write an artist statement on their final project was 1 pt. of extra credit. Therefore, a minority of students completed this exercise. We collected 22 artist statements out of 72 students enrolled – a correspondence of 30.5% of the total class enrolment.
For IAT 340 Fall 2012 the artist statements were mandatory.
We conducted thematic analysis of all artistic statements. Thematic analysis refers to "the process of analyzing data according to commonalities, relationships and differences across a data set. The word 'thematic' relates to the aim of searching for aggregated themes within data." (Gibson & Brown, 2009, para. 1)

We identified the following repetitive themes:
- Emotions associated with production
- Self-reflexivity
- Creative styles of verbal expression
- Awareness of personal perspectives, approaches, preferences, aesthetics

What we indicated as a difference between artistic statements obtained from IAT 313 and IAT 340 is the elevated level of self-reflexivity and analytical depth reached by IAT 313 students. Where the majority of artistic statements from IAT 340 incorporate description as a means of conveying artistic experience, artistic statements from IAT 313 are distinguished by rigorous writing, and an almost deconstructional approach to personal artistic practice. We also

noticed that some students from IAT 313 tried to implement strategies from the course' materials into the graphic design of their artistic statements and thus non-verbally communicate their artistic nature within an otherwise verbal assignment. Again, we partially assign this progress in artistic practices, thinking, and expression to the increased and refined volume of engagement with discursive practices (reading, writing, and audio-visual materials) during the second phase of this teaching and learning project.

7. Conclusions

Pigrum's multi-mode transitional practices of teaching creativity (2009) are highly adaptable to a variety of learning situations. With a generalizable field of twelve conceptual themes and practical parameters to explore, it is not difficult to find potential mappings and modifications to assignments that enrich the creative output of students in upper division production courses. This application of theory to pedagogy resulted in a higher number of portfolio quality student work produced in the courses under investigation when compared to previous iterations of the same courses. Thematic analysis of students' writing further revealed improvements in overall verbal and written articulation of their work, herein defined as discursivity, or the ability to create and sustain discourse around their creative output.

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